

LET'S THINK ABOUT THE NEW TESTAMENT

Resource Material for Lent 2004



THE PARISH CHURCH OF ST MARY THE VIRGIN

within the

FOUNDATION OF LADY KATHERINE LEVESON

at Temple Balsall

Introduction

This handbook is offered as a resource to help our parish study in Lent 2004. It consists of material meant to accompany each of the five weekly sessions. The sessions themselves will be found most useful if you have read the relevant section of the handbook before you come. The handbook should act as a springboard for discussion and further thought. After each section you will find a number of questions. These are meant to stimulate further thought and discussion. At the end, you will find a table of the chief dates: these give mental pegs to accompany the reading. Also there is a brief description of each of the NT writings.

Important note: This version contains only the material for the first session.

Printed copies of the full version (60 pages A4) are available from the Foundation, price £5.50 each (including UK Postage) from:

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Questions to Think About before the First Session

1. *How do YOU use the New Testament?*
2. *What parts of the New Testament do you find difficult, and why?*
3. *Which aspects of the early Christian books fascinate you, and why?*
4. *What do you hope to gain from this course?*
5. *Are there particular parts of the New Testament that you would like to find out more about?*
6. *What is your favourite passage in the New Testament?*
7. *Which translation of the New Testament do you use, and why?*

FIRST SESSION: The world of the New Testament

In this session, the first aim is to get a picture of aspects of the world of Jesus' life-time and the following years. The second aim is to survey the make-up of the New Testament and how it came into existence.

What about the world of the New Testament?

'In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.....'
(Luke 3.1-2)

Welcome to the world of the New Testament! Let us unpack this formal dating that comes just before the start of Jesus' ministry as told in the Gospel of Luke. This writer, also responsible for the Acts of the Apostles, is much the most 'aware' of the writers in the New Testament. He knows a good deal about the world in which he lives: its geography, and its political set-up; who runs it and how you get from one place to another, especially in the Eastern half of the Mediterranean. If there had been serious newspapers and reviews in those days, he would have been the sort of person to read them.

This does not mean that he gets it entirely right. It sounds conceited and silly, but modern scholarship often enables us to do better than almost anybody at the time of Jesus and Luke could possibly have done. For example, not only were there no useful maps but at that time (and for centuries to come) people had no way of providing

dates that everybody could recognize. That is why we have the cumbersome list of rulers given here: it was the best anybody could do by way of dating people and events. Let's see how far Luke's list gets us.

Tiberius became Roman Emperor in AD14, on the death of the great Augustus. So his fifteenth year is 29-30 in our way of numbering (which was arrived at centuries later).

Pontius Pilate was Roman governor of Judea, the southern part of Palestine, from 26 to 36, a long spell for a man to hold a job of that sort. Without his involvement in Jesus' death, he would scarcely have made a ripple in history. He had oversight the southern of part of modern Israel, within what was the Roman province of Syria, covering our Syria, Palestine/Israel and most of Jordan. It was the eastern fringe of the Empire, important for containing trade routes from further East through to Mediterranean ports.

Herod was a son of Herod the Great, who appears in the story of the Wise Men. When he died in 4BC, his territory, roughly modern Palestine which he ruled under the Romans, was divided up among his sons, into four parts ('tetrarchies'). The reference here is to Herod Antipas who had charge of Galilee until 39: so he was in power throughout Jesus' childhood and his ministry. The other lands referred to lie close by, in modern Syria.

Annas and Caiaphas were never high priests together, as Luke implies: he misunderstood the set-up. In the Jewish system, there was a single high priest. Annas had been deposed ('retired') in the year 15 and then Caiaphas was in office for many years. To make them on a par would be like saying that the Queen and her mother reigned side by side. The high priest was in charge of the temple in Jerusalem, which Herod the Great had rebuilt in splendid style and which the Romans were to destroy in 70. He was king-pin of Jewish life, religiously, politically and economically, especially in Judea. In a way he was responsible for good order to Pilate; in fact they cooperated, like British officials and Indian leaders often did in India until independence. The crucifying of Jesus was an example of their working together in the interests of good order.

Into this world came first John the Baptist, reformer and prophet, and then Jesus from Nazareth, the subject of Luke's book and of the whole New Testament.

But before we go on, we should give a brief description of the rest of the setting of these great but hidden events. As the map makes clear, Palestine is on the edge of the Roman Empire which consisted of all the lands around the Mediterranean, and even stretched out beyond. The eastern half had been conquered by the Greek general Alexander the Great a few centuries before. His empire had stretched as far as India, at least for a brief time. And wherever his power stretched, his troops took Greek culture and the Greek language with them. So after his death, Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt, now ruled by the heirs of his leading generals, were all Greek-speaking as far as city-life, trade and culture were concerned — even after the Romans conquered them not long before the time of Jesus.

In this world, the Jews stood out as a strong and independent people, with outposts in all major cities and maintaining their own firm religion and customs. They were unusual in their total refusal to make gestures of compromise with the religions of the places in which they settled. This made them seem to be disloyal. For the religion of the various cities was a symbol of local patriotism, as, at the higher level, was the cult of the Roman emperors which applied throughout the Empire. These cults were expressed in the worship of any number of gods and goddesses, each with its own local temple and routine of festivals and sacrifices. Compared with the moral and scripture-centred character of Jewish worship in the synagogues, pagan religion seemed to Jews often outrageously crude and without much basis in anything beyond legends and a routine of animal offerings and riotous parties, often with associated sexual licence. The Christians from the start, whether they were ex-Jews or ex-pagans, shared this rejection of pagan practice: they worshipped the one God of Israel, now made known afresh in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, a figure quite unlike anybody in the legends of Greece and Rome.

What about the New Testament?

The New Testament is a collection of 27 books, each written separately (though Luke and Acts belong together as volumes 1 and 2). Each has its own distinct origin, and its own purpose and point. In other words, they were not written by a committee which decided on a programme of work to which a number of people contributed; though people often treat them as if they did come about in that way.

The books fall into two main categories: letters and books about Jesus' life. The letters came to be given the name 'epistles'; but that is simply from the Greek and Latin words for 'letter'. Twenty-one of the writings fall into this category, though a few of them seem better described as treatises than letters. For its first century or two, the Church had no overall structure of authority and seems to have kept together largely through a great deal of letter-writing and book-swapping, as well as through visits. We know this because from the second half of the second century on, sections of early Christian writings, including parts of the New Testament, have been dug up in the dry sand of Egypt (a good preservative). None of these books seems to have been composed there but more likely in Greece or Turkey, and even in southern France.

Four accounts of Jesus' life, death and resurrection came to be included in the New Testament and were given the name 'gospels': they were seen as accounts of the 'good news of salvation'. One of the four, as we have seen, was part one of a longer work which came to include an account of the first thirty years or so of parts of the Church's mission. It got the name Acts of the Apostles.

There is one other book that stands by itself: the Revelation of John. This was not included in the collection for some time and has sometimes over the centuries had a job to be kept in! It is a visionary writing, of a kind common in Judaism at the time but very strange to us. It is best seen as a long poem about the glorious heavenly

court, all angels and hymns at the throne of God, and about the future triumph of God and Christ over the whole world. (Note: it is not a kind of predecessor of Old Moore's Almanack!)

The letters are dominated by the writings of Paul, no doubt the most influential early Christian leader. They are written to a range of Christian communities, mostly in the 50s. Other letters come from a variety of early leaders whose work obviously came to be more widely valued.

Early in the second century, and perhaps even earlier, some Christian communities, perhaps in major centres like Ephesus or Smyrna or Antioch or Rome, began to collect the writings which they had got used to reading in their meetings for worship. They valued them not only for worship but also as authorities for guidance in problems that confronted them from time to time — over moral questions and matters of belief: the Church was already not short of differences of opinion. Leaders did not usually like that and were glad to turn to the NT writings as authorities. Gradually, perhaps as early as 150, the list of accepted books had come into being, more or less as it has remained to this day. They are called 'the canon' because they form the 'standard' or 'measure' of faith and conduct. Though of course over the years and over different areas, they have been interpreted and used in a great variety of different ways, down to the present day.

It is worth having a picture of how books were actually written. At that time, writings, especially those made in Egypt (i.e. all those that have survived from the early period) were put on long sheets of papyrus (made from reeds), which were then rolled up in scrolls (as Jewish scriptures still are for synagogue use). Outside Egypt, parchment, made from animal skins, was the usual writing material. The scribe wrote in columns a few inches wide, from top to bottom of the scroll, but leaving margins. However, some, usually low-grade work (like school exercise books) was done on sheets that were sewn together at the edge, and gradually this form was becoming commoner. It is a fact that all the early manuscripts of the NT writings that have survived were made in this form; and it is not too much to claim that the early Church was almost the inventor of what we know of as 'the book'. It is of course an economical form: you can write on both sides of a page, not possible with a scroll. The earliest surviving manuscript of the NT is a few verses of John 18, dating from about the year 130, only about 30 or 40 years after the Gospel was written. You can see it in the John Rylands Library in Manchester: an interesting trip from Egypt where it was originally written and where it survived for so many centuries, buried in the sand.



This shows a book in traditional scroll form, as used still in synagogues, and the common way of book production in Jesus' time.



This is the last page of Luke's Gospel in a beautiful fifth-century Greek manuscript of the N.T.

It is, of course, in the form of a book with pages (a codex). Its opulence shows how wealthy the Church could be by this time.

Two brief notes:

Dead Sea Scrolls: in 1947, some Arabs came across a cache of old scrolls near Qumran by the Dead Sea in southern Palestine. Soon, exploration revealed a large quantity of such scrolls and fragments, as well as the remains of a settlement — all apparently dating from the last two hundred or so years before AD70. It has since become pretty certain that this was the location of a dissident community of Jewish rebels who fell out with the high priestly authorities in Jerusalem in the second century BC. They are often identified with the sect called Essenes who existed in this period alongside other Jewish groups like the Pharisees. The scrolls were most probably the sect's library consisting of both biblical books and their own writings. It is likely that they fled the site during the Jewish rebellion against the Romans, 66-73, and hid their books before departing. It is of great interest that they get no mention of any kind in the NT, but they do have a number of points in common with the early Christian community, even though the latter did not have the same monastic character. We can say that both the Church and the Qumran sect illustrate the diversity in Judaism in the period. The Qumran scrolls represent one of the most significant finds relating to the period of the Jesus and the NT ever made.

Septuagint: Hebrew was the original language of the Hebrew scriptures (our OT), but already in the third century BC most Jews lived in the Dispersion (i.e. outside Palestine, where alone Hebrew was at all widely understood), with groups being gradually established in most significant cities, where, as we saw, Greek was the common tongue. One of the most important such colonies of Jews was in Alexandria in Egypt which became a major Jewish intellectual centre. While holding fast to their religion, the Jews were mostly content to use Greek as their main language, even in the practice of their faith. So it is not surprising (though still a revolutionary step) that Alexandrian Jews at this time translated the holy scriptures into Greek, the first of a number of such attempts. It is called the Septuagint because of the legend that it was the work of a team of 70 translators (who miraculously all came up with identical translations!). This version was in effect the scriptures of early Christianity and has left a much stronger mark on the NT than the old Hebrew originals.

Questions

1. *What would you like to grasp in more detail about the world of the time of Jesus and the early Church?*
2. *What, if anything, puzzles you about the way the New Testament books were actually written?*



The scene is high ground in rough wilderness terrain overlooking the Dead sea. The arrow near the middle of the picture points to the ruins of the community house of the people who wrote the Dead Sea scrolls. It was abandoned in about AD68,



Greek inscription recording the rebuilding of a synagogue and associated rooms by Theodotus, son of Vettenuis, found in Jerusalem. First century AD.

This inscription, like others of various kinds, shows how common Greek was even in Jerusalem in Jesus' day.