What Is the New Testament?

The New Testament is a collection of twenty-seven books and letters with different styles of writing, written at different times by different authors. It covers a period of approximately 100 years or less, compared to the Old Testament, which covers over 2,000 years. There are two foci for these books and letters. In the Gospels it is the testimony of Jesus. In the letters it is teaching what the gospel means to members of the Church.

The New Testament begins with four Gospels, four announcements of the good news that Jesus was born, taught, died for us, and was resurrected to sit at the right hand of the Father. Each is a testimony of Jesus’s mission and divinity written by a different author for a different audience and different purpose. There are “harmonies” of the Gospels, documents that show how to harmonize the events of Jesus’s ministry as each of the Gospels reports them. There is one in the LDS edition of the Bible. But I don’t refer to such harmonies because they treat the Gospels as histories and may encourage us to forget that they are fundamentally testimonies.

Following the four Gospels is the Acts of the Apostles, the second part of Luke’s story and the closest thing to a modern history that we will find in the New Testament, though it too is not a modern history. It is an account of the Church after the death of Jesus, but unlike a modern history it has a purpose: to show the ways that the Spirit has revealed itself
through the Church as it has grown and spread throughout the world. Acts is not a testimony of Christ, at least not directly, but it is a testimony of the Spirit.

The largest part of the New Testament is made up of thirteen letters, most of which bear Paul’s name, though perhaps not all were written by him. Some may have been written by a secretary acting in his name. Some may have been written by a disciple who understood Paul’s teaching and wrote in his name. Most of these letters were written to churches in which some question had arisen about what it means to be a Christian or about how to deal with problems within the Church.

The last book in the collection that is the New Testament is the book of Revelation. This is an apocalyptic vision attributed to the Apostle John. In it we see a vision of the final triumph of God over evil on this earth. Some believe that at least part of the first part of the vision is the same as the revelation that Jesus received during his forty-day fast at the beginning of his ministry.

But the order of the collection is not the order of composition. That wasn’t true of the Old Testament, though its books are at least roughly in chronological order. But it isn’t at all true of the New Testament. Here is one reconstruction of the chronological order of the New Testament books and letters, with the approximate date of composition following in parentheses:

1, 2 Thessalonians (50–51)
1, 2 Corinthians (54–56)
Matthew (55–60) and Luke/Acts (55–60)
Galatians (56)
Romans (56–60)
James (before 60–62)
Mark (60–65) and Colossians (60–65)
Philemon (61–62)
Philippians (62)
1 Peter (64–65)
1, 2 Timothy/Titus (65)
Hebrews (69)
Ephesians (after 70)
John (70–80)
1–3 John (80–90)
Jude (85–95)
Revelation (90–95)
2 Peter (100–110)

Note, however, that most (but not all) contemporary biblical scholars assume that the Gospel of Mark was written before the other Gospels, though not before other New Testament texts.

As mentioned, there are questions about the authorship of some of the letters. There are also questions about the authorship of the Gospels. Perhaps a majority of biblical scholars are skeptical that the Gospels were written by the people they are ascribed to. Everyone agrees that there was probably a period after Jesus’s ministry in which stories of his life and work were told and transmitted orally and that eventually those stories were put into writing. The question is when and by whom. One can ask whether they were put into writing by the apostles Matthew, Mark, and John and their acquaintance Luke, and contemporary scholars are
often skeptical that they were. Likewise, many are skeptical that John the Beloved was the author of Revelation.

Because Mark has very few unique verses and most of it can be seen repeated in Matthew and Luke, early Christians assumed that Mark was a synopsis of either Matthew or perhaps Luke. Today most scholars believe instead that Mark was the first document and that Matthew and Luke were written using Mark as a source.

Of the letters, there are varying degrees of doubt concerning the authorship of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Hebrews. From very early in the Christian tradition there have been doubts about Paul’s authorship of Hebrews. For example, Origen (185–254) was skeptical about it being written by Paul, and nothing internal to the letter says it was written by him. Nevertheless, Christians have long recognized that Hebrews and the other disputed epistles were written by the inspiration of God.

The questions in this book won’t be concerned with authorship. They will assume that the Christian tradition is correct in assuming that the Gospels, Acts, the letters, and Revelation were inspired by the Holy Ghost and authentically testify of Jesus Christ. In that case, questions of authorship are less important. As we study, our question will be “What do these materials say to believers and, in particular, what do they say to me?” As a matter of convenience, I will refer to the authors of the letters by the names traditionally ascribed to them. I assume that those traditional ascriptions are generally sound, but whether they are is irrelevant to the questions we will use for study.