



**Certificate
In a Box**

New Testament

An introduction to the general background of the New Testament

The Youthworks College Certificate in a Box[®] is a resource that provides teaching materials for teaching theological and biblical study at Certificate level.

Teaching Guide

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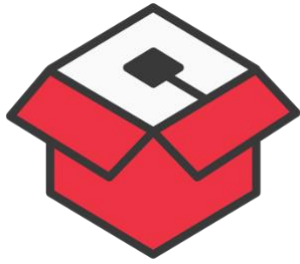


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Certificate in a Box

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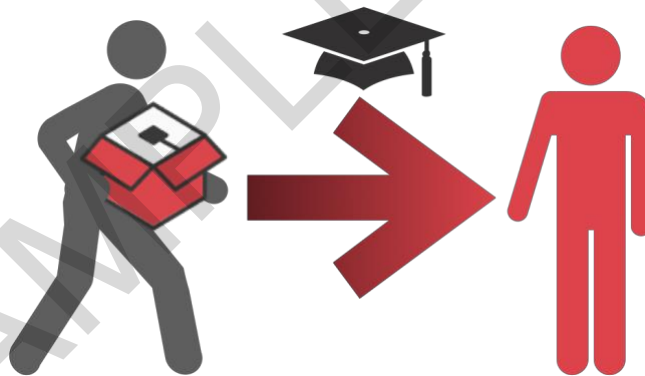
The Youthworks College “Certificate in a Box” is a resource that provides teaching materials for Certificate level theological and biblical study. It is a resource for Christian schools, churches, and other institutions interested in teaching biblical, ministry, and theology units at Certificate level.

What does it include?

Each unit of study includes a **Teaching Guide** covering all the sub-topics in the unit of study. It provides an **Assessment Guide** with suggested assessments and marking rubrics, and **recommended text books** to accompany the unit of study.

How is it designed to be used?

The unit Teaching Guide provides all the information to teach the course. The information in this Teaching Guide is intended to be **distilled to the students by the teacher in classes**. This allows for the accommodation of the content to suit the timeframe and context in which it is being taught.



The flexibility of the “Certificate in a Box” means teachers utilise their own teaching skills to teach the content in the way that is most appropriate for their context. This allows for teachers to use their own Learning Management System (LMS) for distributing and receiving assessments with their students. The assessments provided in the Assessment Guide can be used as they are or adjusted to meet the teaching context.

Further Teaching Resources:

VISUAL UNIT. Bible graphics, charts, and graphs: <https://visualunit.me>

BIBLE PROJECT. Bible videos, overviews, book summaries: <https://bibleproject.com>

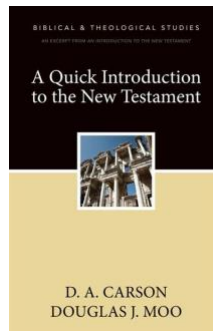
Further material in the Certificate in a Box “Teaching Resources” folder for this unit.

Recommended Text

It is suggested students not only learn the content of the teaching guide, but also read **one** of the recommended text books alongside the teaching they receive in class during this unit.

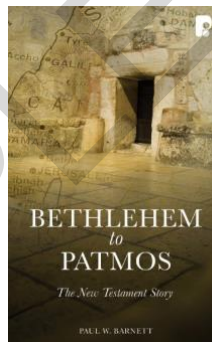
The recommended text books to accompany this unit are:

Carson, D. A., & Moo, D. J. (2012). *A Quick Introduction to the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan. **(99 pages)**



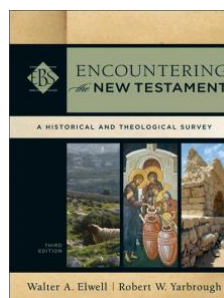
OR

Barnett, P. (2013). *Bethlehem to Patmos* (ebook). Rydelmere: Hodder & Stoughton. **(240 pages)**



OR

Elwell, W. A., & Yarbrough, R. W. (2013). *Encountering the New Testament: A Historical and Theological Survey*. Baker Books. **(448 pages)**



Unit Overview

1 Aims

The aim of this unit is to give students a broad understanding of the content and main theological themes of the New Testament, with a specific focus on the Gospels, Acts 1-15, 1 Cor 1-11, 1 Peter, Hebrews, and Revelation.

In particular we will be looking at:

- The historical and cultural background to the New Testament texts
- Some of the key teachings concerning God and his character and plans; and God's people: especially how they should have responded to God, how they did respond, and how God deals with this. All of this will be very much focussed on the person of Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of all that God planned and promised
- The different types of material we find in the New Testament; the different genres; how to interpret and apply them faithfully, and how they contribute to the overall picture of the Bible.

2 Learning Outcomes

1. Describe the main features of relevant historical and cultural background to the New Testament and explain their relevance.
2. Discuss how the various books and genres of the New Testament relate to the unfolding story of God's plan
3. Describe what the New Testament generally teaches about the character God, the person and work of Christ, and the appropriate response of his people
4. Express appreciation for the sovereignty and grace of God in the light of a better understanding of his unfolding plan of salvation, especially in its fulfilment in Jesus Christ

Topic 1 - Mark and the historical context of the New Testament

1 Topic goals

1. To understand the historical context of the New Testament and its relevance to reading the New Testament, with a focus on Mark
2. To understand the structure and themes of Mark

2 Topic intro



Read Mark 1:1-15 and pretend you're explaining it to someone who has never read the Bible or heard about Jesus at all. Circle the words and phrases you think you would need to explain to that person for them to understand what is happening in the section.



More ideas:

Use the "New Testament Intro Quiz" to gauge the students' understanding of the Gospels. Adjust the quiz as necessary.

3 The importance of historical context

It doesn't take very much reading of the NT before we realise we are reading about a different world. There are strange place names, exotic customs, famous and not so famous names, even new words. We are quickly reminded that the NT documents were written by and to people living in a very different time and place from where we are today.

In order to hear what is being said and to understand how it speaks to us, we need to come to grips with some of the political, economic, cultural, and philosophical contexts of the NT world.

4 The historical context of the New Testament

Although there is some discussion about exactly when Jesus was born and precisely what year he died, we do know, from biblical and non-biblical sources that he was born during the reign of Augustus Caesar (27 BCE to 14 CE) and that he died during the reign of Augustus Caesar's son Tiberius Caesar (14 CE to 37 CE). We know that he was born and that he lived at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea in the regions of Judaea and Galilee. It is this time and this place that we must give some attention to if we hope to get as much as we can out of the New Testament.

Era	BCE/BC										CE/AD	
	500	450	400	350	300	250	200	150	100	50	50	100
Biblical period	OT			Intertestamental period							NT	
Empire	Persian				Greek					Roman		
Famous figures	Esther	Ezra, Nehemiah							Judas Maccabeus	Herod the Great, Nero		
Chinese dynasty	... end of Zhou dynasty					Qin		Han				

This chart points out the broad sweep of history prior to, and contemporary with, the New Testament.

- The first background we need to think about is the history of the people of Israel as outlined in the Old Testament.
- We will then think of events immediately prior to the New Testament period.
- The Chinese dynasties are mentioned to remind us in a small way that while all these events are going on there is a world of other events happening across the globe.
- It is interesting to think how eventually these events in this tiny part of the Roman empire will become so significant a part of the history of so many other cultures around the world.

4.1 The Old Testament background to the New Testament

The Old Testament background is contained in the first part of the Bibles we read. There we see the story of God and his dealings first of all with his creation and then his dealings with Abraham and his descendants as he seeks to bring his creation back into good order after the events recorded in Genesis 1-11.

The promises to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 are fundamental for understanding the rest of the narrative. The Old Testament is the story of God fulfilling these promises to Abraham that he will become a great (and numerous) nation; that his descendants will live in their own land; and through Abraham's descendants all nations will be blessed.

This history plays out initially as a story of failure (with some successes) as the people of Israel are formed, rescued, taken to the Promised land, settled and given Kings (as they request). They are given a law through Moses, and an ideal picture of Kingship in the person of David. Despite so much blessing the people fail to be the faithful to God. They follow other Gods (idolatry), and do not behave the way God's people should and eventually are taken over by foreign powers (Assyria and Babylon) and exiled from the land.

God remains faithful to his promises. Through his prophets he says that he will remain faithful to his promises to Abraham that through the nation of Israel he will still work and raise up a King or

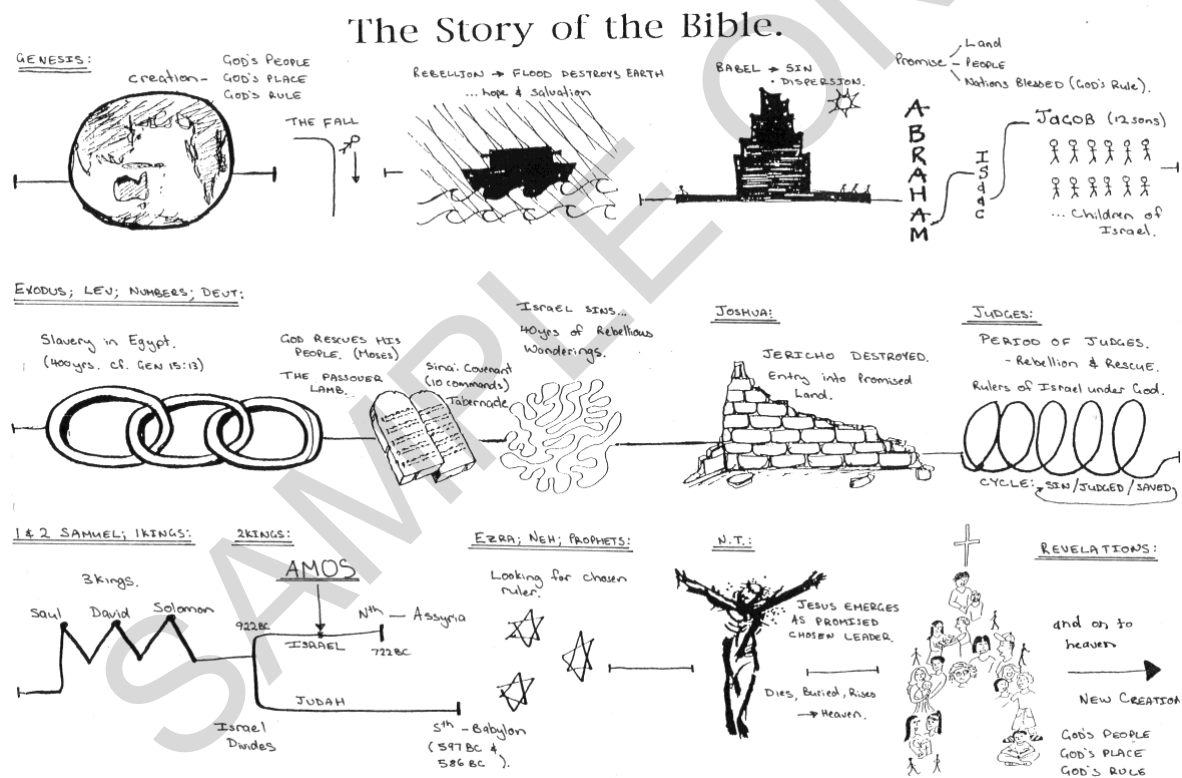
Messiah (anointed one) who will lead God's people to be the people they ought to be and thus bring about the advent of his Kingdom.

Through the prophet Isaiah especially we learn that this King will die and bear the sins of his people, enabling them to be forgiven and given new hearts to obey in a new situation that will reverse the effects of the fall and bring about the Kingdom of God, that will look like a brand-new creation. All of this will happen by God's grace and initiative.

The King/Messiah, of course is the Lord Jesus Christ, and the New Testament tells his story as the fulfilment of this grand plan of God to restore his creation after it has been marred through sin.

Jesus is the King who will rule over God's people as he brings in the Kingdom and the promises to Abraham find their ultimate fulfilment in him as he rules over God's people, in the new creation and brings blessing to every tribe, people, and language (Rev 7:9).

This has been a short summary of a much longer and more detailed story but hopefully it gives us a little bit of the greater Biblical context as we approach the NT materials.



4.2 Roman Empire (63 BCE-5th CE)

The Roman Empire was run by a leadership group of three: the Roman generals Pompey, Julius Caesar and Marcus Crassus, and was known as 'the triumvirate'.

The Empire brought Roman peace (the *pax Romana*), to Palestine, but it was a brutal rather than a benign peace. The Romans demanded loyalty to the emperor and imposed heavy taxes. In 37-4 BCE they also imposed their own client king, Herod (the Great) who was an Idumean by birth and not

Jewish. Herod tried to demonstrate his right to rule and to curry favour amongst the Jewish people by rebuilding the Jerusalem temple, which had fallen into a state of disrepair.

To finance the empire Rome taxed the provinces. The taxes were often collected by “tax farmers” of which Matthew Levi and Zacchaeus are mentioned in the Gospels (Mark 2:14, Luke 19:2). After the Jewish wars (66-70 CE) the Jews paid a special tax called the Fiscus Judaicus (Jewish tax) which enabled them to continue to practice their monotheistic religion. In the early Christian period Rome mistook Christianity for a Jewish sect. However, as the first century unfolded tensions between the Jews and Christians brought about Jewish persecution of the Christian church and Jews making it clear to Rome that Christianity was not a part of Judaism. This left the Christian church vulnerable to persecution from Rome.

Although was the Roman Empire that dominated the New Testament era politically, it was Greek culture that dominated when Jesus walked on earth.

4.3 Judaism and Jewish Sects

It is easy to imagine that Judaism was monochrome, that all Jews believed the same things, saw the world in the same way, lived out their faith just like their neighbours and thought the same way when it came to understanding the place of religion in their lives. The reality is very different. On the simple matter of a messiah, for example, there was a group that didn't believe that God's plan involved sending a messiah, another group were looking forward to a king like David and there was another group who were expecting not one but two messiahs.

Although C1st Judaism was very diverse there are certain features that we would expect to see in any group that claimed to be “Jewish”. The first is that they would recognise Yahweh, the God who was revealed in the Scriptures. There might be some disagreement as to which books were considered scriptural, but a Jewish group would see themselves in some sense as the present-day version of the ancient people who trace their origin back through Moses to Abraham. By the same token, they would see themselves as chosen by Yahweh to be his people. And this implies that they would have some sort of expectation about how he would reveal his commitment to them either now, in the future or both now and in the future.

There were four main sects within Judaism. Each came to a slightly different conclusion as to how God would vindicate them as his people. These four groups were the Essenes, the Sadducees, the Pharisees and the Zealots (see Appendix for details).

The different groups, or sects, came to different conclusions on matters of belief. There was, however, much more common ground in matters of behaviour. Although the law prescribed that Jews should make regular pilgrimages to the temple in Jerusalem, by the first century we understand that the synagogue was more central and more prominent in the public expression of their faith.

Privately Jewish people kept the Sabbath, abstained from certain foods and practiced circumcision on infant males, and met publicly regularly in the synagogue. Here they would hear the ancestral stories of their nation's beginnings and of how God had demonstrated his power to them. Scribes, also known as teachers of the law, were especially responsible for preserving the age-old traditions and for explaining the Scriptures. It was at a synagogue meeting that Jesus formally launched his public ministry (Luke 4:16-30).

5 Ordinary Life in the First Century World

In the midst of this discussion of the 'big events' as recorded in the history books it can be easy to lose sight of the fact that the Gospels are written to and about, ordinary people.

They are certainly affected by the political scene around them, but we also need to remember that they also lived lives that were made up the cares and worries of trying to survive and live a normal life.

There were numerous features of the experience of a person living in the first century that we could mention but to help us see the Gospels in a little more depth we will mention 3 here.

5.1 A world full of gods

The first century, especially the Graeco-Roman world was a world full of gods. This will be even more important to keep in mind as we make our way through the book of Acts and into the letters, but it is also important to remember as we read the Gospels. While they reflect Jewish religion in first century Palestine, we also know that due to Greek and Roman rule the presence of foreign gods was inescapable. As well as the various Greek and Roman gods and all the temples, festivals, and practices that went along with their worship we also know of other gods from Egypt and other countries who also attracted cult followings. Gods like Dionysius, Asclepius, Isis, Serapis. And others had cult followings.

Roman religion tended to be syncretistic, that is it added gods who could be worshipped alongside one another, and we need to keep this overall religious (using the word advisedly) context in mind as we read. One of the fastest growing cults/religious practices through the first century was the rise of imperial worship, that venerated the departed Roman emperors as gods.

5.2 A world full of spirits

Alongside this generally religious milieu was also a lively awareness of the power of evil spirits and demons. One of the confronting things about reading the New Testament, especially the Gospels, for the contemporary reader is the amount of demonic activity that is recorded. We know from the discovery of ancient magic spells and other magical practices that many first century people lived in terror of the underworld and sought to either appease or even harness these powers for their own use (love spells for example).

5.3 A world full of disease and death

Many of these spells were related to the third feature to briefly emphasise: disease and death. We need to recall that these were times with very high infant mortality rates, and that life for many was not long. There is a long medical discussion of ailments such as fever (which was seen as a killer), skin diseases (such as leprosy) and their terrible social consequences and numerous other diseases. We only need to read through the variety of ailments that Jesus heals in the Gospels to get the picture. Life for many was nasty, brutish, and short to quote Thomas Hobbes.

A very ordinary world

We have only mentioned briefly these three elements but there is a lot more we could say about poverty, poor diet, the disparity between rich and poor; the prevalence of slavery; the idea that

people in the ancient world saw themselves more communally than individually, and that concepts like honour and shame were very important socially.

We can also learn a lot about the world of the people at the time by simply reading carefully the New Testament text and noting the things that surprise the people and the things that don't surprise them. This can help us understand what Jesus and the others do for them and the significance that this seems to make for their lives.



Assessment Guidance:

Hand out the "50 Questions for NT in a Box Students" document so that students can do further research on the New Testament background and prepare for the Multiple Choice Quiz assessment if you've decided to use it in this unit.

6 The Historical context of Mark

Mark's Gospel (like the other Gospels) is anonymous. It was quickly designated as being written by Mark by the early church. The Mark in question is usually assumed to John Mark, who is mentioned in a number of places through the NT and has quite a story (cf Acts 12:12, 25; 13:13; 15:37-39; Col 4:10; 2 Tim 4:11; 1Pet5:13).

It is also thought that Mark is recording the apostle Peter's memoirs and that Peter's speech in Acts 10:34-43 provides the basic outline for these memoirs.

Mark is the shortest of the three Synoptics and is often assumed to be the first of the canonical Gospels to have been written. It is thought that Mark is recording Peter's account of his time with Jesus. Mark sacrifices details surrounding Jesus' birth and details about the resurrection appearances to save space. It means that his Gospel tends to be brief and to the point. He is also helped by the fact that he tends to focus on Jesus' actions rather than his teaching. Mark's account is quite dynamic, making frequent use of the phrase 'at once'. He also has a story telling technique where he relates two incidents together, sandwiching one inside the other (eg. Mk 11:12-25). He also makes extensive use of questions in his story. This has the effect of engaging the reader in some of the issues raised.

7 Structure of Mark

7.1 The Beginning of Mark (Mk 1:1-15)

It is always helpful to pay attention to the way a piece of writing begins. The beginning often sets the tone for the work and hints at the purpose and main themes. Sometimes questions are raised to be answered later.

When we read the opening to Mark, verses 1-15 we observe the following things:

- Mark refers to the concept of 'gospel' in his opening verse. He tells us that his work is going to explore the gospel (announcement) about Jesus, who he describes as the Christ and the Son of God.
- Mark then refers to the prophets to set the story of Jesus in an Old Testament context of expectation or promise.

- The action quickly moves to the description of Jesus' baptism, where Jesus identifies himself with the people he has come to. Jesus is hinted to be the one who will 'baptise' with the Holy Spirit. As Jesus is baptised, we hear a voice from heaven acclaim Jesus in an amalgam of Ps 2 and Isa 42. These texts point to Jesus as the one who is God's anointed King and at the same time his suffering servant.
- Jesus is then presented as being tempted in the desert. This recalls the temptation of the nation of Israel. Jesus succeeds where Israel previously failed.
- Finally, Jesus speaks in verse 15 and announces that the Kingdom of God has drawn near and that the appropriate response is to repent and believe the gospel. This sets the program for the rest of Jesus' ministry which will be the announcement and bringing in of the Kingdom of God.

All of this combines to set important expectations for what will follow in the Gospel.

7.2 The end of Mark (Mk 15-16)

One description of the Gospels is 'passion narratives with an introduction'. Mark's passion account arguably commences in Mark 11 as Jesus enters Jerusalem and the last week of his ministry. The climax is reached in Mark 15, which details his trial and death by crucifixion. Mark records details which mean we are to see Jesus' death as a ransom for sin, taking the punishment for sin from God, which is death.

In Mark 16 the empty tomb is narrated but there is no resurrection appearance from Jesus.

The Gospel ends rather abruptly in 16:8 with the mention of the fear of the women at the tomb that means they are silent, when they have been urged to speak. This ending has caused some debate as to whether the original ending might have been lost and most English Bibles will detail several alternative endings that have appeared in various ancient manuscripts. However that may be, 16:8 is a fitting end for a Gospel that wants us to not fear, but instead go and tell!

8 Key Themes of Mark

8.1 Son of God

Jesus is identified as the son of God (1:1,11; 9:7; 15:39). First of all, it is Mark as narrator who formally introduces his study by telling us that he is writing a Gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God. Still in the introduction we hear the words spoken by the Father at Jesus' baptism, "You are My beloved Son; I take delight in You!"

The Gospel begins with a voice calling in the wilderness. This is an echo of Isaiah 40, and we understand that the voice announces that the saving work of God is about to happen. It identifies the Gospel of Mark as the development of that story in words and images that are grounded in the Old Testament. That being the case, we understand that son of God is used in the Old Testament to refer to angels (Job 38:7), to Israel (Ex 4:22; Hos 11:1) and to the Davidic king (2 Sam 7:14; Psa 2:7). The connection to Isaiah 40 makes us think that son of God must be a reference to the king. It's the only interpretation of the term that would seem to make sense. And yet there is a dilemma because Isaiah 40 would lead us to expect that the coming salvation is brought in not by a Davidic king, but by the sovereign Lord (Isa 40:9b-11).

As the Gospel continues questions are raised about this son of God (2:7), but in fact we do not see Jesus doing anything that demands that we should think in any terms other than that he is the Messiah, David's heir, and Israel's legitimate king until we get to the end of the book.

As the Gospel progresses, we are increasingly directed towards the cross. This is where the fourth declaration that Jesus is the son of God appears (15:39). As we realise the story has been building to this point, we are challenged to think about how this event will bring the story to its conclusion. At the very least the predictions (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34) tell us that, when it happens, we are not to think that somehow God has lost control. But, when we get there, God seems absent when he ought to be present (15:34). He worked through Moses to bring his people out of Egypt, and he anointed Cyrus to bring his people out of exile. He should be present at the cross to rescue at this decisive moment of salvation. Salvation, like creation, is uniquely God's work. If God (the Father) has abandoned Jesus, and yet this is the moment when salvation was scheduled to be won, there are only two possible conclusions. That the story, which seemed to be a continuation of the Old Testament story, has gone hopelessly off track, or the story has a most surprising twist in its tail.

The focus on Jesus as he goes to the cross could mean that he has been blasphemously taking on a God's role and perhaps maliciously misleading his followers. If so, then we know that he will be judged. This may not be evident during his life, but it will certainly be implemented in his death. We will not see him again. Alternatively, although the Father is absent, we must assume that God, the saviour, is still present. We are being asked to believe that God is present in Jesus, and as Jesus. Jesus is God. As unlikely as this would have sounded to C1st Jewish ears, they would know it to be true if Jesus was vindicated by being raised to life. In that event they would be able to say things like there is salvation in no one else! (Acts 4:12) and salvation belongs to our God and to the lamb! (Rev 7:10).

What is interesting is that Mark finishes his gospel somewhat ambiguously at 16:8. Do we trust the women? Dare we trust the women? Did he rise from the dead? Mark provides the answer but does so in a way that invites us to determine for ourselves the truth of the matter, as we study it and examine, as we listen and weigh the testimony of the characters who speak within it and from it.

8.2 Son of Man

Jesus prefers to identify himself as the son of man (2:10, 28; 8:31, 38 etc.). Son of man is often assumed to be a reference to Jesus' humanity, but if we take the Old Testament background into consideration this provides an unlikely solution to what the title means.

If we take the Old Testament background seriously then son of God is first and foremost a reference to Jesus' being the legitimate heir of David's throne and of being, in some sense at least, an embodiment of the nation Israel. To be consistent we would have to say that son of man also has links to the Old Testament and where it is used in poetry as an alternative term for a person simply as a representative of the human race (Num 23:19; Psa 8:4; 80:17) or as a term that denotes puny person (Job 25:6; Isa 51:12; Ezek 2:1, 3, 6, 8; 3:1, 3, 4 etc.). When Jesus uses it for himself in this way, he is expressing his complete dependence on God the Father (and on the Holy Spirit). He also models for us that this is what true humanity looks like, this is how we are to think of ourselves.

However, son of man is also used in a more technical sense. In Daniel the term appears in a vision about the people of God. Different hybrid creatures represent different nations that threaten and

oppress Israel and by analogy the son of man is a 'corporate' figure representing the people of God. As the vision develops, we see the son of man approaching God, the Ancient of Days, and being given authority to rule on God's behalf (Dan 7:13-14).

In the interpretation that the angel offers it is hard to know if the son of man is the nation as a whole or if he is an exalted individual who represents them (7:27-28). Either way Jesus seems deliberately to connect with the Daniel passages (13:26; 14:21, 62) in a way that tells us that he is expressing his confidence that God will finally prevail, while at the same time making a clear statement that those who oppose will be judged for their defiance against God. Perhaps even more importantly, he is reminding us that what he is about to go through, he does so as our representative and on our behalf.

Daniel 7:13-14	Mark 14:62
<p>... and I saw One like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was escorted before Him. He was given authority to rule, and glory, and a kingdom; so that those of every people, nation, and language should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and His kingdom is one that will not be destroyed.</p>	<p>Again the high priest questioned Him, "Are You the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," said Jesus, "and all of you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven."</p>

Finally, it reminds us that the story of salvation, and our stories of faith which appear as threads woven into the story, progresses against the backdrop of hostility and opposition. As son of God and son of man Jesus deals with that opposition so that we need not be distracted by it but can focus on the primary task that God has given us – to be his image bearers in the world.

8.3 The suffering servant

One of the key features of Mark's presentation of Jesus is the necessity of his suffering. Three times Jesus predicts he will suffer, in fact insists that he must suffer (Mk 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). Many of the references to the Son of Man in the Gospel focus also on his imminent suffering. In one of the key verses in the Gospel Jesus describes himself as the Son of Man who did not come to be served but to serve others by giving his life as a ransom for many. This statement seems to be drawing on the Old Testament figures of the Son of Man (see above) and also the suffering servant figure of Isaiah (see especially Isa 53). While the Son of Man is a glorious figure there is also this element of suffering to be appreciated as well.

As Jesus speaks about himself we need to give due weight to the presentation of him as Son of God, Son of man, and suffering servant. In fact it looks as if he will only be declared Son of God as the Son of Man and suffering servant...these are three windows onto an understanding of who Jesus is.

8.4 The Kingdom of God

When Jesus finally speaks in Mark 1:15 his first words are to announce the imminent coming of God's kingdom. This will be a major theme of Mark and the other two synoptic Gospels. All of Jesus'

activity is oriented to helping those he speaks to understand that his coming means the kingdom of God is near and helping them to understand what this kingdom is and means.

The concept of the Kingdom of God has its roots in the Old Testament and was a concrete state if affairs looked forward to under the plan of God. It was expected to arrive at the end of time as a result of God's activity (Isa 40:28; 63:1-6) and would be a state of affairs when God would rule unambiguously through his anointed King, the Messiah.

Daniel looks forward to this time and understood that this kingdom would be given to one like a Son of Man (Dan 7) and entered through resurrection (Dan 12).

When Jesus announces the Kingdom is near, he does so with this weight of expectation. His ministry of miracles show that the Kingdom is present and also what kind of a Kingdom it will be. His parables announce the Kingdom and again, what it will be like.

His death and resurrection are presented as his bringing in the Kingdom, through suffering and glory.

The surprise is that this happens in the middle of time, rather than at the end of time so we can speak of the Kingdom being inaugurated and present in the coming of Jesus, especially his resurrection from the dead as the first fruits of the Kingdom and the promise that many more resurrections will follow. But there is also a sense in which Jesus inaugurates a time when we also await the final consummation or coming of the kingdom when he returns again.

Christian existence is therefore lived in the context when the Kingdom is present now but not yet finally realised or fulfilled.

8.5 Parables

One of the keynotes of Jesus' teaching style is the use of parables. Mark, Matthew and Luke all record parables that Jesus told. It is worth spending a few minutes thinking about the parables and what they mean.

Although Mark concentrates Jesus' parables in chapter four, he makes the point that this was his standard way of teaching the crowds (4:34). As we compare the chapter with Matthew 13 we realise that neither chapter represents an extended teaching session that Jesus gave. Rather Matthew has chosen that space and Mark this one to bring together a number of parables that Jesus used (and perhaps re-used) over the course of his ministry. Mark has put them here (Mk 4) to help us to continue to think about what is meant by the kingdom of God (cf. 1:15) and by extension what it means for Jesus to be the king, the son of God.

At the most foundational level a parable is an illustration. It might be an illustration that lends itself to be considered at a number of points of contact, like the parable of the sower, or it might be an illustration that only really connects in one detail only. Either way it invites us to think about something that is less known by making a connection to something that we are more familiar with.

Jesus' audience, for example, may not have known a lot about the kingdom of God. It might be a term that they had heard used, and others have so assumed that they knew what it meant, that no one had ever taken the time to explain it to them. If this unfamiliar thing (kingdom of God) is likened to something that people living in the land in 1st CE would be expected to know something about,

like growing plants. Suddenly, they have a way of making more sense of it. For example, they can begin to appreciate that the things of God have an 'organic', a natural side to them. Like plants they tend to grow rather than suddenly appear. They might grow quickly, or they might grow slowly, but either way there are things that can foster and encourage growth and there are things that can inhibit and prevent growth.

Jesus does not always seem concerned to see that everyone understands everything he says. Rather he assumes that they will not. He knows, for example, that things will continue to be obscure and difficult to grasp for those who are on the outside. More than that, the very words and teaching that is intended to inform insiders can serve to harden the hearts of those who do not believe (4:10-12).

We realise that the parables are not just there to tease or to inform Jesus' audience. They divide audiences into two categories: insiders and outsiders. Our natural inclination to want to be included is being appealed to. The parables offer us a choice. We can stop and think about this some more, work out what it means and how this applies to us. Or we can dismiss it as just a silly story and imagine that this doesn't really affect us. The invitation to choose wisely lies behind the Jesus' comment anyone who has ears to hear should listen! (4:9, 23)

8.6 Miracles

Jesus' miracle activity also needs to be seen in the light of his announcement of the Kingdom of God. Mark uses a word that can be translated 'work of power' to describe what we would call Jesus' miracles. The miracles point to his power and authority as God's king and also demonstrate that his kingdom is one of powerful service for those living under the shadow of demons, disease and death. The miracles point to Jesus' identity as the one who is chosen to bring the kingdom in and are not necessarily a program for his followers and their ministries.

8.7 Discipleship

Each of the Gospels point in their own way to what it means to follow Jesus. They use complementary concepts and metaphors to describe this. In Mark's Gospel the controlling image for discipleship is 'taking up one's cross' (Mk 8:34-38). This is a metaphor following Jesus, who is the one who bears the cross and is an image of self-denial and total surrender in following Jesus. If anyone took up a cross in the ancient world it meant that they were heading to death and Jesus uses this image to show the cost and demand of discipleship.

Memory Verse:

Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"⁶² "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

Mark 14:61b-62

8.8 Summary

Mark tells his story of Jesus in two halves. In the first half, as the question of Jesus' identity is presented, Jesus teaches like no other teacher and does things no ordinary person could do. His powerful authority is shown in the context of his announcement of the coming kingdom of God. In the second half Mark shows what it means for Jesus to be a King. Paradoxically this glorious position will involve humiliation, suffering, and death. As Mark unfolds this story, it is clear that this death will be an act of service to redeem his followers from their sin and save them from the wrath of God. The one who wishes to benefit from what Jesus has done needs to repent and believe and having done so to take up their cross and follow Jesus.

9 For discussion

The Bible claims to be more than history. It claims to be how God reveals himself to us so we can have life through faith in his Son.

Then he [Jesus] called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

Mark 8:34-38

If this is the Bible's purpose, how important is understanding the historical context at the time of the New Testament?