



Session Twelve

INTRODUCING...

THE NEW TESTAMENT

O Lord,
*You who fashioned the countless lights of heaven,
You who designed the house that is the world
You who placed the sun , the moon, and the constellations
in the firmament
To mark the seasons and the days and the years,
We pray you, Giver of life, stir our minds and our will
That we might love you with all our heart.*
Amen

From Hovhannes of Garni

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Word Watch

Gospel: from the Anglo-Saxon word "godspell" which meant "good tidings" and later came to mean the "story concerning God" and specifically, the books which describe Christ's life and teachings. In general use, it refers to something that is unquestionably true.

Epistle: from the Greek for "letter," the word technically refers to the 21 letters of the New Testament, written by St. Paul and other apostles to the new Christian communities.



Between Old and New

The last of the prophetic books in the Old Testament is the Book of Malachi. Between the time he wrote and the time of the coming of Christ is a period of about 400 years. We know what happened during some of that time: the conquest of Palestine by Alexander the Great, who introduced the Greek language and customs. Alexander's empire was succeeded by others, one of them led by the brutal Antiochus who tried to "Hellenize," or force Greek customs on, the Jewish people.

The revolts led by the Maccabees began a brief period of Jewish independence, but soon the expanding Roman Empire conquered Palestine. The Romans had little respect for Judaism, and were deeply resented by the Jews. This was the setting of the birth of Jesus Christ into a Jewish family in the obscure town of Bethlehem.

Some good things had come out of this history of constant conquest. The Greeks, when in power, had established Greek as a common language of the conquered lands. The Romans had built a large and well-maintained network of roads. These things would make it easier for the Gospel (which means "good news") of Jesus Christ to spread far and wide. The "Old Testament" or old covenant between God and the ancient Hebrews would now be fulfilled in the "New Testament," a new covenant with Jesus Christ at its center. The first followers of Jesus Christ were nearly all Jews. They were the "faithful remnant" who were looking for the Messiah, and recognized Him as the one they had been looking for. After His death, resurrection, and ascension, they proclaimed His message of salvation to all the peoples of the world. The early Church was composed of people from many nations. Its membership was based on faith, not ethnic background.

How the New Testament Came to Be

The 27 books of the New Testament include the four Gospels of Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the Book of Acts, 21 letters or "epistles" by Saint Paul and other writers, and the Book of Revelation. The books were written in common Greek (that language spread around the area by its Greek conquerors).

The epistles were written first, probably all before 65 A.D. (Of course we are now out of the time of B.C.—before Christ—and into the time of A.D. which in Latin means "year of our lord.") The Gospels were composed between 65 and 90 A.D. Saint John's letters and the Book of Revelation (usually thought to be written by him) were written between 90 and 95 A.D.

In talking about the Old Testament, we said that the oral tradition known in 1200 B.C. was written down later. Similarly with the New Testament, the apostles of Jesus Christ listened to His teaching, and witnessed the things He did. All of this they passed along orally to the new converts to the faith. Then, as they became older and began to die, the need to put things in writing became obvious. So in the later part of the first century, the Gospels and other documents were written. Not long after, the letters of Saint Paul were collected.

The Canon is Established

A problem soon arose. All sorts of books and writings began to appear, claiming to be true to the teaching of Jesus Christ. Some of these writings were produced by cultic groups or by people who only pretended to know what the apostles had taught and witnessed. So the Church had to devise three criteria to decide what writings would be part of the New Testament scriptures. The criteria were these:

- They had to have been written by an apostle or an immediate follower of an apostle
- They had to be recognized by at least one established Church community
- They had to be consistent with the doctrine taught by the apostles

The writings that met these criteria were part of the “canon of Scripture.” As with the Old Testament, this means a rule or standard by which something is measured. It also means the group of writings that meet a rule or standard. For several years, there were arguments about certain writings—some thought they should be in the canon, some thought they should not—but by the fourth century the Church had agreed on the 27 books we have as the New Testament canon today.

The Four Gospels

Though these four books were written by people with different points of view, they have the same joyous message. (That’s why when we are speaking formally, we say “the Gospel according to St. Mark” or “according to St. Luke.” Same story; different storyteller.)

The Gospels are not biographies of Jesus Christ. They don’t even tell us much about His early years, up to the age of thirty when He began His public ministry. In those years, we can assume, Jesus was preparing for that ministry and was in communion with His Father and the Holy Spirit. The Church doesn’t speculate or guess at what God has not chosen to reveal, so sometimes those

The Armenian Angle

It was a very early practice in Armenia to illuminate biblical manuscripts. Illuminate in this sense means to adorn a page with ornamental designs, miniature illustrations, or ornate lettering. At first only sec-



tions of the Bible were copied and illustrated. By the 12th century, entire Bibles were being laboriously hand copied and brilliantly illustrated. One of the most famous of these artists was Toros Roslin of the 13th century.

years of Jesus' life are called the "silent years." A few early events are recorded, and we will look at those later.

The Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke are more similar to each other than they are to the Gospel of John. The three are similar in content and form, and they basically follow the same narrative. For this reason they are called the *synoptic* gospels, which means that they "see together." We'll consider these three gospels in this session, and St. John's gospel in the next.

SYNOPTIC STUDY

Read Matthew 4: 1-11

Mark 1:12-13

Luke 4:1-13

What are these readings about?

How do they differ?

How are they the same?

The Gospel of Mark

This earliest of the four books is also the shortest; it appears second in the Bible. Mark was not one of the twelve apostles, but his writing was probably guided by St. Peter, who was. Mark's gospel is known for its action. Since Mark probably wrote his gospel for Romans, who did not know too much about the prophecies of the Old Testament, he tells what Jesus did rather than what had been predicted about Him. You will often see the word "immediately" in Mark's gospel—the action moves quickly. (Read *Mark 1:16-31* as an example.)

Mark stresses Jesus as the crucified Messiah who brings hope to the world, and who came to be a servant to the world

The Gospel of Matthew

Written for Jewish Christians, Matthew's gospel quotes the prophecies of the Old Testament frequently. His purpose is to show those who are familiar with the prophecies that Jesus Christ fulfills them, that He is the One they are written about. Matthew establishes Jesus as the king who is descended from King David (because the Jews knew from Scripture that the Savior was to come from David's line). He also shows Jesus as the descendant of Abraham, the father (or "patriarch") of the Hebrews to whom God gave His promise. You remember that in a previous session we looked at the genealogy which begins this gospel. Matthew's gospel contains the longest and most detailed record of Jesus Christ's teachings that we have—in the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5 to 7).

Matthew's gospel appears first in the New Testament. Its writer was one of the twelve apostles, and a man who was not very popular with his fellow Jews because he made his living by collecting taxes for the Romans. But Matthew did a very good job of portraying Jesus Christ as a king, fulfilling and going beyond the tradition of King David.

The Gospel of Luke

Luke was not one of the twelve apostles, but he was a close follower of Jesus who traveled and worked with St. Paul. Luke was a doctor who wrote his gospel primarily for Gentile converts to Christianity. He emphasizes the universal nature of Jesus' message: salvation is not only for the Jewish people but for all humankind. Luke wrote his gospel and the Book of Acts as a single volume, telling about the ministry of Jesus Christ and the history of the early Christian Church under the leadership of the apostles. Read the parable of the lost sheep in *Luke 15:1-7*.

Luke's gospel contains several parables (stories that teach a truth or lesson) warning against the dangers of wealth and self-satisfaction, and showing the great mercy of God. These parables appear only in this gospel, as does the story of the Lord meeting two disciples on the road to Emmaus after His resurrection.

Luke emphasizes the Kingdom of God brought to the world by Jesus Christ and given to those who follow Him in His suffering. He gives us a record of Christ's great concern for the poor, and for those who have sinned and need forgiveness.

Did You Know?

While Matthew is the first gospel of the New Testament, it was not the first written. Mark is the oldest. Matthew is placed first because his gospel refers most often to the prophecies of the Old Testament and their fulfillment in the New. Flip through the four gospels and quickly find out the following. Which gospel has the least chapters? Which has the most? Look up John 11:35 and read the shortest verse in the Bible. Which gospel starts with the words "in the beginning"? Which ends with "I am with you always, to the end of the age"? Which gospel's first chapter has Mary singing her joy about the news of Jesus' impending birth in a famous hymn that is still sung today (The Magnificat or "my soul magnifies the Lord")?

Looking In

Pretend you are about to write your own gospel describing the life and teachings of Jesus. Call it "The Gospel According to (your name)." What would you stress? What, in this time of history, needs to be stressed?

Quick Quiz #12

① to ④ Which came first? (circle the right answer)

1. the Gospels or the Epistles
2. oral tradition or illuminated manuscripts
3. the silent years or the first gospel
4. the Gospel of John or the synoptic gospels

⑤ to ⑦ What criteria did the Church use to form the New Testament?

- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

⑧ to ⑩ Who were their intended readers?

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| 8. Mark | Gentile converts |
| 9. Matthew | Romans |
| 10. Luke | Jewish Christians |