



New Testament Reader's Notes
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Matthew

Author – unknown – attributed to Matthew by 2nd century (see Mt 9:9 and 10:3)

Date – likely between 80-90AD (probably later half of that decade) – seems to know Temple destroyed – 70AD

Purpose – to make the case that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah

Matthew uses parts of Mark, quotes OT frequently (especially fulfillment of prophecy)

Tension with Jewish leaders reflects late 1st century reality for church –

Matthew leans anti-Jewish / anti-synagogue (problematic for later church, anti-Semitism)

Matthew includes the most Jewish Genealogy and stresses the ways in which Jesus fulfills OT covenant

MT can be beautiful and encouraging – Sermon on mount, beatitudes

or very rough – sheep and goats, Judgment, hate mother and father, etc.

Great commission – a call to the church to spread the Good News

Mark

Earliest Gospel written – possibly just before destruction of temple in 70 or just after (65-75 often used to date)

Virtually nothing known about Author – rough and simple Greek

Attributed to John-Mark of Acts 15:37-38

Mark almost singularly focused on presenting Jesus as the Son of God

Mark also highlights tension and fear of following Christ (probably written during a time of persecution)

Two major sections – A. Mark 1:13 – 10:52 the ministry and healings of Jesus around Galilee

B. Mark 11:1 – 16:8 the conflicts and opposition to Jesus around Jerusalem

“Markan Secret” – Jesus often tells those who know something about him not to tell anyone

Mark generally gives fewer details than other books – simple and plain

Luke

Probably written between 80-85AD

Very well written – obviously educated person (Luke the physician from book of Acts- travelled with Paul)

Luke and Acts share an author – 2 volume set dedicated to Theophilus = “lover of God”

Luke has a heart for the poor, the broken, the sick, and needy

Luke reflects Paul’s commitment to outsiders and Gentiles (Luke includes Samaritans in several places)

Large amount of material unique to this book (scholars think Luke had access to an unknown source)

Luke is concerned with Jesus as a rejected prophet and the restorer of Israel – but also universal

Luke’s genealogy includes non-Jewish ancestors

Salvation is for all

John

Attributed to John the disciple – “The beloved one” as described in the book

Different than the other 3 Gospels – chronology, content (no parables, no Last supper), adds long discourse

More cosmic in scope – less historical

Dating is difficult – possibly 75-80 but some argue much earlier 55-70 (eye-witness) and some later (90-95)

Harshest of the Gospels on Jews and on Peter

Jesus in John shows no weakness, always knows what people are thinking/doing, no fear, etc.

John uses the word “hour” as a theme of Jesus’ moment of action – his cross and sacrifice

Perhaps the most evangelistic of the Gospels – almost sermon-like in many places

Acts

Attributed to Luke (same author as Gospel) – and generally dated around 80-90

Written as a parallel of Luke – shares many of the same themes but focuses on growth of church

Not exact but divided largely into 2 main sections – before Paul and after Paul

Some insight and history of the governance and tensions of early church – also emphasis on Holy Spirit

Romans

Most complete and sophisticated presentation of Paul’s theology – a foundation of Reformed/Presby theology

No serious doubt that author is Paul – generally dated about 57AD

What does it mean to be Christian in the heart of the Empire

What about the Jews? (chapt 9-11)

Paul had neither founded or visited Roman church when letter was written

Universal in scope but moves to the particulars

What is the Gospel and how should we live because of what God has done?

Considered by many Paul’s greatest work

1 & 2 Corinthians

1 Cor written in late 53 – early 54 / 2 Cor written about 55

Reference to a 3rd letter is made but that letter is unknown to us

Corinth is a major city of Paul’s day – 250k people plus 400k slaves – trade routes – wealthy and important city

At least 12 separate temples dedicated to various gods/goddesses

A reputation for immorality – sexual industry and prostitution

Paul founded the church there and remains in contact with them – predominantly Gentile congregation

Both letters deal with various practical and theological issues of the church

Both contain struggles of being faithful amidst an unchristian culture and pagan practices

Also display tension of early church question – How Jewish must Christians be?

1st Cor – privatization or personalization of the faith is an issue – individual freedom to do as you please?

The Corinthians misunderstand what it means to be freed from our sin as permission to do anything

2nd Cor especially gives evidence of some painful argument or disagreement and a challenge to Paul’s authority

Chapt 11 – the fool’s boast – Paul defends his ministry

A very interesting picture of a church trying to figure out how to be a church

Galatians

Author – no serious challenge to the claim that Paul is the author

Galatia is generally used to describe a Roman territory rather than a specific location or town

Letter is probably intended for a group of churches within the region

Date – two possibilities – Written to churches in Northern area of Galatia (53-57) / Southern region (48-49)

Main issue – Evangelists requiring adherence to Jewish laws and customs challenging Paul’s leadership

Paul is defending himself and his understanding of the Gospel

Especially Justification by faith – which makes Galatians a valuable asset to Christian theology

Significant controversy over circumcision and Paul attacks enemies harshly

Chapter 5 is in many ways the highlight (fruits of the Spirit, etc.)

Ephesians

Author and date are debated

Writing, grammar and style do not match most of Paul's letter – possibly some content also

Paul? – if attributed to Paul – often dated later (58-59) – end of his life (change some of his ideas/style)

Someone else (no idea who) – follower of Paul – honoring his ideas – date would be late (85-90)

Ephesus = most important city in western Asia Minor – harbor city – commercial center

General letter - No particular mistake or heresy addressed

A thoroughly Pauline letter – even if not written by Paul – knew of Paul's other letters – indicates imprisonment

Major theme – God's plan to unify and reconcile Jews and Gentiles

Philippians

Philippi = major city of Macedonia (named for Alexander the Great's father, Phillip)

Many retired military – given land in Macedonia after retirement

Primarily Gentile – no Jewish synagogue in Philippi

Consensus is that Paul wrote this letter and wrote it from Prison – 3 options for date

53-55 – imprisoned in Ephesus / 57-59 Caesarea / 61 – Rome (most popular theory)

Essentially a missionary thank you letter – friendship and encouragement (they are worried for Paul)

No OT quotes but a beautiful passage on Jesus (2:5-11) that may have even been a hymn or liturgical reading

Sometimes referred to as the “letter of joy” – Paul uses the words joy/rejoice often in the letter

Colossians

Major city in what is now Turkey – nearly completely destroyed in 60AD by earthquake

Debate about authorship and date but historically attributed to Paul (from prison) around mid 50's

Paul has not visited this church/churches but is concerned about some of their practices/beliefs

Specifically the worshipping of heavenly bodies “stars” – heavenly powers of divine presences

These beliefs are called the “Colossian Heresy” though the exact nature of it can only be inferred

It appears to be a confusion of cosmology with spirituality?

Paul seeks to refute these wrong beliefs specifically and elevate Christ above all other beliefs

1 & 2 Thessalonians

1st Thess is written by Paul around 50AD and is probably the oldest written work in the New Testament

1 Thess is probably the very first proclamation of the God News in written form!

Paul is affectionate to the Thess church and considers himself a parent of sorts – spiritually

Concerned with the struggles of converts and the persecution they might be facing – encouragement

Also to clarify and express belief in the (imminent) return of Christ

2nd Thess is debated as a letter of Paul and no date can be firmly established given this discrepancy

Essentially a re-statement of many of the themes of the first letter

Also a high emphasis on the return of Christ and the end of time

1 & 2 Timothy

Generally attributed to Paul though the description of leaving Timothy doesn't square with Acts

If Paul wrote it, which is considered likely, it is probably dated around 60

Timothy is a co-worker and some sort of apprentice to Paul – Gentile by birth – convert to Christianity

Evidently now leading a church (Ephesus) and encountering some leadership struggles

Paul writes to give instruction and encouragement for a young pastor
Both letters contain general advice and thoughts – 2 Timothy is somewhat more personal in tone

Titus

Written to one of Paul's assistants – Titus and if written by Paul should be dated about 60AD
Titus is heavily involved in Paul's dealings with the Corinthians
Letter is concerned with right teaching and leadership – instruction for Titus

Philemon

A personal letter to a slave owner asking mercy for a runaway slave who has crossed paths with Paul
Paul is in prison when he writes this letter
Appeals to Philemon to treat and consider the slave as a "brother" in Christ and not punish him harshly
Within his rights to execute him
New interpretation has questioned whether the above is accurate and claimed that the two are actually brothers
Perhaps partly because this letter has been used historically by Christians to support slavery

Hebrews

More of a sermon than a letter – though the conclusion has elements of a letter
Attributed to Paul by some of the early church (3rd century) but no evidence at all exists to support that
Essentially nothing can be said about who wrote this work except almost certainly Jewish-Christian
Date – Probably around 65AD as no mention of the destruction of temple in 70 is mentioned
Also no mention of intense persecution – which happened in late 60s by Nero
Seems intended for Jewish converts (Hebrews) – who are trying to defend themselves from Jews
Themes...
New covenant in Christ is superior to the old covenant in every way (Author uses better/superior 15x)
Better priesthood, temple, sacrifice, etc.
Jesus is the full revelation of God's intention and plan
Practical application is offered but essentially this book is a theological argument elevate Jesus

James

Addressed not to a specific church but to - "members of 12 tribes in dispersion" probably Jewish Christians?
Author – James brother of Jesus who led the Jerusalem council historically considered the author
Martyred by Herod in 62 so letter is generally dated early 60s - some argue for much earlier date
Letter is very Jewish with high emphasis on moral/ethical behavior, and an active faith
Harsh criticism of partiality and abuse of the poor by the rich
Mostly practical and challenging with some theological content
Luther condemned book of James for teaching "works righteousness" – can be hard to reconcile with Paul

1 & 2 Peter

Attributed to Peter but scholars argue over the claim – based on the Greek is very sophisticated and polished
Also reflects a persecution that might not have existed until after Peter's death
Little known of the occasion, origin, or reason for writing
Beautifully written letter – poetic and deep – profound letter that shows exceptional language skill
2 Peter differs in style and tone – much stiffer and less poetic – leans toward lecture?
2 Peter shows clear connections to the Letter of Jude

1, 2 & 3 John

Attributed to John the Apostle (author of Gospel and Revelation) – not agreed upon – possibly John the Elder
Written to a congregation that has suffered some division – pastoral in nature

Many similarities between the letters and the Gospel (love, light/dark, world, life...)

Some suggest these letters combat Gnosticism, an early church heresy of the late 1st – 2nd century.
(the body is evil, salvation is an escape from the body, duality of flesh and spirit, etc.)

Jude

Possibly one of Jesus brothers

Difficult to date – probably late 1st century

Connected to 2 Peter

Combatting a heresy of the early church

False teachers – being saved from sin allows us to sin

Possibly very early form of Gnosticism being addressed

Revelation

Authorship – John (Gospel) – challenged but historically accepted

Date – Probably about 95 AD though some argue earlier and some later (obviously during persecution)

An Apocalyptic – a very specific genre of Jewish writing adapted by Christians – mystical, symbolic, end times

Written to give church confidence and encouragement during intense suffering – reminder – God wins

Probably the hardest and most abused book in NT? Very open to misinterpretation – vivid imagery

Duality – life/death – Heaven/Hell – Judgement/Salvation – reward/punishment – grace/wrath – God/Satan...

Group Leadership

1. Begin with Prayer

2. Start by summarizing the material covered – to make sure everyone is on same page
 - a. Ask what people found interesting, challenging, new, etc.

 - b. Discuss any questions about readings
 - i. Pay particular attention to differences in words – usually indicates translation challenges

 - ii. Try to keep focus on what it says about Jesus or following him...
 1. How does this text help me in my faith

 - iii. Don't get bogged down by uncomfortable or difficult stuff

1. Don't ignore it but with large chunks of material there should be positive stuff
 - iv. Try to note passages that may be connected to the particular book or author if possible
3. Present any particulars you found interesting, challenging, helpful
4. Give brief overview of upcoming readings