

# Study 1: Introduction to NT Survey

Some of us have a very basic understanding of the New Testament. Others have a strong grasp on “doctrine” – the *teaching* of the New Testament. Yet often we don’t have a broader understanding of the historical context of the New Testament letters – how they relate to each other, and **WHY** they were written in the first place.

By stepping back, we can get a good appreciation of the things that were happening in the churches in New Testament times. It is only after we understand the *context* of the books that we can then make a proper application of their teaching to our situation.

This first study will help us with some tools and orientation as we approach a series of studies of all of the New Testament books.

## ***Introduction***

## ***The Social World of the First Century***

## ***Jewish Preparation for the New Testament***

## ***Greek Culture: A Common Language***

## ***Roman Governance: A Common Empire***

## ***Canon***

## ***Selected Bibliography***

### ***Homework and preparation for next week:***

- Read Matthew chapter 1, Luke chapters 1-3, Mark chapter 1 and John chapter 1
  - Why do you think Matthew and Luke give genealogies for Jesus, but Mark and John don’t?
  - Which gospel do you think was written first?
  - Which gospel do you think was written last?
- Why do you think we have four gospels?
- Why did John write his gospel? (read chapter 20)

# Notes for study 1: Introduction to NT Survey

## ***Introduction***

It is my observation that we often jump into the study of a book of the New Testament – or even worse – a part of the book, without properly understanding the context. We can do a “thorough” study of the exegesis of a particular passage, and correlate it to parallel passages, to come to a conclusive argument on any array of biblical subjects.

However, without an understanding of the *context* of the letter – and indeed of those passages that we are trying to parallel it to – we often *misunderstand* the point that the writer is trying to say. And in many cases, we may find that the parallel passages aren’t actually parallel at all, because the writer is addressing a different set of circumstances!

In this study series, we will not address doctrine *per se*, except to try to understand the context and content of each of the New Testament books.

As a short title, this series is a “Survey of the New Testament” and it will help us gain a better understanding of each of the books. However, the study series goes deeper than that, and I want it to help those who already have a good understanding of the New Testament and its doctrine, to help pull together the relationship between the books “Piecing Together the New Testament”.

The general approach will be a short study of the gospels, and pose the question “Why do we have four gospels?” We will look at the characteristics of each of them, and how they help our understanding of the biblical story.

We will spend several weeks in the book of Acts, particularly gaining an understanding of the chronology of the book, where Paul went to (and when), and how his travels relate to his writings.

The rest of the studies will work through each of the remaining the New Testament books, and we will also (at least try to) put them into some sort of context.

Of course, there are many views of the dates of the New Testament writings, and I am sure that my views will conflict with many of them!

The New Testament writings did not appear in a vacuum. They were written to real people and churches in real places by real men. They reflect the things that were happening in the world at the time. If we are to properly understand the New Testament writings, then we need to have at least some understanding of the history, culture and circumstances of that part of the world at that time. We also need to know something about the audience – those to whom the letters were written. Were they Jewish, or Greek, or a mixture of both? When was the recipient church established? Are they new Christians, or mature Christians?

Lastly, a brief understanding of the issues addressed in each of the letters will help us to work out the purpose of the letter, and key things together.

## ***The Social World of the First Century***

We live in a society that is depraved and immoral. Sexualisation of society is everywhere, and people openly engage in practices that God regards as immoral, without shame. There has been a radical move away from “Christian society” in the last 50 years, and western society is now generally regarded as “post Christian”.

We need to remember that life in the first century wasn’t much different! As we look at the issues in Corinth, or in the Roman letter we can see a picture of the things that were going on in the world at the time (and it’s not a pretty picture). The Roman historian Tacitus describes in gory detail the corruption and immorality that was rife in the city – right up to the very leaders of the

empire. Most of what we know about the Roman leaders of the time, we learn from Tacitus. In describing the persecution of Christians, he says of Rome,

“...All degraded and shameful practices collect and flourish in the capital.”<sup>1</sup>

We should remember that in the first century, society was generally agricultural, and whilst very basic education was widespread, well educated people were a rarity. Most people could not read or write, and society generally was illiterate. In such a situation, the *spoken* word was paramount, whilst what was written was treated with a great degree of scepticism.

Travel options were very limited. For longer journeys the sea and larger rivers became the highways. But of course, the ships had no engines, and navigating a sailing ship upstream against the run of the river limited its movement. Travel was generally by foot, although perhaps a donkey, horse, or chariot (for the rich) would provide some relief to sore feet. The Romans built roads paved with flag-stones that criss-crossed the empire, and allowed (relatively) easy travel. Many of them are still evident.

In today’s society, communications have never been easier. We can see live events happening on our TV’s from the other side of the world, or have voice or email communications to virtually anywhere on earth in real-time. Things were not so easy in the first century. A letter sent from Jerusalem to Rome would either be carried on foot, or go by ship. Either way, it was a journey of several months each way. And of course, the postal service did not exist – you would need to find someone who was going to where you wanted the letter to go, and have them carry it for you. We find some examples of these problems in the New Testament letters and Acts.

The Romans demanded taxes be paid to the emperor, a practice that was despised everywhere (perhaps with the exception of Rome, as the recipients of the taxes!). In a largely agricultural society, the people felt that there was little hope. Bouquet gives an insight into life at the time<sup>2</sup>:

“...The masses in the big cities were kept good-tempered by doles of food and free entertainments, but from top to bottom, the literature that has come down to us shows that people lived without very much hope for the future. One man wrote that the world was perishing and running down and reaching its last end, and it is clear that the Greeks in particular were depressed by the manner in which things decayed and rotted and vanished away. So if they enjoyed life at all it was generally by not thinking too much about it and living for today. It was also, as we shall see, rather a cruel world...”

Christianity offered a sense of purpose, and hope in a hopeless world. As our society develops, we see greater planning and provision, and with that comes less dependence on God, and we become a Godless society (or rather, other things become our gods). The message of the gospel is the same for us as it was in the first century – a message of hope in a self-destructing world.

### ***Jewish Preparation for the New Testament***

Man was separated from God when he fell from sin in the garden. God had a plan to get man back into a relationship with Him, but the time was not yet right. First, man needed to learn what it means to have a relationship with Him, and so a family was chosen from faithful Abraham. From God’s people (Israel), man could know what it meant to be a chosen people, and to be a part of God’s family. The nature of acceptable and unacceptable worship was also established through the Jewish Law, as were a host of practices that would have fulfilment of their meaning in Christ (captivity in Egypt, Passover, the wilderness wanderings, the Promised Land, the Jewish Feasts, just to name a few).

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<sup>1</sup> Tacitus, “Annals of Imperial Rome” 15:44

<sup>2</sup> Bouquet, p. 2

The prophecies and the types throughout the Old Testament pointed to a time when the Messiah would come and put things right and redeem man. God's kingdom would be established, and the world would see God ruling over His people with the glory that had been seen under King David.

All of this established a climate that was receptive to the gospel when it came. The Jews knew God, knew His power, and knew the prophecies concerning the Messiah. Throughout the Diaspora, the Jews had spread throughout the world, and provided synagogues which would allow the evangelists (most notably Paul and his associates) to have a ready-made infrastructure to preach the word concerning Jesus the Christ.

In establishing the Feasts of the Lord (Lev 23:4), three of them were specified as "Pilgrim Feasts" (Dt 16:16), and God had foreseen a time that all the men should be in Jerusalem. Two of these (Passover and Pentecost) were close together – only 7 weeks apart. Men would come from all over the world for Passover, and stay for Pentecost before returning home. It was precisely during one of these Passover feasts that Jews from all over the world saw the fulfilment of the Passover in the sacrifice and crucifixion of Jesus! And then, just seven weeks later, these same Jews saw the establishment of God's kingdom – the church. Some time later, as they returned home, they took the gospel with them and paved the way for the work which was to be done later in growing the church on a world-wide basis in the first century.

### ***Greek Culture: A Common Language***

God foresaw the events that would set the scene leading to the establishment of the church. In Daniel's prophecy concerning Nebuchadnezzar's vision, he saw the Greek empire (under Alexander the Great) as an empire that would lead up to the Roman empire. To a large extent this would lay the foundations for the Roman empire to follow. Not all of the traits of the Greek empire were replaced by Rome. The Greek culture largely remained – at least during the New Testament times – and a "universal" language was left behind. The New International Version Bible Commentary (NIVBC) notes:

The third empire (bronze) was even less desirable from Nebuchadnezzar's standpoint. This empire was the Greco-Macedonian Empire established by Alexander the Great. Though Greece was to "rule over the whole earth," its political tradition was more republican than its predecessor. Alexander began his invasion of Persia in 334, crushed its last resistance in 331, and established a realm extending from the border of Yugoslavia to beyond the Indus Valley in India--the largest empire of ancient times. After his death in 323, Alexander's territory was split into four realms, ruled over by his former generals (Antipater in Macedon-Greece, Lysimachus in Thrace-Asia Minor, Seleucus in Asia, and Ptolemy in Egypt, Cyrenaica, and Palestine). This situation crystallized after the Battle of Ipsus in 301, when the final attempt to maintain a unified empire was crushed through the defeat of the imperial regent Antigonos. The eastern sections of the Seleucid realm revolted from the central authority at Antioch and were gradually absorbed by the Parthians as far westward as Mesopotamia. But the remainder of the former Greek Empire was annexed by Rome after Antiochus the Great was defeated at Magnesia in 190 B.C. Macedon was annexed by Rome in 168, Greece was permanently subdued in 146, the Seleucid domains west of the Tigris were annexed by Pompey the Great in 63 B.C., and Egypt was reduced to a Roman province after the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C. Thus the bronze kingdom lasted about 260 or 300 years before it was supplanted by the fourth kingdom prefigured in Nebuchadnezzar's dream-image. (NIVBC)

## **Roman Governance: A Common Empire**

The Roman Empire extended from Britain to Arabia, and southward to the north coast of Africa. Never before in the history of the world had an empire governed so much territory. Travel became relatively easy (given the physical constraints and limitations of the time). As a Roman citizen, Paul could travel freely anywhere within the empire, and could prove his citizenship with his Roman passport, or by reference to the records that were held in each colony. God foresaw when the time would be ripe to establish the church and Daniel prophesied “... *in the days of these kings* (ie the Roman empire), *the God of heaven will establish a kingdom that shall never be destroyed...*” (Dan 2:44). The New International Version Bible Commentary notes:

The Roman Empire was the result of a process of expansion that began in the sixth and seventh centuries before Christ. In 509 B.C., Rome early began the search for a stable frontier that was to form the guiding motive of her history. That quest took her step by step to the subjugation of the Italian peninsula and the domination of its peoples.

By the beginning of the Christian era the Roman Empire was reaching the limits of its expansion. A major military disaster in A.D. 9 caused Augustus to choose the Rhine as a northern frontier. The Danube formed its logical eastward continuation. Spain, Gaul, and Britain formed stable enough buttresses in the west, while the southern marches rested on the Sahara, a desert frontier, and strategically the most stable of all. The east was never totally secured, and some of the imagery of the Apocalypse reflects the fear felt in the Middle East of the archer cavalry from over the Euphrates.

Politically, the term Roman Empire must be distinguished from the Roman Republic. The Empire describes the system of rule and government known as the principate. The year 31 B.C., the date of the Battle of Actium, is arbitrarily chosen as the dividing line, when Republic became Empire. Octavian, Julius Caesar's adoptive nephew, had defeated Antony. Extraordinary commands and special powers prepared the way for the autocracy that emerged full-fledged with Augustus.

The Roman Empire, using the word in the political sense of the term, was the governmental framework of the Roman Peace, that era of centralized government that kept comparative peace in the Mediterranean world for significant centuries. No wonder the Eastern provinces, accustomed since ancient days to the deification of rulers, early established the custom of worshiping the emperor. The notion gained popularity through the writings of poets such as Horace and Virgil, who genuinely believed in the divine call of Augustus and who, without a higher view of deity, saw no incompatibility in ascribing divine attributes to a mere man of destiny. Such were the sinister beginnings of a cult that Rome chose as a cement of empire. (NIVBC)

By the times of the New Testament, for the first time since Abraham (in fact, since the tower of Babel) it was possible to travel freely and extensively around the then-known world under a common system of governance, and with a common language. The time was right for the gospel to be taken “*into all the world*”.

## **Canon**

Not all of the writings of the first century make up our New Testament. Not even all of the writings of the apostles made it in (primarily because they got lost). But the New Testament also includes writings by some people who were not apostles (John Mark, Luke, the Hebrew writer, and

probably Jude and James). That is not to say that these writers were not inspired by God – in fact they wrote as prophets “inspired spokespersons for God”.

Somewhere along the way, someone had to decide what was accepted as a part of the New Testament and what didn't make it in. The technical term for what “is in” is “Canon”. We could spend a great deal of time discussing the merits of each book, and the process for acceptance. Lightfoot<sup>3</sup> provides a concise discussion of the selection of the Canon. Milligan<sup>4</sup> provides deep evidence for second century acceptance of the 27 books that we know as the New Testament.

In this study we will accept the Canon as the 27 books that we know as the New Testament. The purpose of the study is to see how the pieces of the Canon fit together, rather than to challenge their acceptance. We will, however, briefly note the strength of acceptance of the books as we go.

### ***Selected Bibliography***

The following references will be used and quoted from during the studies. The full references of the books are quoted here, and only their abbreviated title and page number will be quoted in the studies.

#### **Barnett**

Barnett, Paul: *Is the New Testament History?*  
Hodder & Stoughton, Rydalmere NSW; ISBN 0-340-37449-7

#### **Boer**

Boer, Harry R: *A Short History of the Early Church*  
Wm B Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI; ISBN 0-8028-1339-9

#### **Bouquet**

Bouquet, A.C: *Everyday Life in New Testament Times*,  
BT Batsford Ltd, London

#### **Bridge**

Bridge, Donald: *Why Four Gospels?*  
Christian Focus Publications, Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland; ISBN 1-85792-225-5

#### **Bruce (1)**

Bruce, FF: *Paul: Apostle of the heart set free*,  
Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids Michigan; ISBN 0-8028-3501-5

#### **Bruce (2)**

Bruce, FF: *The Book of Acts – The New International Commentary on the New Testament*  
Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids Michigan; ISBN 0-8028-2505-2

#### **Bruce (3)**

Bruce, FF: *In the Steps of the Apostle Paul*  
Candle Books: ISBN 1-8598-5043-X

#### **Cogdill**

Cogdill, Roy E: “The New Testament: Book by Book – A 26 Lesson Outline series covering the entire New Testament”  
Cogdill Foundation Publications, Marion Ind. 46952

#### **Coneybeare and Howson**

Coneybeare WJ, and Howson JS: *The Life and Epistle of St Paul*,  
Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids Michigan; ISBN 0-8028-8086-X

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<sup>3</sup> Lightfoot, p.63

<sup>4</sup> Milligan, p.168 ff

**Fee & Stuart**

Gordon D Fee & Douglas Stuart: "How to Read the Bible Book by Book"  
Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 49530; ISBN 0-310-21118-2

**Foster**

Foster RC: Studies in the Life of Christ,  
College Press, Joplin Missouri; ISBN 0-89900-644-2

**Josephus**

The Works of Josephus translated by William Whiston  
Hendrickson Publishers, Lynn, Massachusetts;

**Lightfoot**

Lightfoot, Neil R: How We Got the Bible  
A.C.U. Press, Abilene TX; ISBN 0-89112-180-3

**McGarvey (1)**

McGarvey, JW: A Commentary of Acts of Apostles, with a Revised Version of the text  
Gospel Advocate Co, Nashville Tenn. (generally referred to as the Original Commentary on Acts)

**McGarvey (2)**

McGarvey, JW: New Commentary on Acts of Apostles,  
Gospel Light Publishing Company, Delight, Arkansas; ISBN 0-89916-000-X

**Milligan**

Milligan, Robert: Reason and Revelation  
Lambert Book House, Shreveport Louisiana

**Monser**

Monser, J.W: An Encyclopedia on the Evidences  
Gospel Advocate, Nashville TN;

**Neyrey**

Neyrey, Jerome H: The Social World of Luke-Acts  
Hendrickson, Peabody Massachusetts; ISBN 1-56563-512-4

**Reese**

Reese, Gareth: New Testament History – A critical and exegetical commentary of the book of Acts,  
College Press, Joplin Missouri; ISBN 0-89900-055-X

**Ramsay**

Ramsay, WM: St Paul the Traveller and Roman Citizen,  
Hodder and Straughton, Third Edition

**Robinson**

Robinson, John A.T: Re-dating the New Testament  
Wipf & Stock, Eugene OR; ISBN 1-5791-0527-0

**Tenney**

Tenney, Merrill C: New Testament Times – Understanding the World of the First Century  
Baker, Grand Rapids, MI; ISBN 0-8010-1265-1