

The New Testament: Jesus is the Fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Who is Jesus?	4
The Gospels	7
The Acts of the Apostles	9
New Testament Letters	9
Conclusion	10
Bibliography	12

Introduction

The Babylonians had destroyed the Temple in 586 BC and removed the Israelites from Jerusalem and their homeland.¹ Following decades of exile, Cyrus, king of Persia, defeats Babylon in 539 BC and issues an edict to allow the Israelites to return to their homeland in 538 BC.² The Persians were defeated by Alexander the Great and the homeland of the Patriarchs was now Greek.³ In 63 BC the Romans now controlled Palestine and the faith the Jews possessed was in conflict with the reality of life they were experiencing under the control of the Romans. This dark period of nearly 600 years of exile and living under the authority of foreign rule is called the intertestamental period, the Silent Years.⁴ The God that was so active in the stories and celebrated in the festivals seemed to be silent.

Antagonized by the Romans, many Jews were ripe for change and looking forward with great hope to the day when the Lord would liberate them from Rome, restore the Temple in Jerusalem, reclaim the land for His chosen race, and reestablish the Torah as the law.⁵ The story line passed down from their ancestors led them to look for a political messiah similar to the famed King David to lead this redemption. This is where we begin the New Testament story.

The New Testament consists of 27 books written by apostles of Jesus and organized by the “gospels” and letters. The central figure of the New Testament is Jesus. The books of the New Testament provide an account of His life, death, and resurrection. They detail His claims, parables, and instructions regarding the practical and ethical ways of following Jesus. In God’s

¹ Felice Sorgwe, Introduction to Biblical Text and Doctrines, CHRI 5300, Class lecture at Houston Baptist University, Houston, Texas, February 4, 2020.

² Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 38.

³ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1992), 160.

⁴ Felice Sorgwe, Introduction to Biblical Text and Doctrines, CHRI 5300, Class lecture at Houston Baptist University, Houston, Texas, February 4, 2020.

⁵ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1992), 300.

meta-narrative, the New Testament is the second act where God continues the story of His redemption plan for all mankind. We will begin with the narrative story of Jesus's life and the significance to His claim to be the fulfillment of the Law and Prophets as God's redemption plan for all mankind. We will then provide an overview of the "gospels" and letters written to provide an account of the life of Jesus, record His claims and teachings, tell the story of the early church and introduce the prophetic writings regarding future events.

Who is Jesus?

Who is Jesus? Throughout the gospels and letters provided in the New Testament, the characters in each of the accounts are individually challenged to reconcile Jesus's claims to their personal belief. This same question has confronted every person in history who has encountered the stories and claims of Jesus. Although there were various sects of Judaism, Jews held common beliefs that God would reclaim the land promised to His chosen nation, rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, and restore the Torah as the way of life. It was also commonly believed by Jews that God would accomplish this through the Messiah, like a new King David in a coming "messianic age".⁶

The Old Testament writers provided several prophetic statements regarding the Messiah that Jesus fulfilled. The Messiah would come from the line of Isaac.⁷ The Messiah would be heir to the throne of King David.⁸ The Messiah would be born of a virgin and be called Immanuel.⁹ The Messiah would be rejected by His own people.¹⁰

⁶ Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 7.

⁷ Gen. 17:19 (NASB)

⁸ Isa. 9:6-7 (NASB)

⁹ Isa. 7:14 (NASB)

¹⁰ Isa. 53:3 (NASB)

The apostles Matthew and Luke record that an angel appeared to Mary and Joseph declaring that Mary, being a virgin, would conceive a son.¹¹ Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the region of Judaea as predicted by the Prophet Micah.¹² The book of Malachi spoke of God sending a messenger to prepare the way for the coming of God.¹³ John the Baptist was proclaiming that the people needed to repent of their sins before the nation could be restored. The apostle Mark records that John proclaims that someone greater than him would follow him, whose sandals he was not worthy to untie, and as Jesus entered, it was clear John was referring to Jesus. As Jesus came up from the water after being baptized, a voice from heaven declared “This is My beloved son, in whom I am well-pleased.”¹⁴ After Jesus was baptized, He went away for a period of 40 days in the desert where Jesus experienced and overcame all the temptations that He would experience during his ministry. This marks the beginning of Jesus’s public ministry.

Jesus continues his ministry in Capernaum where He selected twelve men to be His disciples and become the core of the early church. For approximately three years Jesus preached in the region of Galilee and Judaea. Jesus proclaimed a radical and controversial message summarized by the apostle Mark; “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”¹⁵ The “kingdom” is not referring to a political king or place where the king reigns. However, it is referencing the fulfillment of the prophecies moving from a kingdom era where sin and condemnation under the law reigns to a kingdom era where saving grace through Jesus as the Messiah reigns. Jesus radically claims to be the personification of

¹¹ Matt. 1:22-23; Luke 1:26-31

¹² Mic. 5:2

¹³ Mal. 3:1-2 (NASB)

¹⁴ Matt. 3:17 (NASB)

¹⁵ Mark 1:15 (NASB)

God Himself, He claims to be the salvation of all mankind, and He models and teaches how we should live our life.¹⁶

During the time of Jesus's ministry John the Baptist, imprisoned by Herod Antipas, heard of the works of Jesus and questioned in a letter: "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"¹⁷ A natural question from someone who had dedicated his life to paving the way for a Messiah and declaring Jesus as He. Jesus responds, "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor."¹⁸ There was no doubt who Jesus claimed to be. These bold claims were disruptive and did not sit well with the religious establishment.

Jesus authenticated His teaching and claims by performing many miracles during His ministry. Soon after raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus is ushered into Jerusalem as King of the Jews riding in on the back of a donkey as foretold by the prophet Zechariah.¹⁹ As he rode into Jerusalem, the crowds cut down branches from the brooks and ravines and laid them down at His feet, shouting out "Hosanna to the Son of David; Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!"²⁰ (Which means, save us now) This was the greeting for the Messiah.

Jesus was coming to Jerusalem as the Passover lamb. As is tradition for the Jews on the 10th day of the first month of Nisan, a lamb was taken into the home and kept there for 4 days and inspected to make sure that he had no blemish.²¹ He was then suitable to serve as the

¹⁶ Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 23-

24.

¹⁷ Matt. 11:3 (NASB)

¹⁸ Matt. 11:6 (NASB)

¹⁹ Zech. 9:9 (NASB)

²⁰ Matt. 21:9 (NASB)

²¹ Exod. 12:3 (NASB)

Passover lamb sacrifice. So too, Jesus, on exactly the 10th day of Nisan, rode into Jerusalem, God's home, and for the next four days he was examined and questioned by the priests to see if they could trip him up. Pilate made the declaration that he could find "no fault" in Him. To satisfy the religious leaders, he washed his hands of "personal responsibility" and delivered Jesus up to be crucified. This pure, sinless Lamb of God was then led to be crucified and died at the exact time that the Passover lamb was being sacrificed in the Temple.²²

Death by crucifixion was a cruel punishment reserved as a visual deterrent for the worst criminals. Jesus was crucified, died and was buried in a borrowed tomb on a Friday. Because Jesus preached that He would be raised three days later, the Romans stationed a guard to secure the grave.²³ It was three days later on Sunday, as predicted, Jesus conquered death and left an empty tomb. The "resurrection" gives the ultimate significance to the life of Jesus, the Messiah. This gospel or "good news" is the power that Christians claim provides forgiveness for our sins, redemption for all mankind, and victory over death. Jesus did not destroy the theological roots of Judaism but affirmed the Christian cultural origins in Judaism and provided a Messiah for all humanity.

The Gospels

The assumed authors of the first four books of the New Testament known as the gospels are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They provide accounts of the life of Jesus written in 49-60 A.D. from different and complementary perspectives providing a historical and theological account of the life of Jesus. The time between Jesus's crucifixion (30-33 A.D.) and the writing

²² Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 18.

²³ Matt. 27:65 NASB

of the gospels is known as the “period of oral tradition” where the narratives were passed on through story.²⁴

Matthew, formerly a Jewish tax collector, writes to a Jewish audience to prove that Jesus is the Messiah and to explain God’s kingdom. Matthew begins by establishing Jesus’s genealogy and connecting him to Abraham and King David. He gives the account of Jesus’s birth from the perspective of Joseph and provides Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount describing the traits Jesus desires in His followers. Matthew’s writings also include Jesus’s instructions to His apostles, parables of the kingdom, instructions to the church, and the Mount Olivet discourse.

The book of Mark was written by John Mark who was not an apostle of Jesus, but accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey. The gospel of Mark was the first gospel written to Christians in Rome to prove that Jesus was the Messiah. Mark provides an action-packed narrative of Jesus’s ministry beginning with the inauguration of Jesus’s public ministry by John the Baptist and ends with the crucifixion and Jesus ascending into heaven.

Luke, thought to be the personal physician of Paul, is the only Gentile author in the New Testament. Luke writes to a Greek audience and provides detailed accounts of the birth of Jesus from the perspective of Mary and emphasizes the humanity of Jesus. He traces Jesus’s genealogy back to Adam emphasizing Jesus as “Son of Man”.²⁵ Luke’s writings also emphasize prayer, miracles, and angels.

The gospel of John was written by John, an apostle of Jesus, son of Zebedee and brother of James to new Christians and searching non-Christians. The gospel of John was written after A.D. 70 and was a reflective gospel to prove conclusively that Jesus is the Son of God and that

²⁴ Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 43.

²⁵ Luke 19:10 (NASB)

all who believe in Him will have eternal life. John begins with connecting Jesus to being with God at the creation and carries this theme throughout the book. Where the other authors of the gospels provide genealogy and detailed accounts of Jesus life, John describes miracles not recorded in the other gospel books to demonstrate the power of Jesus, and John gives a personal eyewitness account of finding the empty tomb and post resurrection appearances by Jesus.

The Acts of the Apostles

Written by Luke, the book of Acts begins with the last days of Jesus, the selection of Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot, and Jesus instructing them to be His witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth before ascending into the clouds. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended and filled those present. Empowered by the Holy Spirit and the bold preaching of the apostles, the church grew rapidly in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria. Paul is introduced as a zealous persecutor of the early church in chapter 7 at the stoning of Stephen. Acts then describes Paul's dramatic conversion while traveling the road to Damascus to become a passionate evangelist responsible for leading the growth of Christian church. Luke records the adventures of Paul as he carries the gospel to the world on three missionary journeys, is shipwrecked and imprisoned.

New Testament Letters

The New Testament letters provide instruction on Christian doctrine and encouragement to individuals and churches as Christianity expanded. The majority of the letters were written by Paul to pastors and churches established during his journeys. Paul's letters address practical matters related to Jews and Gentiles in the church such as morality, disputes between brethren, and marriage. To first century Jews, he connects and emphasizes the gospel as a continuing story of the Hebrew faith. He provides instruction as to how to stand firm in our faith, resist evil

and on matters of church order, and church doctrine. His book to the church of Rome provides a beautifully written description of the path to salvation.

Referred to as the “General Epistles” are letters written by James, Peter, John and Jude to first century Christians to warn of hypocritical practices and false teachings, to emphasize the basics of following Christ, encourage those who were suffering and to inspire vigilance and provide assurance of their faith.

Written by the apostle John to seven churches in Asia and all believers, the book of Revelation concludes the New Testament. In apocalyptic literature form, the apostle John describes a vision of the glorified Christ, the future return and reign of Christ on earth, final judgment of Satan and sin, and a hope for a new heaven and new earth.

Conclusion

As Paul concludes his epic book to the church of Rome, I will join in his great revelation. “Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen.”²⁶ Paul states that their faith has been established on the good news he has taught and according to the preaching of Jesus Christ. Paul refers to the great mystery that has been kept secret for long ages past. Since the creation of man God has had a plan for man. Through the writings of the prophets and according to God’s command, He has now made this eternal mystery known to all nations. What is this

²⁶ Rom. 16:25-27 (NASB)

eternal mystery? Through the sacrifice of God's own Son and His defeat of death, God has delivered His redemption plan for man. Glory be to God!

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