

HOW TO READ THE NEW TESTAMENT EPISTLES

Practical suggestions

Banska Bystrica, 15th March 2015

LITERATURE: WILKINSON & BOA: *Talk Thru the Bible*; MEARS, H. *What the Bible is All About*; HILL, H. *A Journey through the Bible*; PAWSON, D. *Unlocking the Bible*.

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0. INTRODUCTION: THE EPISTLES

- 21 letters out of 27 NT books! (about 77%)
- Epistles: the key to understanding the NT (theology)

0.1. THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

- (1) the gospels, (2) Acts - history, (3) the letters of Paul, (4) catholic/general letters (5) the Revelation

0.2. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

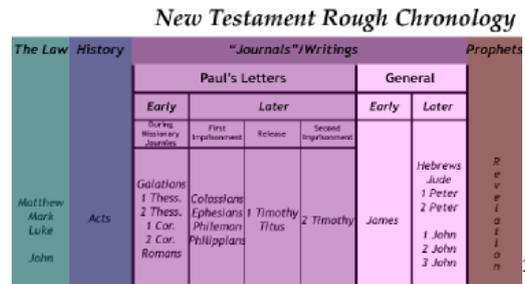
- basic division: (1) Paul's letters, (2) general letters
- NT – the key to the Bible
- the epistles – the key to the New Testament

0.2.1. AUTHORS

- pseudoepigraphs?¹ – “...it was generally accepted in the classical world that historians would freely compose speeches and letters and attribute them to the main characters about whom they

¹ pseudonymity – ‘a device for passing on authoritative tradition in a creative way’ (Lincoln, Ephesians)

were writing.² ⇒ the Bible does not have any higher standard for truth than the surrounding culture...



Year ⁴	Book
47	Galatians
49	James
51/52	1 & 2 Thessalonians
55	1 & 2 Corinthians
57	Romans
58/60	Mark
60	Colossians, Ephesians, & Philemon
61	Philippians
61/64	Matthew
61/64	Luke
64	1 Timothy
64	Titus
64/65	1 Peter
65	Jude
66/68	Acts
66/68	2 Peter
66/67	2 Timothy
68/70	Hebrews
85	John
85/90	1, 2, & 3 John
95	Revelation

- Paul, the apostle (13 epistles); (**2 Peter 3:15-16** ...as our beloved **brother Paul** also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶ as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.)
- Peter, the apostle (2); John, the apostle (3); James, Jesus' brother (1); Jude (1); anonymous[Hebrews] (1)

The author of Hebrews is not known for sure. But whoever its author was, he received revelation from God (Heb. 1:1), the truth of which was confirmed by the twelve apostles (Heb. 2:3-4). James was a half brother of Jesus (James 1:1; Gal. 1:19) and a leader in the apostolic church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13; Gal. 2:9). The apostle Peter authored two epistles (see 1 Pet. 1:1; 2 Pet. 2:1), although he used Silvanus as a scribe to pen the first one (1 Pet. 5:12). This leaves only Jude, who was also a half brother of Jesus (Jude 1:1; cf. Matt. 13:55), and he too spoke with prophetic authority (vs. 3, 5, 20ff.).⁵

² ROGERSON, J. *An Introduction to the Bible*, London : Equinox, p. 30.

³ http://fbckl.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/NT_Books_Basic_Timeline.gif

⁴ http://walkwiththeword.org/Studies/NT_Overview_3-Chronological.html

⁵ GEISLER, N. L. – NIX, W. E. *A General Introduction to the Bible*, Chicago : Moody Publishers, p. 156-7.

0.2.2. THE GENRE

- “normal” genuine letters – with salutation, greetings, situational information...

0.2.3. AUTHORITY (JESUS → PAUL PROBLEM)

- the last inspired revelation from God (Heb 1:1)
- the Holy Spirit present (**John 16:12** "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.")
- the church prepared to listen (**2Cor 5:16** Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer.)

1. PURPOSE

- spreading and explaining the gospel of Jesus Christ
- encouraging and educating the church
- correcting problems of life and doctrine

2. THEMES**2.1. DOCTRINE**

- Romans (“the gospel according to Paul”)
- Ephesians (the great purpose of God for the church)
- Hebrews (exposition of the Old Testament)

2.2. HERESIES

- Galatians (legalism, Judaism)
- Colossians (Gnosticism?)
- Jude, 2Peter (false teachers)

2.3. LIFE IN CHRIST

- 1-2 Thessalonians (letters for the new church)
- Philippians (“thank-you letter”)
- 1Peter (persecution)

2.4. CHURCH LIFE

- Pastoral letters (1-2 Timothy, Titus) The two letters addressed to Timothy and the one to Titus are collectively called the "Pastoral" letters, not only since they are addressed to these early Christian "*pastors*" (leaders who care for their "flock"), but also because they give instructions about the qualifications and responsibilities of people who are to serve as "*shepherds*" (leaders including "bishops" and "deacons:") of local congregations.⁶
- Personal letter (Philemon)
- 1-2 Corinthians (relationships, carnality)

2.5. APOSTASY

- Hebrews (returning to Judaism)
- 1-3 John (what is genuine Christianity – tests)

3. READING SUGGESTIONS

- read the epistle as a whole – best, several times
- make sure you understand the “technical” words (theology)

⁶ <http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Paul-Pastorals.htm>

3.1. FOR UNDERSTANDING

3.1.1. BACKGROUND

- read in conjunction with the Book of Acts (historical)
- consult the chronological charts (e.g. life of Paul)
- understand the situation of the author and the receivers

3.1.2. STRUCTURE

- doctrine → life application
- create an outline of your own

3.1.3. “MICROSCOPIC”

- go for the real meaning of the words (use dictionaries, commentaries, monographs)
- try to understand the flow of logic

3.2. FOR LIVING

- find out important facts about to whom the letter was addressed – find similarities to your situation
- look for connections between doctrine (theory) and application (practice)

4. TO REMEMBER

- NT epistles are genuine letters – applied Christian doctrine.
- NT epistles have highest doctrinal authority in the Bible.
- Profitable understanding of the NT epistles takes knowing the whole Bible, the historical background and prayer for illumination by the Holy Spirit for application. (Peter about Paul’s letters)