

NEW TESTAMENT SURVEY

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## NEW TESTAMENT SURVEY

Detailed information about Roman soldiers, Stoicism, and Pharisaic traditions are particulars that most common Bible readers do not take into account when reading the New Testament. If told in society today, many of Jesus' parables would take on vastly different meanings because of the extreme changes in terminology and cultural practices between the intertestamental period and the twentieth century. A foreknowledge of the political history and diverse people groups within Palestine aid the interpreter to dig deeper into the text by placing key words, people, and places into a big story line. The following will be that big story line.

### **Political History of Palestine**

Though Israel, by the grace of God, is still a nation today, the Jews are no stranger to being under the authority of foreign nations. One might remember from the Old Testament the Babylonian Empire and their rule over the Jews between 626 and 539 B.C. After the known world became Hellenized, through the military campaigns of Alexander the Great, the use of the Hebrew language declined among the Jews. Jewish culture became so Hellenized at this time that the Septuagint was written by a group of seventy-two Jewish scholars in order to translate the Hebrew Bible into Greek: the common street language at that time. The Septuagint was used as a standard text during the time of Jesus, even by the rabbis. After Alexander's death, his empire was split into parts by four generals known as the *diadochi*, a derivative from a Greek word meaning

successors. Egypt and Syria were birthed from this split and went on to create empires that are significant to New Testament history.

Antiochus IV, ruler of the Syrian Empire (175-163 B.C.), demanded to be worshiped as the incarnation of Zeus and placed his statue in the Jewish temple. His efforts to Hellenize went too far when he banned Jewish worship in the temple, attempted to destroy all copies of the Torah, and sacrificed a pig on the altar. These actions resulted in the Maccabean Revolt, led by Mattathias, in 167 B.C.

The success of the Maccabean Period was namely due to Judas, son of Mattathias. Nicknamed Maccabeus the Hammer, Judas won back religious freedom from the Syrians and the Jews still celebrate the purification of the temple during their annual celebration of the Feast of Lights, or Hanukkah. The success experienced by the Jews at this point eventually led up to a series of rulers who forsook the biblical teaching of leadership and became corrupt for money and power. It is during this Hasmonean Period that factions such as the Pharisees and Sadducees begin to develop.

The Roman Empire ruled from 63 B.C. to the end of the New Testament era. Most famous for their military might, the Romans contributed proactively to the world through the building of roads, political stability, religious tolerance, and the unification of language into Greek. This was all brought about by a time of Roman peace known as the *Pax Romana*. Romans, influenced greatly by Stoicism, valued order above all else. As long as a people's religion did not make trouble, it was legally recognized and accepted into the empire. The following chart will list a few Roman emperors who played a prominent role in the New Testament period.

Name of Ruler	Time of Reign	Contributions to New Testament Period
Augustus	27 B.C. – A.D. 14	Emperor during Jesus' birth
Tiberias	A.D. 14 – 37	Emperor during Jesus' ministry
Caligula	A.D. 37 – 41	Reduced taxes, released political prisoners, provided public entertainment, had his statue erected in the temple, and was assassinated by group of Imperial Guards
Claudius	A.D. 41 – 54	Expelled the Jews from Rome and affected Paul's missionary partners Priscilla and Aquila
Nero	A.D. 54 – 68	Careless administrator, famous for his persecution of the early Christian Church, and blamed Christians for the fires that burned the city
Titus	A.D. 79 – 81	Destroys Jerusalem in A.D. 70
Domitian	A.D. 81 – 96	Responsible for the persecution of foreign religions and serves as the background of John's content in Revelation

Romans also had local rulers in Palestine that were called *Tetrarch's*, a general designation of subordinate rulers. The following chart will show the local rulers of Palestine and explain their role in the New Testament Era.

Name of Ruler	Time of Reign	Contributions to New Testament Era
Herod the Great	37 B.C. – 4 B.C.	Called for the slaughter of children under the age of two in the town of Bethlehem, refurbished the temple, built a wall around the city, and was a practicing Jew.
Herod Antipas	4 B.C. – 39 A.D.	Tetrarch of Galilee and Pera, rebuked by John the Baptist for divorcing his wife for his half brother's wife, Jesus calls him "that fox" in Luke 13:32, and stands trial before him in Luke 23:7.
Herod Phillip	4 B.C. – 34 A.D.	Tetrarch of Iturea, Trachonitis, Gualanitis, Auranitis, Batanea, and was known as fair and just.
Herod Agrippa	37 – 44 A.D.	King of all of Palestine, grandson of Herod the Great, executed James, and imprisoned Peter.
Herod Agrippa II	50 A.D.	Tetrarch of Chalcis and most likely the one who Paul gave his testimony to in Acts 26.

### **Life in the New Testament**

Life in the New Testament was far from what modern day Palestine looks like today and even further from the average American lifestyle. Palestinian houses were made of stone, had a flat roof, one room, and at times two levels. This contrasted Roman households which were much more durable, equipped with some type of central heating and air, and usually accompanied by some type of plumbing system. The Palestinian diet consisted of vegetables, fruit, bread, and fish. Eating only two small meals a day was a stark difference from the four hearty meals the Romans ate every day. There were about 4-8 million Jews within the Roman Empire. Walking around town a person would see people in tunics, speaking either Aramaic, Greek, or Latin, and working in the field of pottery, construction, agriculture, grain import, banking, or some type of clothing industry. Marriages were arranged, financially negotiated, and celebrated for a week after the ceremony; and at funerals, instead of the black suit and tie, people wore sackcloth, beat their breasts, and cut their cheeks in mourning. Both of these practices would be frowned upon in American culture, but some countries continue to celebrate and mourn in these ways. Boys were taught in the way of the Lord by a rabbi and girls learned domestics. Parents sometimes relieved themselves of girls and deformed or unwanted infants by leaving them in alleyways and exposing them to the elements. Entertainment venues consisted of singing, dancing, board games, wrestling, and in the Roman Empire often entailed the killing of men and animals.

### **Religious Background to the New Testament**

There were various options for worship throughout the Roman Empire and New Testament world. Religions were about as varied as they are today and were

practiced much more adamantly by their adherents. Many Greek gods were worshiped in the Roman Empire but had their names changed. For example, Zeus became Jupiter, Hera became Juno, Poseidon became Neptune, and Hermes became Mercury. Scorned by Roman nobility and prominent philosophers, the worship of these gods eventually faded away. There were religions such as Animism which worshiped gods of the field, forest, and stream and it was not uncommon for a person to devote worship to more than one god. These religions were practiced by society at large and focused more on purity and tradition than they did morality and ethics.

First century Roman senate moved gradually to ascribe divinity to the Roman emperor. Augustus regarded himself as a savior and took the title of not human but not fully divine. Although most viewed emperor worship as a harmless patriotic duty, Christian refusal to participate in it brought about fierce persecution.

Mystery religions were also practiced in the Roman Empire. Some scholars believe that Christianity pulled parts of their doctrine from these religions but major conflicts exist between them. Some of the distinctions of Christianity are the historicity of God's existence, the redemptive value Christ's death, and the extent and value of the resurrection. Philosophies such as Epicureanism and Stoicism were popular during that time as well and one can see them being refuted by the apostle Paul during his witnessing efforts as recorded in Acts 17. Gnosticism, also refuted by Paul, offered salvation by presenting added knowledge for those who sought it. In Gnosticism, knowledge was superior to faith and only enlightened Christians had special knowledge of the truth. Lastly, are the Cynics and the Skeptics. Skeptics, then, as they do today, rejected all standards of right and wrong and insisted that all judgments are relative.

Judaism is the religion seen most in the New Testament. Judaism is monotheistic and focuses on the transcendence of God, Israel's relationship with Yahweh, and deliverance by the Messiah. Within Judaism at that time were various sects. The following chart will list those sects and explain their role in Judaism.

<b>SECT OF JUDAISM</b>	<b>DISTINCTIONS OF SECT</b>
Pharisees	Seen as liberal because they embraced interpretation of the law, believed in the resurrection and the supernatural, tended to be legalistic, focused on Synagogue worship, and favored support of the common people.
Sadducees	Focused only on the law, naturalists who didn't believe in the resurrection, and had authoritative influence over the priests concerning rituals and sacrifices.
Scribes	More of a professional group than a religious group, interpreted and taught the Old Testament law, and gave judicial opinion on cases brought before them.
Essenes	Hardcore nationalists, tended to be ascetic and lived away from everyone else, tried to follow the law and saw priests and temple rituals as corrupt, and looked forward to the coming of the Messiah.
Zealots	Group that wanted to overthrow the Roman government, refused to pay taxes, and initiated revolts against their Roman overlords.
Herodians	A small minority that supported the Herodian dynasty and joined the Pharisees in plotting Jesus' death.
Sanhedrin	Body that met daily in the area of the temple except on the Sabbath. Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin.

The bible student should recognize these names because of Jesus' interaction with them throughout his ministry. He rebuked the Pharisees, debated the Sadducees, and was reviled for his fresh interpretation of the law and claims of oneness with the Father.

## **The New Testament: Canon, Text, and Genre**

The canonization of the New Testament has slowly evolved into what is seen in Bibles today. In determining canonicity a book needed to be inspired. There was a three part qualification process in labeling a book as inspired. It needed orthodoxy, apostolicity, and universality. In essence, it had to follow the beliefs the church regarded as acceptable and correct, needed authorship by an apostle or the associate of an apostle, and must have been accepted by a broad geographical segment of the church. The Gospels, Paul's letters, and other writings were circulated amongst believers in the early church. However, the development of heretical canons led the Christian community to start the process of compiling a suitable one. The Third Council of Carthage took official action in 397 and adopted Athanasius's canon as the New Testament canon that is still use today.

The canon emerged from the community of faith through a process that took 400 years. Some place doubt in the canon because of the length of time it took to put it all together, but the way the canon was arranged is the way God has worked since the beginning of time. God has always chosen to work through his people. Unique to the canonization of the New Testament is the fact that, though God worked through people in creating it, no individual person was exalted. This difference sets the Christian Bible apart from other religions such as Mormonism and Islam.

Following the acceptance of the canon was the creation of various Bible translations. The Latin Vulgate was written by Jerome and derived from the Septuagint. John Wycliffe, using the Latin Vulgate, created an English translation of the Bible. The first Bible to use numbered verses was the Geneva Bible (1560) and the first translation underwritten by the government was the 1611 King James Version.

The discovery of new manuscripts and changes in linguistics led to translations such as the English Revised Version (1881) and the American Revised Version (1901). The brink of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century brought in translations that are still in use today such as the ASV, NIV, and paraphrase Bibles such as The Message. Translations are usually written as either dynamic (thought for thought) or formal (word for word). Most recently was the development of a new translation theory called an optimal translation. A notable example of an optimal translation is the Holman Christian Standard Bible which uses both dynamic and formal interpretation in the translation process.

Though some exclude the acceptance of these new translations there are many factors that play in to their usefulness by the Christian community. Some things to consider are the availability of new transcripts during the time of their writing and that the translation process was usually trans-denominational, insuring that a denomination's presuppositions did not get in the way of interpretation. Also, many new versions are better at contextualizing by making the content of the Bible more applicable to society today. Even though truth is unchanging, language and culture are dynamic.

### **The Synoptic Problem**

Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are labeled as synoptic because they "see together" on a certain number of things. They contain the same general historical arrangement of Jesus' baptism, temptation, public ministry in Galilee, and all point to Peter's confession that Jesus was the Christ as the turning point of Jesus' ministry. Various forms of criticism have been used to explain away differences between the gospels. The four major types are form, source, redaction, and literary. Though their principles are helpful, critics often go far beyond internal and external evidences in an effort to sustain their theories

## Form Criticism

Form criticism looks at the oral tradition of the gospels by reading the text and speculating what might have been the oral story that circulated before its writing. The most notable form critic is Ralph Bultmann who said that the sayings of Jesus were written in small units called *pericopes* and that these stories assumed some type of standard form within the gospels. Bultmann held that many of the stories sprang up and were modified in order to meet the need within the church. Bultmann's laws of transmission held that over time people always lengthen their stories, add details, fit stories into their own language, and preserve or develop only what meets their needs and promotes their beliefs.

Problems with Bultmann's theory exclude the possibility that some things could have actually been written down and that oral transmission does not always lengthen a story. One should also consider the option that gospel material was preserved simply because it was true, not merely to sustain the biases or teaching of the early church. A good example of this principle is explained in the terms *kerygma* and *didache*. These terms sum up the proclamation and teaching that was needed by believers for salvation and growth in their spiritual life.

The content most likely resembled what you see in Peter's sermon after the baptizing of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The prophecies are fulfilled and Jesus' coming has inaugurated the new age. Jesus was born of the seed of David and died according to Scriptures in order to deliver us out of this evil age. He was buried but rose on the third day, and has been exalted to the right hand of God. He will come again as judge and Savior of mankind.

### **Source Criticism**

Source Criticism looks at the written sources that the gospel writers might have used in producing their writings. Source critic G.E. Lessing suggested that all the content in the Synoptic Gospels stemmed from an original gospel that all the others pulled from. The two-source hypothesis claims that Mark was written first and Matthew and Luke pulled from it in writing their gospel accounts. Another theory is the presence of a “Q” (which means source) document that held all the sayings and deeds of Jesus. The most elaborate proposal for this theory was by B.H. Streeter in 1924.

### **Redaction Criticism**

Redaction criticism focuses on the activity of the author in the production of the Gospels. Some of the principles in this theory suggest that authors changed and modified traditions according to their own viewpoint and special emphases. They see every difference in the gospel as a theological distinction or concern. Most times, redaction critics assume that the Gospel writers had little concern for historical accuracy. However, as stated earlier, some critics make conclusions that are too specific the available evidence.

### **Literary Criticism**

Literary Criticism focuses on the meaning between the text and the reader. This type of criticism becomes quite subjective when arriving at the meaning of the text and will often times ignore authorial intent during interpretation. Most literary critics find meaning in structuralism and create universal ways of expressing Biblical truth. It is important to realize that the Gospel produced the Church. Some would like to reverse that role, allowing the Church to produce their own gospel.

## An Overview of the Gospels

When looking at the gospels, many things need to be taken into consideration.

The political history, cultural distinctions, and religious beliefs within Palestine need to be acknowledged by the Bible student simply because of their significant contributions to the New Testament. As the reader interacts with the text, this background information provides the resources needed to fill in blanks that the New Testament leaves open.

Another good tool to have when reading the New Testament is knowledge of authorship.

A closer look into the lives, purposes, and audience of the gospel writers will explain much of why they wrote what they did. The following chart will list the four gospel writers and their audiences, give approximate dates to their writing, explain authorial intent, and show specific features within each gospel.

<b>Features</b>	<b>Matthew</b>	<b>Mark</b>	<b>Luke</b>	<b>John</b>
<b>Authorship</b>	Matthew according to Patristic evidence	John-Mark of Acts who was with Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journeys	Luke according to Patristic evidence	Disputed, but Patristic evidence points to John
<b>Date of Writing</b>	Before 70 A.D.	In the late 50's A.D.	Before 64 A.D.	In 80 or 90 A.D.
<b>Audience</b>	Jewish	Romans	Gentile and Jew	Ephesian/Greek
<b>Features</b>	Presents Jesus as the Messiah and the Church as the people of God.	Focused on the actions and emotions of Jesus. Gives attention to Jesus' preparation of the disciples for ministry.	Jesus' interest in those who were outcasts in society as well as women. Shows Jesus' social and relationship skills.	Attendance of Jesus at religious feasts, "I AM" passages, and emphasizes on signs.
<b>Focus and Purpose</b>	Focuses on Jesus as teacher and Messiah. Wrote with the special purpose of reaching Jewish people.	Doesn't include a purpose statement but possibly written to emphasize the certainty of reward for persistence in obedience to Christ.	To write a careful investigation based on eyewitness reports and written accounts. Intended to be accurate and give readers a certain basis for their knowledge.	Focused on the cross and Judean ministry of Jesus. Intended to show the preexistence of Christ as God and evangelize.

### **Birth and Ministry of Jesus**

Matthew and Luke both present birth accounts of Jesus. Judging by the rule of Herod, scholars place the birth of Jesus at around 4 B.C. Matthew and Luke contain different genealogies of Jesus and have sparked concern among some believers. Theories that reconcile the genealogies suggest that Matthew provided the genealogy through Joseph while Luke provided the genealogy through Mary. Another option is taking into account the practice of Levite marriage. This would mean that Matthew's account traces Joseph's genealogy through his actual father Jacob while Luke provides it through his legal father Heli. As stated in the previous chart, Luke wrote to a Gentile audience and wanted to trace the lineage of Jesus back to Adam in order to show that Jesus' redemptive death on the cross was for all of man, both Jew and Gentile.

Jesus started his ministry between the ages of 26 and 30 and carried it out for three years. He died around 30 A.D. and spent the majority of his life in Palestine. A suggested chronology of Jesus' life goes from his birth and childhood, to his ministry preparation and baptism, to the ministry in Judea and Galilee, his final journey to Jerusalem, and the Passion Week.

Jesus' method was extremely effective and the content centered on his very person, not a system. He taught with authority and used fresh interpretations of the scriptures by means of parables, arguments, questions, object lessons, ministry practicums, and most remarkably through his personal example. His teachings were both moral and theological. The Sermon on the Mount included topics such as sexual morality, revenge, forgiveness, persecution, the nature of God, and his own role in the divine plan.

## **Life of Jesus in the Gospels**

The life of Jesus that most people know is pulled from the gospels. Some evidences have been presented through archaeology and apocryphal writings, but most of the Christian community studies from the accepted canonical books. In order to highlight the ministry of Jesus as told in the gospels, his ministry will be divided into three major sections: in and around Galilee, Judea and Pera, and the Passion Week.

### **Galilean Ministry**

The ministry in Galilee lasted about eighteen months and had its headquarters in Capernaum. Jesus' popularity with the common people began to increase while his acceptance by Jewish leaders began to decline. His following decreased dramatically after the feeding of the 5000 but his chosen disciples remained loyal. The beginnings of the controversy between Jesus and his enemies revolved around Jesus healing people on the Sabbath. Jesus seemed to initiate these healings and confrontations as a way of rebuking the Pharisees for their faulty interpretation of the law and warped sense of righteousness.

Throughout the Galilean ministry were miracles and signs that proved Jesus' divinity and in each instance led some to believe and some to reject him. The Sermon on the Mount, feeding of the 5000, healing of the centurion's servant, and raising the widow's dead son back to life are all instances that point to the different types of miracles Jesus performed in response to a person's faith. He made the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, and the speechless talk. Those who were shunned became accepted, the Pharisees were rebuked, and the disciples were taught in the way of the Lord by God in the flesh.

## **Judean and Perea Ministry**

The Judean and Perea ministry are seen mostly in the books of Luke and John. Luke describes Jesus' ministry in Judea and serves as a type of travel document between there and Jerusalem. Luke also highlights the distorted values of the Pharisees and Sadducees. John is bathed in terminology and literary devices that paint the theme of oneness between Jesus and God. The preexistence of Christ is seen more in this gospel than any other. John 20:28 shows Thomas saying, "My Lord and my God!" This statement illustrates that even Thomas recognized Jesus as God in the flesh, the prophesied Messiah, and the awaited Savior of the world.

Jesus' "I AM" statements are also a highlight of his Judean Ministry. Though the Gospel of John is different than the Synoptic gospels, the content is still important. Jesus is referred to as the "Light of the World" and "The Good Shepherd." Jesus is shown to have a genuine attachment to his flock and demonstrates that love by surrendering his life to death on a cross in order to give eternal life to those who are raised with him in his resurrection. Key parables and teachings within the Judean ministry include the Good Samaritan, persistence in prayer, the rich man and Lazarus, and the prodigal son. Jesus stressed love for one's neighbor, the grace of the Father, the urgency of repentance, and the thoroughness of God in bringing His children back to himself.

The main message of Jesus was the coming of the Kingdom. Those who had been invited to the wedding suddenly did not want to show up, and those who were not invited had just been given good seats at the banqueting table. Jesus turned his world upside down with his teaching and love for sinners. He was a spring of living water to a spiritually dry and thirsty land, but, according to scripture, he had to die.

### **The Passion Week**

The last week of Jesus' life is known as the Passion Week. All four Gospels give an account of what happened during this time. Sunday was the triumphal entry. It was during this time that Jesus came into town on a donkey and people shouted, sang, and laid down palm leaves in hope that Israel's political deliverance had arrived through this "Son of David." Monday was the cleansing of the temple. During this time Jesus cursed the fig tree and showed righteous anger in ridding the Temple of greed and corruption. On Tuesday was the Olivet Discourse and discussions with Jewish leaders. At this point you find Jesus using logical arguments with the Pharisees and Sadducees such as the Great Commandment, paying taxes to Caesar, discourses over the resurrection, and several parables of readiness for the end of time. Thursday Jesus celebrated the Passover meal with his disciples. During this time Jesus washed his disciple's feet, instituted the first Lord's Supper, and pointed Judas out as the one who would betray him.

The crucifixion of Jesus took place on Friday. Jesus gave the High Priestly Prayer in John 17 and prayed for all believers: present and future. Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane and willingly handed himself over those who sought to kill him. While before the Sanhedrin they concluded that he must die, but could find no fault in him. From there, Jesus went to Pilate. Influenced by Stoicism, Romans valued order above all else. Pilate could find no fault in Jesus, but in an effort to maintain order he sent Jesus' to Herod Antipas. Herod, the discerning man that he was, sent Jesus back to Pilate. At that point, Pilate gave the people a choice of releasing either Jesus or Barabbas. The crowd, most likely handpicked, chose Barabbas. Pilate had Jesus publically flogged but it was not enough for the crowd. After washing his hands of what was about to happen, Pilate sent Jesus to the cross.

Jesus was crucified at Golgotha. The term actually means “place of the skull” and translated into Latin becomes Calvary. Death on a cross usually resulted after three of four days by means of affixation. In order to speed up the process, soldiers would go by and break the legs of those being crucified. Jesus died before this time, so the soldier pierced his side instead. In the chart below are the last seven statements of Jesus and their significance. Scripture references are quoted from the English Standard Version.

<b>Reference</b>	<b>Statement</b>	<b>Significance</b>
Luke 23:43	“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”	Jesus taught throughout his ministry to love one’s neighbor. His personal example shown on the cross should serve as the ultimate type of love and forgiveness.
Luke 23:43	“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise”	Shows that salvation is available to all who believe and repent; even when repentance comes at the closing hours of one’s life.
John 19:27	“Woman, behold, your son!” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!”	What Jesus does here shows compassion on his mother, Mary. Jesus’ brothers had not yet believed like Mary and so she could not expect any financial assistance from them. Jesus meets that need through John
Matthew 27:46	““Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God my God, why have you forsaken me?”	This shows the weight of our sin on Christ and the effect it has on Jesus’ relationship with the Father. It serves as a reminder of how sin separates man from a right relationship with God
John 19:28	“I thirst.”	Shows Jesus’ humanity right up to the point of his death. The cross was not an easy burden and Jesus took it upon himself to suffer in a very painful, physical, and human way. Jesus remained fully man and fully God up to his very death.
John 19:30	“It is finished,”	The word Jesus used here was a Greek word that was sometimes used on receipts to mean “Paid In Full.” This is a victorious statement for Jesus and a joyful statement for all those who celebrate in his grace and love.
Luke 23:46	“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!”	Expresses the hope of a restored relationship with the Father and sends a message of finality to defeat of sin and death.

The death of Jesus brought about great sadness amongst his followers. The political king they had hoped for was hung on a cross and buried in a tomb. However, as Jesus promised, on the third day he rose from the dead. He later on appeared to his disciples and instructed them that through the work of the Holy Spirit they were to continue on in the mission the Father gave him to do. “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.<sup>1</sup>”

The awaited Messiah, Jesus, came into the world with a mission from the Father. His followers encouraged and, at times, tried to force Jesus into becoming a political king. However, God’s ways are not man’s ways. Instead of becoming a political ruler that went down in history like Alexander the Great, he befriended sinners, loved his enemies, and gave his life as a ransom for many. The king that was expected to be king of Israel became the King of Glory, King of Kings, and the Chief Cornerstone.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 28:19-20 English Standard Version

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