

INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

This Bible study will be in the form of a “survey.” The purpose of a survey is to give a Christian a working understanding of the message of the New Testament books.

New Testament and Old Testament Surveys are included in every bible college and seminary curriculum. The reason is that the bible student may understand the bible at a “micro” level but does not understand the implications of the historical and cultural settings. Dates and places become less important than the “why’s” and doctrines. Surveys form the foundation for all other bible studies.

How we interpret passages must always be laid aside other scriptures, historical and cultural facts.

WHY IS THE BIBLE DIVIDED INTO TWO TESTAMENTS?

Most Bible students are aware that their Bible, no matter what translation they are using, is divided into two (2) Testaments: Old Testament and New Testament. The question begs to be asked, “Why?”

The Old Testament (OT) was written between 1200 and 165 BC and is the largest by size having thirty-nine (39) books. The texts were mainly written in Biblical Hebrew, although portions of Daniel and Ezra were written in Biblical Aramaic. The Old Testament is normally divided into three sections by the Jewish faith:

- The Law
- Prophets
- Writings

The Christian church divides the OT into five sections:

- Law
- History
- Wisdom
- Major Prophets
- Minor Prophets

The New Testament (NT) was written between 50-100 AD and is smaller in size having twenty-seven (27) books. The texts were written in “koiné” Greek. Although the common language of Jesus and the Disciples was Biblical Aramaic. The Christian church generally divides the NT into five sections:

- Gospels
- Acts (History)
- The Epistles by Paul
- The General Epistles
- Revelation

Testament is an English word meaning “testimony, will or covenant.” In the case of the Bible, it is translated from the Greek signifying the covenants of God.

As you would suspect, the idea of a “last will and testament,” contains certain legal characteristics which have important theological implications for the Bible student.

- First, a testament was not an agreement between parties (especially equals), but rather was exercised solely by the testator.
- Second, the testament became effective upon the death of the testator.
- Third, the testament was irrevocable.

When the OT was translated into Greek, the translators had the option of two words to translate the Hebrew word for covenant. One term carries the idea of a mutual agreement and this often between equals. Since this would blur the divine initiative in God's covenantal dealings with the patriarchs and with Israel, the other word was used. It connoted the self-determined action of the sovereign in making the covenant. The NT writers saw in the word testament an additional significance. As a testament became valid at the death of the testator, the benefits of the new covenant have come to believers after the crucifixion and the death of the Christ (Heb 9:15–22; cf. 1 Cor 11:25; Lk 22:20, KJV).¹

Therefore, while the Bible could have been divided into the Old and New Covenant, the early translators opted to use the word “Testament” instead.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

This study is written from a conservative, evangelical point of view, including the Bible is the Word of God, inerrant, and the faith and practice of each believer.

We will begin by looking at what happened between the ending of the Old Testament writings and the birth of Jesus the Messiah. We will investigate:

- What happened between the two “Testaments”
- Social, economic, and religious conditions prevalent during the “400 quiet years.”
- Jewish customs and practices
- We will broaden the scope to include Gentile religions and philosophies

Next, we will take a bird's eye view of the entire New Testament with some time spent on the importance of the Gospels.

Each book, while a composite making up the New Testament, will be looked at with what should be a familiar form in bible study:

- What is the major theme?
- Author
- Written to Whom?
- Where was it written?
- When was it written?
- Why was it written?
- Literary Style
- Key Words and Phrases
- Ancient Practices
- Doctrines Discussed
- Covenants

¹ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Testament,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 2046.

INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD

BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS

On any given gravestone, you will find a “dash” between the birth date and date of death. That dash is the representation of that person’s life.

If you were to open your bible to the last verse in the Old Testament, Malachi 4:6 and then flip the page to Matthew 1:1, you would be experiencing the “dash” representing 400 years. That one or two pages represent four-hundred years of history.

Between the ending of the prophecy of Elijah’s return in Malachi 4:5-6 (circa 430 BC) and the arrival of Jesus in Matthew 1 (circa 6-4 BC), has been referred to as “the 400 Years of Silence.” Silence only in the understanding that God was not speaking to prophets. God is silent, at least in written form, for the intertestamental period encompassing approximately four hundred years.

Historically

Generally, most theologians and historians place the writings of Malachi ended in about 435 B.C. The world powers began to shift from Babylon in the East to the Rome in the West. The prophet Daniel described this shift in power from Babylon to the Medio-Persian empire, to Alexander the Great, the rise of Egypt and finally the rise of the Roman empire.

Malachi ends with the nation of Israel in the land of Palestine after the Babylonian captivity. The Temple has been rebuilt in Jerusalem, on a smaller scale than grand and magnificent Temple of Solomon.

Herod’s Temple is completed in about 20 BC. It is grand in nature, but not

However, when the New Testament begins, Israel is a nation under the rule of the Rome empire. Everywhere you looked, the Roman legions presence saturated the civilized world.

After the Persians were defeated by Alexander, the Greeks invaded Palestine. With them they brought their language and culture—their architecture, names, styles of clothing, and entertainment.

The influence of the Greeks was long-lasting: the entire New Testament was written in Greek. And when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, who spoke Latin, he still chose to write in Greek.

For the Jewish people—who were to be set apart—the coming of Greek culture represented a moral and spiritual crisis.

During this time, internal conflict took place between the Grecian Hellenists who wanted to bring in Grecian ways and liberalize the Jewish way of life and the Hebrew nationalists. This split was the birth pains of the Pharisees. The Pharisees wanted to preserve everything in the Law, including Temple worship, offerings, and adherence to the Mosaic Law. Therefore, they resisted all the foreign influences that would disrupt the old Jewish ways. The word “pharisee” means “to separate.” They were the separationists who insisted on preserving traditions. They grew stronger and stronger, becoming more legalistic and rigid in their requirements. They became a common target of our Lord Jesus. Their religion had become their point of worship. They pushed for both the written and oral laws to be observed by all Jews.

The Hellenists became more politically influential. They became the “Sadducees.” Generally speaking, the Sadducees wanted a less strict interpretation of the Law, becoming “rationalists” in their approach. They did not believe in the supernatural, including life after death.

Politically

There is no Jewish king on the throne of Israel, instead the king is a descendent of Esau instead of Jacob. His name was Herod the Great. However, it was Rome and their governors where the power was seen.

The Jews continued to practice the Law of Moses and the temple rituals until Syria overtook Jerusalem in 204 BC. In 171 BC, Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the Holy of Holies (the most sacred part of the temple). The Jews led by the Maccabee brothers revolted and retook control of Jerusalem in 165 BC. The Roman Empire conquered Israel by 63 BC and continued to reign throughout the events of the New Testament.

Interestingly, many of the events during the intertestamental period fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. Of great significance were the prophecies of Daniel that spoke of coming empires that closely resembled those of the Greek and Roman Empires that took over the land of Israel (Daniel 7, 9). Several apocryphal books were written during this time. Some, like 1 and 2 Maccabees, can be read as more-or-less accurate historical accounts, while others are false teachings or fairy tales. None of them were worthy of being called Scripture by Jewish scholars.

Worship

Galatians 4:4-5 says, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."

The Temple is still the center of all Jewish worship even though it has been destroyed and rebuilt. The line of the Aaronic priesthood is no longer fulfilling their duties as assigned by the Law of Moses. The high priests are no longer in the line of Aaron. The high priest position is one of hiring and not of the calling by God. They purchase the office as political patronage.

Tending to the Temple, Temple Worship, and offerings were being carried out as if they had never been stopped.

While the temple is the center of life for worship and offerings, synagogues have sprung up in most Jewish cities and has become the center of the Jewish life, teaching and worship.

400 YEARS OF SILENCE?

There is a general belief that God was silent during the last prophetic uttering of Malachi and the birth of the Messiah.

The Apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians that says, "But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law," (Gal. 4:4). God may have been silent in spoken word, but God was busy. The Lord was working "behind the scenes" so to speak, concerning the long-awaited birth of the Savior of the world. The LORD was orchestrating events to happen just as was prophesied by the OT prophets. The time of our Lord's birth happened at God's appointed hour. Some of the exciting preparations took place during that time of "silence," however, and you will appreciate your New Testament better if you understand the historic events during the time between the Testaments.

During this time of "silence," God gave time for the teachings and prophecies of the Old Testament to penetrate throughout the world.

WHY ARE THEIR TWO DIVISIONS OF THE BIBLE CALLED THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT?

A TESTAMENT IS A COVENANT OR AGREEMENT

Testament is an old English word that means, “covenant,” or “agreement between two parties.” It is derived from the Latin *testamentum*. This term was used to translate the Greek and Hebrew words for covenant; *berit* in Hebrew and *diatheke* in Greek. Hence the Old and New Covenants became the Old and New Testaments. This is the ancient meaning of the term.

In the strictest sense, the two parts of Scripture are not “testaments” in the modern sense of the word: a last will and testament. Rather, the term means an agreement, covenant, or contract.

Before Jesus, there was only one group of sacred writings: the “scriptures.” Once the writings of the first century became part of the canon, there was a need to identify the two. Therefore, our Bibles today contain the “Old” and “New” Testaments.

THERE ARE A NUMBER OF COVENANTS RECORDED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the Bible, the word “covenant” usually has the idea of an agreement between two parties where one party is superior to the other; it is not an agreement between equals. The superior party makes a covenant in which he agrees to give certain things to the inferior party. This is the idea behind the agreements that God has made with the human race.

One of the central themes of the Old Testament is the idea of a covenant, or agreement, between God and humankind. The Bible lists a number of covenants that God instituted. They include the following:

The Adamic Covenant

The first covenant in Scripture is the one God made with Adam and Eve. The Bible records it in the following manner:

Genesis 2:15-17 (KJV) And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. 16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: 17 But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. (Genesis 2:15-17)

If Adam and Eve obeyed God, they would live in paradise without any sin or evil in their lives. When Adam and Eve broke their part of the covenant, sin entered the world.

The Noahic Covenant

After the Flood, God made a covenant, or agreement, with Noah that He would never destroy the earth again by flood. The sign of the covenant was the rainbow. The Lord said to him:

But with thee will I establish my covenant; and thou shalt come into the ark, thou, and thy sons, and thy wife, and thy sons' wives with thee. (Genesis 6:18)

The Abrahamic Covenant

God made a covenant with Abram (his name was later changed to Abraham). In this agreement, He promised to bless Abraham's descendants which would become the nation of Israel. The sign of the covenant was circumcision of the male child. The Bible records what happened:

Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: 2 And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: 3 And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. (Genesis 12:1-3)

The Mosaic Covenant

The Old Testament, or Old Covenant, derives its name from the agreement that God made with the nation of Israel at Mt. Sinai. The Bible explains it as follows:

In the third month, when the children of Israel were gone forth out of the land of Egypt, the same day came they [into] the wilderness of Sinai. 2 For they were departed from Rephidim, and were come [to] the desert of Sinai, and had pitched in the wilderness; and there Israel camped before the mount. 3 And Moses went up unto God, and the LORD called unto him out of the mountain, saying, Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel; 4 Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and [how] I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. 5 Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth [is] mine: 6 And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These [are] the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel. (Exodus 19:1-6)

God emphasized that He would have a personal relationship with His people. He said:

And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and ye shall be my people. (Leviticus 26:12)

Israel was His chosen people. They were to worship Him exclusively.

The Davidic Covenant

God makes a covenant with King David. The Bible records it as follows:

And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever. 14 I will be his father, and he shall be my son. If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men: 15 But my mercy shall not depart away from him, as I took [it] from Saul, whom I put away before thee. 16 And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever. 17 According to all these words, and according to all this vision, so did Nathan speak unto David. (2 Samuel 7:12-17)

The Promise of the Messiah

It is important to understand the differences concerning the "Anointed One", the "Messiah." There are two lines of thought: 1) One emphasis was that David's son, the Messiah, would restore humanity to a right relationship with God. This would occur by Him being an offering or sacrifice for sin. 2) Another line of teaching had David's son ruling over the nations. Israel is restored as God's chosen people with David's son ruling as king.

Each of these purposes is seen in prophetic pictures in the Old Testament. The New Testament says part one was fulfilled at the first coming of Christ, while part two will be fulfilled at His second coming.