

Between the Testaments

Why read the New Testament? What is it about?

Some read it because of its influence on society. Some for its history. Others because of Jesus and the personal connection gained.

I. The content can be described in the following manner:

A. Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John

Although Mark was probably written first, Matthew comes first because it connects with the Old Testament and provides continuity.

B. Acts.

It reflects the growth of the early time of Christianity.

C. Pauline Epistles

The next 13 are by Paul the early missionary. The first group are written to churches in various cities and the last four to individuals.

D. General Epistles

The first of the next eight is Hebrews whose author is unknown but possibly Paul. The others are just normal letters by people. James and Jude are brothers to Jesus and Peter is the first apostle to the Gentiles.

E. Revelation

Although many visions it is still one unified revealing of supernatural events that God controls.

II. Questions to ask or things to consider while reading.

A. Historical background.

What were the living conditions, government, or unique set of problems that the writers and readers were acquainted with? Time period covered by 40 authors is about 1,500 years.

B. Interpretation

What are the main ideas that are presented?

C. Theology

Are there tasks to do, commands to obey, things to avoid, or a doctrine to be established?

D. Contemporary Application

How to live according to the content of the scripture.

III. Intertestamental Period

The last book of the Old Testament was Malachi written about 425 B.C. So there are four centuries of history before the New Testament.

A. Persian Empire

The Jews were in exile but the government allowed some to return to rebuild the temple, the city and the country. This remained unchanged for another century. Persia had conquered Assyria.

B. Greece

In roughly 13 years, Alexander the Great conquered almost all of Persia including the Middle East. By 323 B.C. the language, culture, and religion was Greek.

C. Seleucid and Ptolemy Rule

Israel was in the middle between the Northern half under the command of Seleucid and the southern half under Ptolemy and control went back and forth. In 167 B.C. Antiochus IV, after trying to forbid Jewish practices, offered a pig on the temple altar that led to a guerilla revolt.

D. Maccabees / Hasmonean Dynasty

An aged priest named Mattathias and his sons spearheaded by one named Judas, nicknamed Maccabeus, in a three year period overthrew the invaders and liberated the temple. This is celebrated as Hanukkah.

This period of time was known as the Hasmonean Dynasty. A century long period of Jewish independence and golden age. Because of the history of warfare and exile, the Jews became more and more opposed to false religion and culture influences. This could still be seen in the time of Jesus.

E. Roman Influence

By 63 B.C. Roman Empire had conquered all of the Greek territory including Israel. This continued through the time of the writing of the New Testament.

This was a good thing for the spread of Christianity because Greek was the common language and travel was easy. In 60 A.D. Nero began persecution of Christians. In 70 A.D. Rome attacked Jerusalem because of a zealot wing of Jewish people. They would not be an independent nation until the 1940's.

IV. Religious options at time of Jesus.

If I lived at the time of Jesus, what would be the options? How did Jesus relate to those?

Greco-Roman religion

A. Mythology.

Apollo was the sun-god who drove his fiery chariot across the sky. Bacchus god of wine, Artemis god of love, Mercury, messenger god. These are used to explain nature, human behavior, delights, virtues, and vices. But emperors had conquered land, and science had discovered natural laws. Decreasing in influence. Only mention in NT was in a country city where these things take longer to die.

B. Emperor Worship

Initially only deified after death but Caligula claimed to be a god while alive. Nero in mid 60s becoming serious. Domitian made people say "Caesar is Lord." This about the time of Revelation.

C. Mystery Religions

From the East and Egypt claiming to have a secret revelation known only to members. All had a defined ceremony when meeting. They were different from Christianity except for eternal life and equality of all people before the gods.

D. Philosophical Schools

Epicurean, eat, drink, be merry. The fine arts. God was too remote to be knowable. Stoics, maximize pleasure and diminish pain. Pantheists, god is everywhere and in everything. Cynics, hippies, vagabonds, beggars, less care for the body more spiritual.

E. Gnosticism

From philosopher Plato, the material world was by nature evil and a mistake. Late on the first century they combined some elements

of Christianity. Their savior was wisdom so they put Jesus in as the savior. By John's letters this was a major problem.

V. Jewish Religion

Some adopted the religions of that time most remained faithful.

A. Am-ha-Aretz (People of the land)

80-95% of the people belonged to no sect. They had kept a faithful hope for a Messiah. Most of those that followed Jesus came from these.

B. Pharisees

Intensely devoted to finding ways to apply the Torah. Most popular among the people. Not all hypocritical. Different kinds of perspectives of ancient Judaism. Many practices are carried into Christianity. The conservative, evangelical Christian, with a high view of scripture, and a desire to apply it to daily life, is a close parallel to the Pharisee.

C. Sadducees

Accepted only written Hebrew Scriptures whereas Pharisee accepted oral laws. Forgiveness of sins was by a literal sacrifice. When the temple was destroyed they died out but the Pharisee continued.

D. Essenes

Not by name in the pages of the NT but quite significant. Monastic group who to please God withdrew from society. At a site known as Qumran, was a large library of scrolls that gave an understanding of the Jews at the time of Jesus. Destroyed by Rome.

E. Zealots

Freedom fighters. Came together about 60 A.D. but completely destroyed by Rome.

Pharisees became the rabbi of today.

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