

Lesson 14: INTERPRETING EPISTLES

INTRODUCTION: The epistles of the NT are unique Bible books where NT apostles or prophets address the problems faced by Christians and churches. They apply the truths of the Gospel to Christian thought and conduct.

I. A **New** Kind of Biblical Literature.

A. The letters (epistles) of the NT are a kind of literature different from anything else found earlier in the Bible.

1. In the OT there are several recorded instances of letters being sent to different persons. **Jer. 29:1-23; Ezra 4:11-16; 5:7-17; 6:6-12; 7:11-26).**
2. But none of these comprise entire books, only embedded pieces.

B. The term *epistle* means “a letter of correspondence.”

1. Epistle is related to the term “**apostle.**” An apostle is a “sent messenger” while an epistle is a “sent message/letter.” But anyone can write an epistle. An epistle is simply a letter.
2. The epistles only make up **7.5%** of the Bible (and **34%** of the NT), but the material in these passages have the most direct relevance to Christians.

II. **The Nature of Biblical Letters.** The epistles are the most directly instructive writings in the Bible for Christians. But we must bear in mind certain features when interpreting them.

A. The style is that of **personal** letters, not official correspondence.

1. That doesn’t mean they’re not authoritative. They are sacred scripture.
2. But they are not written in the official style and a legally binding government memorandum.

Chart 70

Chronological Order of New Testament Books

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BOOK	DATE	ORIGINATION	RECIPIENTS	CIRCUMSTANCES
JAMES	c. 40-45	Palestine	Jewish Christians	Readers are dispersed in Palestine & Syria under duress
MATTHEW	c. 50	Syria	Syrian Jews/Jewish Christians	Written to assure Hellenistic Jews of Jesus' Kingship
GALATIANS	49	Corinth	Gentile churches in Galatia	Judaizers have made incursions; the Jerusalem Council follows
1 THESS.	51	Corinth	Gentile Christians in Thessalonica	Paul explains his absence and corrects false notions about the end times
2 THESS.	51	Corinth	Gentile Christians in Thessalonica	Paul learns months later his first letter was only partially heeded
1 COR.	55	Ephesus	Mostly Gentile Christians in Corinth	After several years away from Corinth, Paul learns of major problems
2 COR.	55	Philippi	Mostly Gentile Christians in Corinth	Paul prepares to visit again, sending this letter to prepare the way
ROMANS	56	Corinth	Gentile & Jewish Christians in Rome	Paul instructs the church on unity in the gospel & prepares for a visit
LUKE	c. 60-61	Caesarea?	An Influential Gentile named Theophilus	Explains how Jesus' life & sacrifice were God's plan for mankind
EPHESIANS	61	Rome	The Gentle churches around Ephesus	Paul instructs Gentiles on their calling into the church & to holiness
COLOSSIANS	61	Rome	The Gentle church of Colossae	Paul instructs Gentiles on their holy calling into union with Christ
PHILEMON	61	Rome	A Christian slave owner in Colossae	Paul returns an escaped slave & urges him to be accepted as a brother
PHILIPPIANS	62	Rome	The Gentle Church in Philippi	Paul thanks them for their generosity & encourages stronger unity
ACTS	63	Rome	Influential Gentile named Theophilus	Luke shows how Paul's Gentile ministry continued that of Peter & Jesus
MARK	c. 64-68	Rome	Gentile Romans	Reflects the preaching & teaching of Peter, under whom Mark served
1 PETER	c. 64-65	Rome	The Gentle churches of Anatolia	Encourages believers facing growing pressure & hostility
1 TIMOTHY	65	Macedonia	Timothy at Ephesus	Timothy is endorsed to reform the church in Paul's stead
TITUS	65	On the move	Titus on Crete	Paul endorses Titus to continue forming the new churches on the isle
2 TIMOTHY	c. 67-68	Rome	Timothy at Ephesus	Paul advises Timothy about ministry priorities & calls for his help
HEBREWS	c. 67-69	Unknown	Hebrews Christians in Rome	Urges Christian faith/faithfulness apart from the legal safety of Judaism
2 PETER	c. 68-69	Rome	The Gentle churches of Anatolia	Warns of a coming surge of false teaching
JUDE	c. 69	Unknown	Anatolia?	Strengthens churches in the midst of the surge of false teaching
JOHN	c. 80-90	Ephesus	Jews in the Dispersion	Fills in details of Jesus life not listed by the other gospels
1, II, III JOHN	c. 90-95	Ephesus	Churches in Asia Minor	Churches are reeling after an exodus led by false teachers
REVELATION	c. 94-96	Isle of Patmos	7 Churches of Asia Minor	Challenges 7 churches about their present state & things to come

- C. They are **open** letters, not private messages.
- While some are written to individuals (e.g., Timothy, Titus, Philemon), they are written with the understanding that they will be read publicly.
 - Note the plural *you's* at the end of 1 Timothy 6:21; 2 Timothy 4:22b, Titus 3:15b; and Philemon 25.
- D. They are **occasional** letters not treatises.
- A treatise is a formal, often lengthy discourse and argument on a particular topic or theme. While there are portions of NT books that have lengthy discourse, none of the NT books could be properly considered treatises.
 - Occasional Letters are written to specific persons or groups in order to address particular questions or **problems** that the writer has become aware of.
 - Almost all of the NT epistles are written in **response** to either prior correspondence or the author's awareness of problems his readers are facing.
 - Understanding the background & problems faced by these churches is very important to properly understanding the letters. This helps the reader:
 - Focus on the **main point** in mind while reading supporting comments. For instance, **James 2:24** does not contradict Paul's teaching on faith alone if one understands the problem James was confronting (and the way he uses the word "justifies").
 - Avoid **generalizing** things that are specific and particular. For instance, **2 Peter 2** describes the false teachers Peter was confronting, not all false teachers at all times in all places.

III. The Arrangement of Biblical Letters.

CHART 69 The Traditional Arrangement of NEW TESTAMENT BOOKS <small>© 2016 M. Scott Bashoor</small>		EPISTLES BY APOSTLES AND ASSOCIATED PROPHETS					
HISTORICAL BOOKS		EPISTLES BY PAUL		EPISTLES BY OTHER WRITERS			
THE LIFE OF JESUS	THE EARLY CHURCH	Letters to Churches	Letters to Leaders	Disputed Author	Regional Encyclicals & Local Letters	Prophetic Encyclical	
		Letter's Recipient	Letter's Recipient	Letter's Recipient	Letter's Author	Word Count	Word Count
Matthew 18,363 words to Jews		Romans	1 Timothy	Hebrews	<u>First Non-Apostolic Epistle</u> James	1,746	Revelation 9,856 words
Mark 11,312 words to Gentiles		1 Corinthians	2 Timothy		<u>Peter's Letters</u> 1 Peter	2,779	
Luke 19,495 words to a Gentile	Acts 18,470 words to a Gentile	2 Corinthians	Titus		2 Peter	1,680	
John 15,671 words to Jews		Galatians	Philemon		<u>John's Letters</u>	1,099	
		<u>Prison Epistles</u> Ephesians			1 John	2,603	
		Philippians			2 John	2,140	
		Colossians			3 John	245	
		1 Thessalonians			<u>Last Non-Apostolic Epistle</u> Jude	218	
		2 Thessalonians				458	

(* Greek word count statistics are based on the *Novum Testamentum Graeca*, NA 28 Revised [© 2012] as computed by Accordance Bible Software.)