

New Testament survey

28.9.16

I am using voice recognition software to type this. Occasionally it replaces what I have said with another similar sounding word, like profit instead of prophet, or something less obviously similar. I usually notice and correct it, but please tell me you notice any glitches of this sort. E.A.P.

The 27 books of the New Testament were written in the first century between the late 40s A.D. and about 90 A.D. They were each written for a specific purpose, and the process of gathering them together may not have begun until the next century. There is some evidence that the Apostle Paul's letters were being gathered together early in that second century, and a writer in A.D. 180 refers to recognising the four Gospels. There were various other spurious Gospels and letters which had been written in the second century to promote heretical beliefs.

We will start with the four gospels. As with the Old Testament survey I am assuming that you have some Bible knowledge.

You will know that Matthew, Mark and Luke's gospels are similar. Mark is much the shortest. Mark, who is mentioned in Acts and in some of the letters, was too young to have accompanied Jesus throughout his earthly ministry. An early Christian document says that later Mark accompanied Peter, interpreting for him, and wrote down what Peter taught others about Jesus. Certainly Peter, in the end of his first letter (1 Peter 5.13), refers to Mark being with him in Rome, which he calls Babylon.

Almost all of what is in Mark is repeated in either or both Matthew and Luke. So it is reasonable to assume that both Matthew and Luke had a copy of Mark's gospel in front of them when they wrote theirs.

However, both Matthew and Luke record additional events and teaching in the life of Jesus. A good many of these additions are in both Matthew and Luke, such as the temptations of Jesus by the Devil, the Sermon on the Mount, the healing of the centurion's servant, Jesus' conversation with the disciples of John the Baptist, the parable of the lost sheep.

Some theologians have invented a common source document, which they have called Q, an abbreviation for the German word *quelle*, meaning source, which is said to have contained the additions that are in both Matthew and Luke. That is possible, but there is no need for it. A simpler explanation is that whichever of Matthew and Luke wrote their gospel last, probably Luke, had seen the other's gospel.

There is no evidence in Scripture that the apostle Matthew wrote the gospel attributed to him. It became the belief of the early church that he wrote it, and that it was the first to be written.

Luke begins his gospel with the words (Luke 1. 1 to 3) "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus ...". It is therefore likely that Luke wrote after Mark and Matthew, whom he had in mind when he wrote of his "many" predecessors.

Luke describes the birth of Jesus from Mary's point of view, and is likely that he got this from Mary herself. Matthew's description is quite different and obviously comes from another source.

It was not regarded as important in those days to record events in the order in which they happened. Matthew in particular grouped things together. For example Matthew 13 contains a group of botanical parables, the sower, the wheat and the weeds, the mustard seed, the yeast.

Sometimes Matthew and Luke record Jesus as giving the same teaching in different surroundings. For example Matthew 5 to 7 contains the Sermon on the Mount, whereas some of the same teaching is recorded in Luke 6 as being given in a level place. It is obvious that Jesus would have given much of his teaching more than once, and it would have been expressed slightly different each time.

Although at first sight it appears that Matthew, with 28 chapters, is the longest gospel, compared with Luke 24 chapters, in fact a look at the number of pages will show you that Luke is slightly longer.

Luke includes a number of events and passages of Jesus teaching in a long section of his gospel recounting Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9.51 – 18.14.) Within this he includes some parables which are not in Matthew and Mark, notably the Good Samaritan, the Rich Fool, the Prodigal Son, the Unjust Steward, the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Unjust Judge, and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

Some events which only Luke records are the miraculous catch of fish which led to four disciples following Jesus, the raising to life of the widow of Nain's son, Jesus's first visit to Mary and Martha, the healing of the 10 lepers, the meeting with Zacchaeus.

On the other hand Matthew alone records the parables of the Wheat and the Weeds, the Unmerciful Servant, the Labourers in the vineyard, the Ten Bridesmaids, and the Sheep and the Goats.

I have a book called Gospel Parallels which sets out Matthew, Mark and Luke in parallel, and is a very useful study and preaching resource. It is still available, and there are various similar things on the web.

Matthew, Mark and Luke have different audiences in mind. Matthew is writing for a Jewish reader and he has more references to how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament Scriptures. Mark is thought to have been writing in Rome for Roman readers, and Luke for Greek readers, in what has been called a more developed style of writing. Luke also gives specific dates for the events he describes, the best-known one dating the birth of Jesus: (Luke 2. 1 to 2) "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria)".

Mark is thought to have written his gospel between A.D. 65 and A.D. 70, the latter year being that in which Jerusalem fell to the Romans after rebelling, and when the temple was destroyed, as Jesus had prophesied. Matthew and Luke are thought to have been written after A.D. 70, but there is no certainty about dates.

Moving on to John's Gospel, this, as I am sure you know is quite different from Matthew, Mark and Luke. John gives his clear purpose in writing (John 20. 30 to 31). "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name".

Because of this stated purpose Christians have often given enquirers a copy of John's Gospel to introduce them to Jesus. Personally I think that people today, with little Bible background, are best given a copy of Mark or Luke. They may find John too deep for them.

John selects just seven miracles, which he calls signs, to convey the truth that Jesus was the divine Messiah. These were Jesus changing water into wine, healing the royal official's son at a distance, healing the man at the pool of Bethesda, feeding the 5000, healing the man born blind, raising Lazarus from the dead, and his own resurrection.

John includes much more of the debates between Jesus and unbelieving Jews. These are what outsiders, if they are given John's Gospel to read, may find too deep at first.

All the gospels give much space to the events of the last days of Jesus life before his crucifixion, but John gives most; they comprise nearly half of his gospel. Chapters 13 to 16 are teaching which Jesus gave his disciples on the evening before his crucifixion, and chapter 17 is his prayer for his disciples, and for others who would come to believe in him. Nearly all the contents of these chapters are only found in John's Gospel.

It is thought likely John wrote near the end of his long life. He could well have known of either Matthew, Mark or Luke, and he wanted to include much of what they had omitted.

As anyone who has studied New Testament Greek knows, John's Greek was not that good, and his Greek vocabulary was somewhat limited, as might be expected of a Galilean fisherman.

The Acts of the Apostles is part two of Luke's work. I will assume you are familiar with it. When Luke joined Paul in his missionary journeys the words "we" and "us" appear from time to time, and it is by deduction from whom was travelling with Paul at those times that we learn that Luke was the author of Acts, and hence the author of his gospel, because both begin in the same way, and both are addressed to Theophilus.

Here is the first instance of "we" in Acts - Acts 16. 6 to 10 – "Paul and his companions travel throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, 'come over to Macedonia and help us'. After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God has called us to preach the gospel to them".

It has been suggested that the book could be called "the Acts of the Holy Spirit". Certainly the book tells of various different ways in which believers received the Holy Spirit. From chapter 13 onwards the book is largely an account of the Apostle Paul's missionary journeys.

Paul's letters are not included in the New Testament in the order in which he wrote them. The letter to the Romans was probably put first because it contains the fullest statement of

his teaching. The two letters to the Corinthians may have been placed next on account of their length. I do not know a reason for the rest of the order, but it is easy to remember the next six in English from the vowels, being Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and, cheating a bit, Thussalonians.

Unbelieving liberal writers, I hesitate to call them scholars, generally argue that Paul did not write the six of the letters, to the Ephesians, Colossians, the second letter to the Thessalonians, and 1&2 Timothy and Titus. Some of their arguments are to do with differences in the vocabulary in different letters. But it is not surprising that Paul used different words in different letters on different subjects and at different times in his life. A good case can be made for Pauline authorship of all his letters. Conservative commentaries, such as those in the Tyndale Press series, and also their Bible Speaks Today series, contain the arguments for Pauline authorship in their introductions.

Paul's first letter may have been that to the Galatians, written in 48 or 49 A.D. after his first missionary journey and just before the Council of Jerusalem described in Acts 15. He wrote it vigorously to counter false teaching and to explain why Gentile converts did not need to be circumcised, because they had been put right with God through faith in Jesus, who had died bearing their sins on the cross. Here's a sample of what he wrote Gals.5.2-6 "Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourself be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is required to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. But by faith we eagerly await through the spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts faith expressing itself through love."

In the rest of the last two chapters of Galatians, in which Paul gives instructions for Christian living, the best-known passage is his list of the nine-part fruit of the spirit, 5.22-23 "But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law." It has been well pointed out that there are not nine fruits, but one, with nine facets.

It was Paul's practice to dictate his letters to a scribe, and this is most obvious in his letter to the Galatians, because in chapter 6.11 he begins the ending "See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!" At the end of his letter to the Romans the scribe chips with a greeting of his own in 16.22 "I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord." In 1 Corinthians 16.21 Paul writes "I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand." Likewise Colossians 4. 18. And in 2 Thessalonians 3.17 "I, Paul write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write."

1 Thessalonians was the next letter to be written. Paul wrote during his time in Corinth, as described in Acts 18, while still on his second missionary journey, in about 50 A.D., not long after his visit to Thessalonica. 2 Thessalonians was written not long after. Paul had had to leave Thessalonica in a hurry and these are letters of thankfulness for the young Christians' perseverance, and of instruction to them, particularly about the second coming of Jesus. 1 Thess. 4.16-17 "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever."

Probably next is Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, most likely written during Paul's two years in Ephesus referred to in Acts 19. 10, in A.D. 53 or 54, during his third missionary journey. He wrote to the Corinthians four times, and the letters we have in the New Testament are the second and fourth of those letters. In what we call 1 Corinthians he wrote in chapter 5 verse 9 "I have written to you in my letter" and in verse 11 "But now I am writing to you", which shows that 1 Corinthians was his second letter to them. Then in 2 Corinthians chapter 7. 8 and 9 Paul wrote "even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it - I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while - yet now I am happy, not because you will made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance." The context shows that this letter which hurt them appears to be a reference to a third letter, written in between 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians.

Both the letters which are in the New Testament deal with practical problems in the church at Corinth. In 1 Corinthians these include divisions in the church, immorality, lawsuits among believers, marriage, food sacrificed to idols, misuse of the Lord's Supper, misuse of spiritual gifts, and unbelief in the resurrection.

1 Corinthians is particularly valued at the present time for its list of spiritual gifts in chapter 12, and its instruction on the use of the gifts of tongues and prophecy in chapter 14. (There are other lists of gifts in Romans 12 and 1 Peter 4.)

However other chapters of 1 Corinthians have had a profound influence in the church down the centuries, namely chapter 7 on marriage and on remaining single, chapter 11, which includes the first written account of the Lord's Supper, chapter 13 with its beautiful discourse on love, and chapter 15 with its helpful teaching on the resurrection of the body. Some years back 39 verses of chapter 15 were read at every Anglican funeral service!

2 Corinthians begins with Paul writing about the comfort he has received from God in difficult times. He then explains why he changed his plans to visit them. Then follows a passage of praise for what God has done, including chapter 3.18 "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

Paul continues to write about his ministry in chapter 4, and his confidence in resurrection in chapter 5. In chapters 6 and 7 he writes chiefly about his relationship with the Corinthian church, and in chapters 8 and 9 teaches them about Christian giving.

Some people think that chapters 10 to 13 of 2 Corinthians are a fifth letter, which got tacked on to the end of the fourth, because the tone changes. Paul defends his ministry and warns them against false apostles.

Paul's letter to encourage the Philippians may have been written next. It was clearly written from prison. He wrote (Phil. 1. 12 to 14). "Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me as really serve to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly." What is not clear is where he was in prison. Was it in Caesarea (Acts 23), or in Rome, or, as some have suggested, in an unrecorded time of imprisonment in Ephesus? We do not know and it does not matter.

What is clear is the joy in this letter despite Paul's circumstances. It contains some of his most memorable writing. Chapter 1.21 "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain". Chapter 2.5-11 is a credal statement which he may be quoting from another source; here for a sample is verse 8 "And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!" Chapter 3.7-8 "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ". Verse 10 "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his suffering, becoming like him in his death." Verse 14 "I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus". Chapter 4.6 "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding will guard your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus". Verse 13 "I can do everything to him who gives me strength". Verse 19 "And my God will meet all your need according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus". Forgive me for spending time on this letter; it is my favourite of Paul's.

The letter to the Ephesians was also written from prison. Paul writes in chapter 6 verses 19 and 20 "Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am ambassador in chains." This letter was intended for more than one church, because some of the early copies have a blank space instead of Ephesus in chapter 1 verse 1. It was carried to its destination or destinations by Tychicus, for Paul wrote at the end, in chapter 6 verses 21 and 22 "Tychicus, the dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord, will tell you everything, so that you also may know how I am and what I am doing. I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage you".

The first half of the letter is all about how God has chosen (chapter 1.4,11) those who have come to believe in Christ, though they were dead in transgressions and sins (chapter 2.1), and how he has brought together believing Jews and Gentiles into the church. The second half of the letter is practical instruction, including the well-known injunctions in chapter 5 "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord ... Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her". There is similar teaching in Colossians chapter 3, Titus chapter 2 and Peter's first letter chapter 3. I mention it because it is widely ignored these days. The last chapter of Ephesians contains the well-known passage about putting on "the full armour of God".

At the end of the letter to the Colossians it appears that Tychicus was also the bearer of that letter too; indeed there are some similarities between the letters to the Ephesians and to the Colossians. In Colossians 4. 7 to 9 Paul wrote: "Tychicus will tell you all the news about us. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I am sending you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you". Onesimus was the runaway slave about whom Paul wrote in his short letter to Philemon. At the end of that letter of Paul to Philemon Paul writes in verses 23 and 24 "Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers." All these five also sent greetings at the end of letter to the Colossians, so it is assumed that the letters to the Colossians and to Philemon were sent from prison together.

Returning to Colossians, although Paul has heard good things about the church, which he recounts in chapter 1, in chapter 2 he responds to false teaching which was troubling them. He emphasises the deity of Christ, and also tells them not to trust in observance of rules and regulations and festivals, or in asceticism and false humility. In chapters 3 and 4 he turns to practical teaching.

Paul's letter to the Romans contains the fullest expression of the Christian gospel, especially the truth of justification through faith alone. Paul writes in chapter 15. 23 to 25 of his time in the eastern Mediterranean countries "But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while. Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there". It seems most likely that he wrote this letter during his three months in Greece (Acts 20.2-3) around about 58 A.D.

Like the letters to the Galatians, the Ephesians, and the Colossians, Paul begins Romans with doctrinal teaching, and concludes from chapter 12 onwards with practical instruction. As we have had a series of sermons on Romans not long ago I will not describe the contents at length.

Paul's introduction concludes with chapter 1.16-17 "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'".

There follows a detailed description of the sinfulness of both Gentiles and Jews, before we reach Paul's account of God's response in chapter 3.22-25a "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood".

In chapter 4 Paul writes of how Abraham was justified through faith rather through works. In chapter 5 he writes of the blessings following from justification, and then of how death came through Adam and life came through Jesus Christ. Chapters 6 and 7 describe how we should live as Christians in relation to sin, the law and grace.

The letter reaches a high point in chapter 8.1 "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" and verses 38 and 39 "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord". I recently heard someone say that if they could only take one chapter of the Bible to a desert island it would be this one. I leave you to explore why.

Chapters 9 to 11 are about the Jewish people. Chapter 12 begins with verses Christians today, who are too easily influenced by the world, do well to heed; verses 1 and 2 "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will."

In chapter 14 Paul returns to a subject about which he also wrote to the Corinthians, the eating of meat which might have been offered first to idols. Though the idols are nothing he encourages people not to do things which might cause others to stumble.

Chapter 16 contains the longest list of greetings at the end of any New Testament letter. Although Paul had not been to Rome he had met many Christians who had moved there.

The letters to Timothy and Titus are often described as the Pastoral Epistles, because they tell the recipients how to pastor churches. For example 1 Timothy chapter 3 and Titus chapter 1 contain guidance as to how to choose men for leadership in the church. These letters seem to date from near the end of Paul's life. When writing 1 Timothy and Titus he was not in prison, but when writing 2 Timothy was not only in prison but expecting to be executed. He refers to various visits he made to a number of places not mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles, so he must have had a further period of freedom to travel after his time in Rome described in Acts 28.

Timothy seems to have been rather a timid person and Paul encourages him, for example in 1 Timothy chapter 1.18 "Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight". Again in chapter 4.12 "Don't let anyone look down on because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity". Further specific instructions about pastoral work follow. In 2 Timothy there is further encouragement. Chapter 1.6-7 "For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline". Chapter 2. 1 "You then, my son, the strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus".

Near the end of 2 Timothy come his encouraging words about Scripture in chapter 3.16-17 "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work".

Finally Paul writes of his future in chapter 4.6-8 "For I am already been poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day - and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing".

Paul encouraged Titus in various similar ways in his letter to him.

Despite the heading in the King James Version, Paul did not write the letter to the Hebrews. It does not give his name, whereas all his letters do. It is completely different from them both in style and in subject matter. Barnabas and Apollos are two people who have been suggested as the author. Certainly the letter carried apostolic authority or it would not have been included in the New Testament. It is a wonderful description of how the Lord Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament Scriptures.

In the opening chapters the writer shows how Christ is superior firstly to the prophets, then to Angels, then to Moses, and then to Joshua.

In chapter 2.18 and from chapter 4.14 onwards the writer describes Christ as a high priest, drawing on the words in the messianic Psalm 110 "You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek." This priesthood is compared in detail in chapter 7 with the Levitical

priesthood. In chapter 8 he explains that Christ has inaugurated the new covenant, as foretold by the prophet Jeremiah.

In chapters 9 and 10 he compares the Old Testament sacrificial system in the Tabernacle with Christ's once for all sacrifice of himself.

From time to time in the letter the writer encourages readers to stand firm in their faith, especially in chapter 6 and the latter half of chapter 10. In chapter 11 he gives many examples of those in the Old Testament who achieved things through faith, and in chapter 12 he gives further encouragement and warning.

The letters of James, Peter, John and Jude are sometimes called the general epistles, because they not addressed to any particular church, though 1 Peter is addressed to Christians throughout five Roman provinces and 2 and 3 John are addressed to individuals.

James was not the brother of John; that James was martyred, as recorded in Acts 12. 2. James this letter writer was a half-brother of Jesus, a son of Joseph and Mary. He came into leadership in the church in Jerusalem, particularly in Acts chapter 15.

James wrote about a series of practical matters, like suffering trials, favouritism, showing faith in deeds, use of the tongue, and prayer for the sick. Peter's first letter had more doctrinal content, like salvation and the meaning of the Cross, but it was also practical too, for example with instructions for slaves, wives, husbands, elders, young men.

Peter's second letter is different in style and reads like an expansion of Jude's letter. Some have suggested that it was not by Peter, but the difference in style may partly be that of secretaries; in 1 Peter 5.12 he mentions that he was using Silas. For 2 Peter he may have used someone else or may have written it himself. Also the subject matter is different, making the vocabulary different. Peter wrote in 2 Peter chapter 3. 1 "Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders stimulate you to wholesome thinking". So Scripture clearly says that he wrote both letters.

His second letter is a call to persevere, to beware of false teachers and to be ready for the return of Jesus.

The background to John's first two letters is the departure of some professing Christians into a separate group who claimed to have special knowledge, and later came to be called Gnostics, from the Greek word *gnosis* meaning knowledge. John refers to their departure in chapter 2.19 "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us." And then he said in verse 26 "I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray." And in chapter 3.7 "Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray". Furthermore in chapter 4.1-3 he writes "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognise the spirit of God: every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world."

John's first letter is a beautiful description of how to follow Jesus. His second letter, addressed to "the chosen lady and her children" is probably a form of address to a church, and is again a plea to beware of false teachers. His third letter, to his "dear friend Gaius" is

about giving help to some Christians on their travels, in contrast to one Diotrephes who refuses to welcome them.

Jude was not the Jude who was one of the original 12 disciples, but, as he calls himself in his verse 1, "a brother of James" he too must have been a half-brother of Jesus. His letter is a shorter version of 2 Peter. We will never know on earth who wrote first - whether Jude's letter prompted Peter to write at greater length, or whether Jude was prompted to write by Peter's letter.

As we have had a recent sermon series on the Book of Revelation I do not propose to say anything about it. I am still hoping that Andrew's back pages on Revelation will be printed as a booklet.

EAP