

THE NEW
TESTAMENT
— IN —
ITS WORLD

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY,
LITERATURE, AND THEOLOGY
OF THE FIRST CHRISTIANS

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The New Testament in Its World
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Preface

The eminent British New Testament scholar C. H. Dodd (1884–1973) was once asked if, supposing all written copies of the Greek New Testament were either lost or destroyed, he could reproduce the whole thing from memory. Dodd replied that, having lived with the Greek New Testament for so long, he was confident that he could indeed remember it all. In one account of the same story, the questioner responded with utter amazement: how could someone possibly claim to be able to recall the whole thing, in Greek no less? ‘Well,’ Dodd is said to have replied, with a comical mixture of humility and coyness, ‘it’s only a little book.’¹

The New Testament might only be small, but it is a strange and powerful book. At one level, it tells the history of Jesus and the early church; at another level (and these two go closely together, as we shall see) it is regarded by churches around the world as inspired scripture, normative for the life of faith. For this to become a reality, for the New Testament to come alive, each generation of readers, and especially teachers and preachers, needs help, particularly in the form of thorough, user-friendly, and creative introductions to Jesus, his first followers, and the literature that emerged from that movement. That is what this book is hoping to provide.

The idea for this book came during a conference in 2010. Michael Bird suggested to Philip Law of SPCK that someone ought to work with N. T. Wright and try condensing his massive and still incomplete *Christian Origins and the Question of God* series into a single volume, thus forming a kind of introduction to the New Testament. Law loved the idea and suggested that Bird himself should be the one to do it. Bird was reluctant at first – preferring to be the progenitor rather than the executor of the idea – but when Wright agreed to the project, Bird signed up enthusiastically.

In the following nine years, Bird’s idea would soar and grow in scope and

¹ The written source is Dillistone 1977, 221 who refers to this event during Dodd’s career in a parenthetical remark, and the oral source is Prof. D. A. Carson.

expression—and not least because Wright kept producing new writings during this time. Both authors also filmed lectures throughout the Holy Land, Greece, and Rome to complement the book, while careful attention and research was given to the book's rich visual and pedagogical features.

Michael Bird was first responsible for working through Wright's substantial corpus of work, selecting key passages, summarizing, and supplementing material. N. T. Wright has been involved at all stages, directing its planning, writing new material, editing, offering manifold suggestions, and affecting the construction of the volume from beginning to end. This New Testament introduction is very much a joint effort.

This book is unique in several ways. First, it is something of an N. T. Wright 'reader' or 'sampler', written up in the genre of an introduction to the New Testament. Several sections of the Christian Origins volumes are directly incorporated, as are various paragraphs from Wright's popular-level books like *Surprised by Hope* and the *New Testament for Everyone* commentaries. The present book thus serves as an introduction not only to the New Testament but also to Wright's corpus; we hope it will function as a gateway to explore his wider academic and popular works.

Second, this volume is a robust and user-friendly introduction to the New Testament, complete with a derivative workbook, online course, video and audio lectures, as well as a church-based video curriculum. A large proportion of the book has been freshly written for this very purpose. What is more, the volume is distinctive in that it aims to introduce the New Testament within the context of the study of early Christianity. Our primary purpose – which we cannot express forcefully enough – is not merely to add knowledge to the things that readers already believe about the New Testament. Rather, we aim to provide the scaffolding for a fully orbed and fully fledged historical description and theological account of Jesus and the early church. We want to cultivate a commitment to a specific account of Christian history, literature, theology, and mission.

Third, the book seeks to avoid some of the standard problems with a 'New Testament introduction'. There is so much to teach, so many debates to explain, so many charts, pictures, and titbits of background a teacher wants to include, that the task might appear endless and the book impossibly cumbersome. We have tried to be reasonably thorough, but in the most precise and pictorial way possible. The chapters that discuss each individual New Testament book proceed by means of a quick thematic introduction. They then discuss critical and contextual matters, provide an outline of the book, offer a miniature commentary, and finish off with some thoughts about application and suggestions for further reading.

In terms of acknowledgments, volumes like this stand on the shoulders of others. While the present volume is clearly based on Wright's work, it would be remiss not to acknowledge the many writings beyond Wright that have deeply shaped the

formation and composition of the book as a whole and its several sections. Among these are the erudite works of Richard Hays, Martin Hengel, Morna Hooker, Luke Timothy Johnson, James Dunn, Richard Bauckham, David deSilva, and Ben Witherington. These scholars have proved to be notable modern interpreters to whom we have turned time and again for interpretative decisions on various portions of the New Testament.

Several other people need to be thanked for their assistance in the completion of this project. We are indebted to several scholars who read portions of the text and offered constructive feedback. Among them are David A. deSilva, Patrick Schreiner, Sarah Harris, Brian Rosner, Hefin Jones, Sean du Toit, Stephen Carlson, Michael Holmes, George Guthrie, Joshua Jipp, Brandon Smith, and Nijay Gupta. This book would never have happened without the joint co-operation of SPCK (Philip Law and Alexandra McDonald) and Zondervan Academic (Katya Covrett, Jesse Hillman, Christopher Beetham, T. J. Rathbun, and so many others).

Finally, we pray and hope that this book will benefit university students, seminarians, church people, and interested readers by providing them with an in-depth introduction to the context, message, and significance of the early Christian writings. The New Testament, as C. H. Dodd pointed out, may be small. But in our view it remains the greatest and most important book ever produced.

N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird



Abbreviations

Stylistic shorthands

| | | | |
|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|--|
| <i>c.</i> | <i>circa</i> | <i>frags.</i> | fragments |
| <i>cf.</i> | confer | <i>i.e.</i> | that is |
| <i>ch(s).</i> | chapter(s) | <i>MSS</i> | manuscripts |
| <i>contra</i> | against | <i>n.</i> | (foot/end)note |
| <i>cp.</i> | compare | <i>par.</i> | parallel |
| <i>d.</i> | died | <i>repr.</i> | reprinted |
| <i>ed(s).</i> | editor(s); edited by | <i>rev.</i> | revised |
| <i>edn(s).</i> | edition(s) | <i>sic</i> | thus (acknowledging an error in original) |
| <i>e.g.</i> | for example | <i>tr.</i> | translation/translated by |
| <i>esp.</i> | especially | <i>v(v).</i> | verse(s) |
| <i>et al.</i> | and others | <i>vol(s).</i> | volume(s) |
| <i>etc.</i> | et cetera | | |

Primary sources

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| <i>1 Clem.</i> | <i>1 Clement</i> |
| <i>1 En.</i> | <i>1 Enoch</i> |
| <i>1 Macc.</i> | <i>1 Maccabees</i> |
| <i>1QH</i> | <i>Thanksgiving Hymns</i> |
| <i>1QM</i> | <i>War Scroll</i> |
| <i>1QpHab</i> | <i>Pesher Habakkuk</i> |
| <i>1QS</i> | <i>Rule of the Community</i> |
| <i>1QSa</i> | <i>Rule of the Community (Appendix a)</i> |
| <i>2 Apoc. Jas.</i> ... | <i>(Second) Apocalypse of James</i> |
| <i>2 Bar.</i> | <i>2 Baruch</i> |
| <i>2 Clem.</i> | <i>2 Clement</i> |
| <i>2 Esd.</i> | <i>2 Esdras</i> |
| <i>2 Macc.</i> | <i>2 Maccabees</i> |

| | |
|-------------|--|
| 4 Ez. | 4 Ezra |
| 4 Macc. | 4 Maccabees |
| 4Q176. | Consolations |
| 4Q246 | Apocryphon of Daniel |
| 4Q405 | Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice |
| 4Q473 | The Two Ways |
| 4Q521 | Messianic Apocalypse |
| 4Q'Amram | Visions of Amram |
| 4QMMT | Halakhic Letter |
| 11Q13 | Melchizedek |
| Aelian | Aelian (<i>Hist. Misc.=Historical Miscellany</i>) |
| Aesch. | Aeschylus (<i>Eumen.=Eumenides</i>) |
| Apoc. Mos. | Apocalypse of Moses |
| Apoc. Pet. | Apocalypse of Peter |
| Arist. | Aristotle (<i>Nic. Eth.=Nicomachean Ethics</i>) |
| Athanasius | Athanasius (<i>Ep. Fest.=Festal Letters</i>) |
| Aug. | Augustine (<i>Civ. Dei=City of God; Conf.=Confessions; Doctr. Chr.=Christian Doctrine; Fid. Op.=Faith and Works</i>) |
| Bar. | Baruch |
| bHag. | Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah |
| bPesah. | Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim |
| bSanh. | Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin |
| bShab. | Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat |
| CD | Cairo Genizah copy of the Damascus Document |
| Chrys. | John Chrysostom (<i>Hom. Rom.=Homilies on Romans; Praef. Hom. Rom.=Preface to the Homilies on Romans</i>) |
| Cic. | Cicero (<i>Flac.=Pro Flacco; Acad.=Academicae Quaestiones</i>) |
| Clem. | Clement of Alexandria (<i>Paed.=Paedagogus; Quis Div.=Quis Dives Salvetur; Strom.=Stromata</i>) |
| Did. | Didache |
| Dio Cassius | Dio Cassius (<i>Hist.=Historia Romana</i>) |
| Dioscorides | Dioscorides (<i>Mat. Med.=Materia Medica</i>) |
| Ep. Apos. | Epistula Apostolorum (Epistle to the Apostles) |
| Ep. Arist. | Epistle of Aristeas |
| Ep. Barn. | Epistle of Barnabas |
| Ep. Diog. | Epistle to Diognetus |
| Epiphanius | Epiphanius (<i>Pan.=Panarion</i>) |
| Eurip. | Euripides (<i>Alcest.=Alcestis</i>) |
| Eus. | Eusebius (<i>Chron.=Chronicle; Hist. Ecc.=Ecclesiastical History; Vit. Const.=Life of Constantine</i>) |

| | | |
|-------------------|-------|---|
| <i>Gos. Heb.</i> | .... | <i>Gospel of the Hebrews</i> |
| <i>Gos. Thom.</i> | .. | <i>Gospel of Thomas</i> |
| Hippolytus | .. | Hippolytus (<i>Antichr.</i> = <i>De Antichristo</i> ; <i>Ref.</i> = <i>Refutation of All Heresies</i>) |
| Iamblichus | .. | Iamblichus (<i>Life</i> = <i>Life of Pythagoras</i>) |
| Ign. | ..... | Ignatius (<i>Eph.</i> = <i>To the Ephesians</i> ; <i>Magn.</i> = <i>To the Magnesians</i> ; <i>Phld.</i> = <i>To the Philadelphians</i> ; <i>Rom.</i> = <i>To the Romans</i> ; <i>Smyrn.</i> = <i>To the Smyrneans</i> ; <i>Trall.</i> = <i>To the Trallians</i>) |
| Iren. | ..... | Irenaeus (<i>Adv. Haer.</i> = <i>Adversus Haeresis</i>) |
| Jer. | ..... | Jerome (<i>Ep.</i> = <i>Epistle</i> ; <i>De Vir. Ill.</i> = <i>De Viris Illustribus</i>) |
| Jos. | ..... | Josephus (<i>Ant.</i> = <i>Jewish Antiquities</i> ; <i>Ap.</i> = <i>Against Apion</i> ; <i>Life</i> = <i>The Life of Josephus</i> ; <i>War</i> = <i>The Jewish War</i>) |
| <i>Jub.</i> | ..... | <i>Jubilees</i> |
| Just. | ..... | Justin Martyr (<i>1 Apol.</i> = <i>First Apology</i> ; <i>Dial.</i> = <i>Dialogue with Trypho</i>) |
| Juv | ..... | Juvenal (<i>Sat.</i> = <i>Satires</i>) |
| Libanius | ..... | Libanius (<i>Ep.</i> = <i>Epistle</i>) |
| LXX | ..... | Septuagint version of the Old Testament |
| mAbot | ..... | Mishnah, Aboth |
| <i>Mart. Isa.</i> | ... | <i>Martyrdom of Isaiah</i> |
| <i>Mart. Pol.</i> | ... | <i>Martyrdom of Polycarp</i> |
| mSanh. | ..... | Mishnah, Sanhedrin |
| MT | ..... | Masoretic Text (of the Hebrew Bible) |
| Origen | ..... | Origen (<i>C. Cels.</i> = <i>Contra Celsum</i> ; <i>Comm. Jn.</i> = <i>Commentary on John</i> ; <i>Comm. Matt.</i> = <i>Commentary on Matthew</i>) |
| Philo | ..... | Philo of Alexandria (<i>Abr.</i> = <i>De Abrahamo</i> ; <i>Leg.</i> = <i>Legum Allegoriae</i> ; (<i>De</i>) <i>Praem.</i> = <i>De Praemiis et Poenis</i> ; (<i>De</i>) <i>Spec. Leg.</i> = <i>De Specialibus Legibus</i> ; <i>Heres</i> = <i>Quis Rerum Divinarum Heres Sit</i> ; <i>Gai.</i> = <i>Legatio ad Gaium</i> ; <i>Hypoth.</i> = <i>Hypothetica</i> ; <i>Omn. Prob. Lib.</i> = <i>Quod Omnis Probus Liber Sit</i> ; <i>Quaest. Gen.</i> = <i>Quaestiones in Genenim</i> ; <i>Vit. Mos.</i> = <i>De Vita Mosis</i> ; <i>Sac.</i> = <i>De Sacrificiis Abelis et Caini</i> ; <i>De Vit. Cont.</i> = <i>De Vita Contemplativa</i>) |
| Pliny | ..... | Pliny the Elder (<i>NH</i> = <i>Natural History</i>) |
| Pliny | ..... | Pliny the Younger (<i>Ep.</i> = <i>Epistulae</i>) |
| Plut. | ..... | Plutarch (<i>Mor.</i> = <i>Moralia</i>) |
| Polybius | ..... | Polybius (<i>Hist.</i> = <i>Histories</i>) |
| Polycarp | ..... | Polycarp (<i>Phil.</i> = <i>To the Philippians</i>) |
| Porphyry | .... | Porphyry (<i>Life</i> = <i>Life of Pythagoras</i>) |
| <i>Ps.-Phoc.</i> | ..... | <i>Pseudo-Phocylides</i> |
| <i>Ps. Sol.</i> | | <i>Psalms of Solomon</i> |
| Sen. | | Seneca the Younger (<i>Ep. Mor.</i> = <i>Moral Epistles</i>) |
| <i>Sib. Or.</i> | | <i>Sibylline Oracles</i> |

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|------------------------|--|
| Sir. | Sirach/Ecclesiasticus |
| Strabo | Strabo (<i>Geogr.=Geographica</i>) |
| Suet. | Suetonius (<i>Claud.=Divus Claudius; Dom.=Domitianus; Ner.=Nero; Tib.=Tiberius; Vesp.=Vespasianus</i>) |
| <i>T. Dan</i> | <i>Testament of Dan</i> |
| <i>T. Job</i> | <i>Testament of Job</i> |
| <i>T. Mos.</i> | <i>Testament of Moses</i> |
| Tac. | Tacitus (<i>Agric.=Agricola; Ann.=Annals; Hist.=Histories</i>) |
| Tert. | Tertullian (<i>Adv. Marc.=Adversus Marcionem; Apol.=Apology; Carn. Chr.=De Carni Christi; Prae. Haer.=De Praescriptione Haereticorum; Scorp.=Scorpiace; Spect.=De Spectaculis</i>) |
| Tob. | Tobit |
| <i>Trim. Prot.</i> ... | <i>Trimorphic Protennoia</i> |
| Wis. | Wisdom |
| ySanh. | Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin |

Secondary sources, etc.

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| AB | Anchor Bible |
| ABC | African Bible Commentary |
| <i>ABD</i> | <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> |
| ABRL | Anchor Bible Reference Library |
| ACCS | Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture |
| <i>ANF</i> | <i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> . Edited by A. Roberts, J. Donaldson et al. 10 vols. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887. |
| ANTC | Abingdon New Testament Commentaries |
| BBC | Blackwell Bible Commentaries |
| <i>BBR</i> | <i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i> |
| BECNT | Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament |
| BETL | Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium |
| BIS | Biblical Interpretation Series |
| BNTC | Black's New Testament Commentary |
| BTC | Belief Theological Commentary |
| BTNT | Biblical Theology of the New Testament |
| BZNW | Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft |
| CBGM | Coherence-Based Genealogical Method |
| <i>CBR</i> | <i>Currents in Biblical Research</i> |
| CCEL | Christian Classics Ethereal Library |
| CCSS | Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture |
| CEB | Common English Bible |
| CITM | Christianity in the Making |

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|-----------------|--|
| ConBNT | Coniectanea Biblica: New Testament Series |
| ConBOT | Coniectanea Biblica: Old Testament Series |
| COQG | Christian Origins and the Question of God |
| CRBS | <i>Currents in Research: Biblical Studies</i> |
| CRINT | Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum |
| CSNTM | Centre for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts |
| ECC | Eerdmans Critical Commentary |
| ECM | <i>Editio Critica Maior</i> |
| EJT | <i>European Journal of Theology</i> |
| ESV | English Standard Version |
| Exp. T. | <i>Expository Times</i> |
| FRLANT . . . | Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments |
| FS | Festschrift |
| GH | Gorgias Handbooks |
| ICC | International Critical Commentary |
| INTF | Institut für Neutestamentliche Textforschung |
| IVPNTC . . . | IVP New Testament Commentary |
| JS | Johannine Studies |
| JSNT | <i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i> |
| JSNTSup . . . | Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplements |
| JTI | <i>Journal of Theological Interpretation</i> |
| KJV | King James ['Authorized'] Version |
| KNT | N. T. Wright, <i>The Kingdom New Testament</i> . San Francisco: HarperOne, 2011 [US edn. of <i>NTE</i>]. |
| LCL | Loeb Classical Library (various publishers, currently Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press). |
| LHJS | Library of Historical Jesus Studies |
| LNTS | Library of New Testament Studies |
| LPS | Library of Pauline Studies |
| MSG | Eugene H. Peterson, <i>The Message</i> . Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2009. |
| NA (25) | Nestle-Aland <i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> (25th edn.) |
| NAC | New American Commentary |
| NCB | New Century Bible |
| NCBC | New Cambridge Bible Commentary |
| NCCS | New Covenant Commentary Series |
| NIB | <i>New Interpreter's Bible</i> . 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994–2002. |
| NIBC | New International Biblical Commentary |
| NICNT | New International Commentary on the New Testament |

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| NIGTC | | New International Greek Testament Commentary |
| NIV | | New International Version |
| NovTSup | .... | Novum Testamentum Supplements |
| NRSV | ..... | New Revised Standard Version |
| NSBT | ..... | New Studies in Biblical Theology |
| NT | ..... | New Testament |
| NTC | ..... | New Testament in Context |
| NTE | ..... | N. T. Wright, <i>The New Testament for Everyone</i> . London: SPCK, 2011 [UK edn. of <i>KNT</i>]. |
| NTL | ..... | New Testament Library |
| NTR | ..... | New Testament Readings |
| NTS | ..... | <i>New Testament Studies</i> |
| NTT | ..... | New Testament Theology |
| OGIS | ..... | <i>Orientalis Graecae Inscriptiones Selectae</i> . Edited by W. Dittenberger. 2 vols. Leipzig: Hirzel, 1903–5; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1960. |
| OT | ..... | Old Testament |
| OTP | ..... | <i>The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha</i> . Edited by J. H. Charlesworth. 2 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1985. |
| PAST | ..... | Pauline Studies |
| PCNT | ..... | Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament |
| PNTC | ..... | Pillar New Testament Commentary |
| RSV | ..... | Revised Standard Version |
| SBL | ..... | Society of Biblical Literature |
| SBLGNT | .... | <i>Society of Biblical Literature Greek New Testament</i> |
| SBT | ..... | Studies in Biblical Theology |
| SD | ..... | Studies and Documents |
| SGBC | ..... | Story of God Bible Commentary |
| SNTSMS | .... | Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series |
| SP | ..... | Sacra Pagina |
| SRC | ..... | Socio-Rhetorical Commentary |
| THGNT | .... | <i>The Greek New Testament Produced at Tyndale House</i> |
| THNTC | .... | Two Horizons New Testament Commentary |
| TNTC | ..... | Tyndale New Testament Commentaries |
| TSAJ | ..... | Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism |
| TTC | ..... | Teach the Text Commentary |
| TynBul | ..... | <i>Tyndale Bulletin</i> |
| UBS (5) | ..... | United Bible Society <i>Greek New Testament</i> (5th edn.) |
| WBC | ..... | Word Biblical Commentary |
| WUNT | ..... | Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament |
| ZECNT | ..... | Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament |

**Previous works by N. T. Wright: short titles and acronyms
(full details in Bibliography)**

- Climax* *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*, 1991.
- DRB* *The Day the Revolution Began*, 2016.
- ECL* *Early Christian Letters for Everyone*, 2011.
- HGBK* *How God Became King*, 2012.
- JVG* *Jesus and the Victory of God* (vol. 2 of Christian Origins and the Question of God), 1996.
- NTPG* *The New Testament and the People of God* (vol. 1 of Christian Origins and the Question of God), 1992.
- Paul:*
- A Biography*.. *Paul: A Biography*, 2018.
- PFG*..... *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (vol. 4 of Christian Origins and the Question of God), 2013.
- PP* *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul 1978–2013*, 2013.
- PRI* *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, 2015.
- Romans* ‘Romans’ in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 10, 2002, pp. 393–770.
- RSB*..... *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (vol. 3 of Christian Origins and the Question of God), 2003.
- SC* *Simply Christian*, 2006.
- SH*..... *Surprised by Hope*, 2007.
- SJ* *Simply Jesus*, 2011.



The Last Supper, dated to the fifteenth century, Novgorod School, National Museum of Russian Art, Kiev

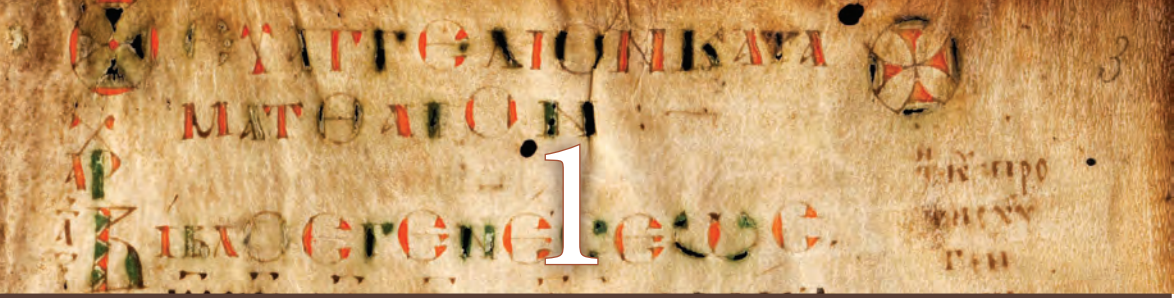
A. Burkatovski / Fine Art Images

I

READING THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament, we suggest, must be read so as to be understood. It isn't the kind of 'magic' book that simply bypasses the mind. Admittedly, there is a good deal of poetry in the New Testament, and poetry regularly achieves its effects on several different levels; but even then, if we are to avoid mere subjective impressions, the poetry itself must be understood as what it is. All this means that the New Testament must be read within appropriate contexts, both the ancient contexts of its original setting and helpful and supportive contemporary contexts today. It must be 'heard' within an acoustic which will allow its full overtones to stand out. It must be read with as little distortion as possible, and with as much sensitivity as possible to its different levels of meaning. It must be read so that the stories, and the Story, which it tells can be heard *as* stories, not as rambling ways of declaring unstoried 'ideas'. It must be read without the assumption that we already know what it is going to say, and without the arrogance that assumes that 'we'—whichever group that might be—already have ancestral rights over this or that passage, book, or writer. And, for full appropriateness, it must be read in such a way as to set in motion the drama which it suggests.¹

¹ Based on Wright *NTPG*, 6.



Beginning Study of the New Testament

The New Testament is the very best book that ever was or ever will be known in the world.¹

CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

This chapter describes how the New Testament consists of history, literature, and theology.

By the end of this chapter you should:

- understand that the New Testament drives us towards worship and mission;
- appreciate the importance of the interrelationship between history, literature, and theology for New Testament studies.

WHY THE NEW TESTAMENT?

Why should anyone spend time studying the contents of the New Testament? Why invest so much time in a relatively small collection of Greek texts? More precisely, exactly what is the New Testament *for* and what does that tell us about *how* we should study it?

I (N. T. Wright, henceforth NTW) own many different kinds of books. I have a lot of history books, and I love to find out more and more not only about what happened in the past but what it was like being there and the ways in which people thought and felt. I want to know what motivated them. I have a good many novels and books of short stories, and though they don't describe things that actually happened they encourage me to think about why people behave the way they do, not least why they get into the messes they do and what might be done about it. I even have quite a few books of plays—Shakespeare of course, but lots of others too: I enjoy the theatre, and if you let your imagination loose you can read the play at home and see it going on in your

¹ Charles Dickens, *The Life of Our Lord*, cited in Howard 2012, 21.

mind's eye. It would be quite different, of course, if I knew I was going to be acting in a play: I would be reading it not just to learn my lines but to think into the different characters and get a sense of what it would be like to 'be' the person I'd be playing, and how I would relate to the others.

So we could go on, with poetry high on the list as well, and biography too. But there are plenty of quite different books which are really important to me. I have several atlases, partly for when I'm planning travel but also because I'm fascinated by the way different parts of the world relate to one another. Since my work involves different languages, I have several dictionaries which I use quite a lot. I enjoy golf, even though I'm not much good at it; I have quite a few books about the game, and how to play it better. I read these books but don't usually manage to obey them, or not thoroughly. I have a couple of books on car maintenance, a few books about how to make your garden look better, first-aid books for health emergencies, and so on.

Where do we fit the New Testament into all that? For some people, it seems to function at the level of car maintenance or garden tips, or even first-aid: it's a book to turn to when you need to know about a particular issue or problem. ('What does the Bible teach about x , y , or z ?') For some, it's like a dictionary: a list of all the things you're supposed to know and believe about the Christian faith, or an atlas, helping you to find your way around the world without getting lost. This is what some people mean when they speak of the Bible being the ultimate 'authority', and so they study it as you might study a dictionary or atlas, or even a car manual.

Now that's not a bad thing. Perhaps it's better to start there than nowhere at all. But the puzzle is that the New Testament really doesn't look like that kind of book. If we assume, as I do, that the reason we have the New Testament the way it is is that this is what God wanted us to have—that this is what, by the strange promptings of the holy spirit, God enabled people like Paul and Luke and John and the others to write—then we should pay more attention to what it might mean that *this* sort of a book—or rather these sorts of books, because of course the New Testament contains many quite different books—is the one we've been given. Only when we do that will we really be living under its 'authority', discovering what that means in practice.

When we rub our eyes and think about this further, we discover that the New Testament includes all those other kinds of books as well: history, short stories which didn't happen but which open up new worlds (I'm thinking of the parables of Jesus in particular), biography, poetry, and much besides. And though none of the New Testament is written in the form of a play to be acted on stage, there is a strong sense in which that is precisely what it is.

Or rather, it's part of a play, the much larger play which consists of the whole Bible. The biblical drama is the heaven-and-earth story, the story of God and the world, of creation and covenant, of creation spoiled and covenant broken and then of covenant renewed and creation restored. The New Testament is the book where

all this comes in to land, and it lands in the form of an invitation: this can be and should be *your* story, *my* story, the story which makes sense of us, which restores us to sense after the nonsense of our lives, the story which breathes hope into a world of chaos, and love into cold hearts and lives. The New Testament involves history, because it's the true story of Jesus and his first followers. It includes poetry, because there are some vital things you can only say that way. It contains biography, because the key to God's purposes has always been the humans who bear his image, and ultimately the One True Human who perfectly reflects his Image, Jesus himself. And yes, there are some bits which you can use like a dictionary or a car manual or a how-to-play-golf kind of book. But these mean what they mean, and function best as a result, within the larger whole. And when we study the New Testament it's the larger whole that ought to be our primary consideration.

So how do we fit into that larger whole? How do we understand the play, the real-life story of God and the world which reached its ultimate climax in Jesus of Nazareth and which then flows out, in the power of the spirit, to transform the world with his love and justice? How do we find our own parts and learn to play them? How do we let the poetry of the early Christians, whether it's the short and dense poems we find in Paul or the extended fantasy-literature of the book of Revelation, transform our imaginations so we can start to think in new ways about God and the world, about the powers that still threaten darkness and death, and about our role in implementing the victory of Jesus?

One central answer is that we must learn to *study* the New Testament for all it's worth, and that's what this whole book is designed to help us do. Jesus insisted that we should love God with our *minds*, as well as our hearts, our souls, and our strength. Devotion matters, but it needs direction; energy matters, but it needs information. That's why, in the early church, one of the most important tasks was *teaching*. Indeed, the Christian church has led the way for two thousand years in making education in general, and biblical education in particular, available to people of all sorts. A good many of the early Christians were functionally illiterate, and part of the glory of the gospel then and now is that it was and is for *everyone*. There shouldn't be an elite who 'get it' while everybody else is simply going along with the flow. So Jesus' first followers taught people to read so that they could be fully conscious of the part they were to play in the drama. That's why the New Testament was and is for everyone.

By contrast with most of the ancient world, early Christianity was very much a *bookish* culture. We sometimes think of the movement as basically a 'religion'; but a first-century observer, blundering in on a meeting of Christians, would almost certainly have seen them initially as belonging to some kind of educational institution. This is the more remarkable in that education in that world was mostly reserved for the rich, for the elite.

What's more, Jesus' first followers were at the forefront of a new kind of textual technology. From quite early on they used the codex, with sheets stuck together to comprise something like a modern book, rather than the scroll, which couldn't hold nearly so much and which was hard to use if you wanted to look up particular passages. In fact, though the codex had been in use already, the type the early Christians developed was more user-friendly than the earlier models. They really did want everyone to be able to read this vital and life-giving text.



This bookish culture, by the way, is why Christianity was a *translating* faith from the beginning. The movement went out very early on from circles where Aramaic was the main language into the larger Greek-speaking world. From there, it quickly moved north-west into Latin-speaking areas, and south and east into regions where Coptic or Ethiopic were dominant. And so on. So those dictionaries remain important too.

But, behind and beyond all that, the reason there's a New Testament at all is because of Jesus himself. Jesus never wrote anything, so far as we know. But what he did and said, and particularly his claim to be launching God's kingdom on earth as in heaven, and his vocation to die a horrible death to defeat the powers of darkness and bring God's new creation into being with his resurrection—all this meant what it meant within its original setting. And that setting was the ancient story of Israel, and the ongoing hopes and longings of the Jews of Jesus' day for God's coming kingdom that would bring that ancient story to its long-awaited conclusion. But, from quite early in the movement, most of Jesus' followers were not from that Jewish world. They needed to be told not only that 'Jesus died for your sins', but also that Jesus was Israel's Messiah and that the meaning of his death was the messianic meaning, to be found in the long story of Israel's scriptures: in other words, as Paul

Coptic fragment
2 Cor. 6:5–7 and 2 Pet. 2:4–5
and 7–9, Louvre Museum

puts it, summarizing the very early ‘gospel’, that the *Messiah* died for our sins *in accordance with the scriptures*.² And to explain what that meant, and how it worked out in practice, four people took it prayerfully upon themselves to tell the story of Jesus in such a way as to bring out its different aspects. Several others, and one person in particular, namely Paul, wrote letters to churches which discussed particular issues but which did so by focusing that same larger story onto whatever needed to be addressed. And one man, out of persecution and prayer and a mind and heart soaked with the scriptures, was granted a breathtaking vision of heaven and earth coming together and Jesus at the middle of it all. Welcome to the New Testament.

So, from very early on, the followers of Jesus discovered that two things were happening. First, when they read these books they were drawn into a life of worship and prayer. The books are self-involving: like plays and poems they say, ‘This is what’s going on, these are the many dimensions that are drawn together; now come up on stage, learn your lines, and join in.’ And the first thing to join in with is worship, the worship rooted in the worship of ancient Israel, not least the Psalms, but now reworked around Jesus and re-energized by his spirit. We can see this going on from many angles, whether it’s Thomas saying ‘My Lord and my God’ (Jn. 20.28) or Paul framing one of his most difficult and painful discussions (Rom. 9–11) like a psalm, with lament at the start, praise at the end, and intercession in the middle. There are, in other words, specific elements of worship. But what really counts is the whole thing: the whole story of the gospels and Acts, the letters as wholes, the book of Revelation as a whole. This is God’s story, and we ought to praise him for it and in it; to praise him by reading it, individually and together; to praise him by allowing it to shape our minds and hearts. The whole New Testament invites its readers to praise the God of creation and covenant for renewing the covenant and restoring creation through Jesus, Israel’s Messiah and the world’s rightful lord.

After all, the phrase ‘New Testament’ is simply a way of saying ‘new covenant’. And a covenant isn’t something you study at a distance. It’s something you sign on for, or rather, something God calls you to be part of. The whole New Testament is written, not exactly to create the new world and the new-covenant relationship—God has done that in Jesus and is doing it in the spirit—but to tell the story of that new world, that new relationship, in such a way that we, the readers, are drawn into that relationship and that world. It is the world of worship: of lament, yes, of intercession, yes, but always and ultimately of praise. The New Testament exists because God wants to involve real humans, thinking, breathing, loving humans, in the ongoing work and life of the kingdom. If praise is to be directed aright—because there are many false trails, many misunderstandings, which can easily arise—then it is vital that we *study* the New Testament for all it’s worth, the history, the maps,

² 1 Cor. 15.3.

the dictionary, the gardening manual, the lot. And especially the play. How does God's great drama work, and what part are we called to play in it? You'll only discover that as you study the book on the one hand, and, on the other hand, learn to worship God with your mind as well as your heart.

As we do this, a strange thing happens. Paul says in Colossians 3.10 that the gospel of Jesus will renew us in *knowledge* according to the creator's *image*. When we worship the true God, with that worship shaped by the story of Jesus seen as the fulfilment of Israel's scriptures, we find that we are being made into image-bearers, called to reflect God's love and purposes into the world. The first letter of Peter speaks of us being rescued from sin and death so that we can become 'a royal priesthood' (2.9), an ancient biblical way of summarizing the whole human vocation. We are to reflect the praises of creation back to the creator in worship; that's the 'priestly' bit. We are thereby becoming polished mirrors, set at an angle so as to reflect the powerful and healing love of the creator back into the world. That's the 'royal' bit.

The New Testament is therefore designed—designed, I would say, by the holy spirit!—to be the book which, when we read it, shapes and energizes and directs us not only for worship but also for *mission*. Worship and mission go hand in hand. Reading and studying the New Testament is the vital and non-negotiable means by which both are given their pattern and their power.

The New Testament, in other words, isn't there to tell us simply 'how to get to heaven'. Indeed, to the surprise of many people, that isn't what it's saying at all. That's why some theories about the New Testament and its authority don't work as well as they should. If you try to read it as a 'how-to' book, which sadly is how some people approach it, you may end up frustrated, thinking it would be better if the spirit had given us something more like a car manual or a railway timetable. No: the New Testament is designed to draw us into the story of God's plan, to rescue the world from chaos and idolatry and to launch his new transformative creation. This rescue, and this launch, have happened in Jesus; now, by the spirit, they are to be put into operation through people who are shaped by the biblical vision itself, by the stories of Jesus and his first followers, with ourselves joining in the movement those first followers began. The first Christians found themselves being formed into a community of generous love, bringing healing and hope to the poor and the sick, confronting the bullying powers of the world with a new way of being human. As we get to know the world of the first Christians, and the urgent things that Paul and the others wrote to them, we find ourselves being addressed and our faith built up. We find ourselves called to face suffering and challenges as they did themselves. Above all, we find ourselves called to shine like lights in the world of our own day.

The New Testament, then, is the manual of mission because it is first the manual of worship. We do not worship a distant or remote deity, but the God who made the

world and is remaking it. Our mission is not to rescue souls away from the world, but to bring God's rescuing love and glory into every corner of creation. The New Testament tells the story of how, in Jesus, God reclaimed the ultimate saving sovereignty over the world. It tells this story in such a way as to draw us, too, into celebration and gratitude so that we cease to be passive spectators, and become part of that saving purpose in our own right (though always dependent on God's spirit).

This huge purpose and promise is itself vulnerable in the same way that a great work of art is vulnerable. People misunderstand it; they distort it for their own ends, or in the service of other forces and agendas. That happened in the first century, and it's happened ever since. The worship can become stale or self-congratulatory. The mission can become a mere religious veneer on a cultural or personal power-trip. And so on. That is why study, constant study, is vital. Every generation needs to be renewed in knowledge. Every part of the church needs to wake up to the whole larger story of what the New Testament is actually saying. That is why, we believe, a book like the present one is so important.

WHAT IS THE NEW TESTAMENT?

We've just discussed why the New Testament matters. Next, we have to ask: what is the New Testament made of? At one level, the answer is easy. The New Testament is made up of twenty-seven books, including various different genres. It was written by several different authors, and quite possibly edited by others as well. It came into existence in the historical period of the second half of the first century of the present era. It is seen by Christians of all sorts as, in some sense, inspired scripture.

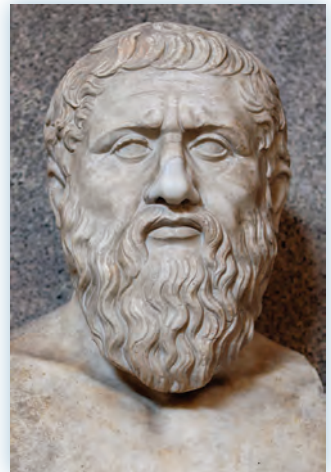
Of course, knowing those facts about the New Testament does not really mean that you actually 'know' it in any meaningful sense. You might know that your mother's eyes are blue, her hair is auburn, she was born in 1965, she likes to drink Earl Grey tea, and she lives with two playful corgis in Newcastle. But telling that to a stranger on the bus will not enable the stranger really to *know* your mother. Really knowing her is far more than listing a lot of facts about her. Similarly, it is one thing to know what the New Testament is in a strictly material sense, but it is quite another to know what the New Testament is really about. Once we ask that question, some people might say it is a 'religious' book; some might say it is 'theological'. Others might want to use words like 'myth'; others again would insist that it is 'divine revelation'. These words can introduce all kinds of muddles. 'Religion', for instance, meant something quite different in the ancient world from what it means today. Many people in the first century might have thought the New Testament was teaching a kind of philosophy; that it was a sort of 'community manual' for a new kind of human life and lifestyle. 'Theology', too, has changed its meaning over time. Certainly the New Testament has some remarkable, even shocking and

dramatic, things to say about God, and about God's relationship to the world and particularly to humans. The word 'myth' has so many senses that it's probably no use to us at the moment, though we may come back to it. And anyone who sees the New Testament as 'divine revelation' is bound to face the question: in what sense can these first-century stories, letters, and visions be seen that way?

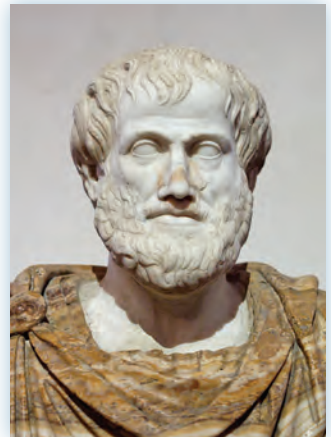
In fact, the question 'What is the New Testament?' would probably need an expert panel of authorities to answer it properly. Supposing we could use a time machine to go back in history and assemble together several prominent Greeks, Romans, and Jews from antiquity. Supposing we got them to sit around a large table for a group discussion on these questions. Let's make it a serious discussion; we wouldn't snatch just anyone from the streets of Rome or Athens. We would want people with known expertise, related to the fields of ancient history, literature, and discussions of 'the gods' and their relation to the world. We would need people who could reflect meaningfully, discuss vigorously, and debate passionately.

We could put together quite an interesting list of such participants. On the Greek side, we would want Homer, the author of the epic works the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. We would find the Athenian general-cum-historian Thucydides a marvellous candidate to include. We would want philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Diogenes, and Plutarch for some intellectual spice. Coming to the Romans, we are again spoiled for choice. We would have to insist on picking Virgil, who was lauded for his Latin poetry and his literary masterpiece the *Aeneid* which provided the mythical story about the founding of Rome and the advent of the Augustan dynasty. Almost as fine a poet, but very different in his worldview, would be the Epicurean Lucretius. From among Roman historians, we would want both Tacitus and Suetonius for their perspectives on the empire and its leaders. Then also Cicero and Seneca, powerful men who shaped the political, literary, and philosophical worlds of their day, and who met their ends by being too close to political power when things turned bad.

Many Jewish representatives would be pressing for a place on our list. The scribe and sage Ben-Sirach would be high on the list for his love of God, Torah, and Wisdom. You would have to include the Alexandrian philosopher Philo, and the historian Josephus; they are in



Plato, Vatican Museum



Aristotle, National Museum of Rome

fact among our best sources for the Jewish world of the first century. The ‘Teacher of Righteousness’, who founded (or perhaps refounded) the sectarian group at Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, would have plenty to say. So would Rabbi Akiba, one of the greatest Jewish teachers of all time, known for his monotheistic piety and famous martyrdom in the early second century.

Let us imagine, then, that we could give each member of our colloquy a copy of the New Testament to read and ponder for a few days, and then bring them back together for an evening of energetic discussion on what they think they have been reading about. What would they say?

We can picture Thucydides, Josephus, Tacitus, and Suetonius all being mesmerized by the gospel of Luke and the parallel book we call Acts, with their striking biographical accounts of Jesus and Paul and their scenic historiography of the early

church. They would understand the idea of ‘history with a purpose’. Josephus in particular would see the point of documents that claimed to be drawing the long history of Israel to a glorious climax—though he would be sceptical about the idea of a crucified and risen Messiah. We can overhear Plato, Philo, and Cicero discussing the meaning of ‘equal with God’ in Philippians 2.6, and whether a phrase like that could apply to a human being besides the emperor and if so what it might mean, politically as well as theologically. Diogenes might be fascinated with Jesus’ command to his disciples to take nothing with them in their missionary travels other than a staff; it would remind him of how the Cynic philosophers used to look (Mk. 6.8–9/Mt. 10.9–10/Lk. 9.3). The ‘Teacher of Righteous-



Tacitus, senator and historian of the Roman Empire, c. AD 56–120

ness’ from Qumran might oscillate between delight and rage as he read through the gospel of John, encouraged by the indictment of the Pharisees, but affronted by the depiction of Jesus as the son of God. Homer (who, being reputedly blind, would have had to have someone read to him) might be seen sitting in a corner scratching his head over the book of Revelation, understanding the idea of a ‘war in heaven’ (Rev. 12.7) from his own writings, but puzzled over the theology and cosmology with which John the Seer has framed his account of heavenly discord. Seneca might well regard Paul’s ode to love in 1 Corinthians 13.1–13 as one of the most sublime pieces of rhetoric he’d ever read—but he wouldn’t understand what Paul meant when comparing the present and the future worlds.

The conversations would go on. And if these illustrious figures of antiquity were asked about what kind of book they were reading, what kind of writing it was, or what the thrust of its contents was, I suspect that their answers would be mixed. In the end, however, their conclusions would probably converge around three things: history, literature, and theology. These writings, they would recognize, claim to be based on real people and real events. They employ different styles and genres which have at least partial analogues in the wider worlds of their day. And they all assume the existence and living activity of a creator God, the God of Israel, claiming that this God has now acted decisively and uniquely in the man Jesus. There might be other categories, too: philosophy, politics, and even economics come to mind. ‘Religion’, to repeat, is too muddled a category to be much use. History, literature, and theology, held together in a new kind of creative tension, are the best starting-points to help us understand what sort of thing the New Testament actually is.

KEEPING HISTORY, LITERATURE, AND THEOLOGY TOGETHER

These three elements comprising history (‘the past’), literature (‘the text’), and theology (‘understanding God and the world’) are all sewn together into the fabric of the New Testament. And yet, what we find as whole cloth in the text—a historically situated discourse about God and the world, in various literary forms—can be violently torn asunder by readers who are afraid that too much history, or too much literature, or too much theology might prove that their mighty edifices of scholarship and piety have been built on a foundation of sand. It has been all too easy for some interpreters to highlight one of the trio: history *or* literature *or* theology—and to discard the rest.

Those focused on historical truth as the only real truth would happily sell theology and literature into slavery in the same way that Judah and his brothers sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites. Some, however, care neither for history nor for theology, and simply want to gaze at the literary beauty of the text, blissfully insulated from the torrid debates of historicity and theology, much as David gazed upon Bathsheba while shutting out the realities of the world and his wider responsibilities. Others, unwilling to face the possibility that the truth about a transcendent God might be uniquely unveiled in the accidental facts of history, cling to their theology like the Sadducees holding on to their dogmas, and eject history and literature in much the same way that Paul and Barnabas were ejected from Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra.

Thus, as with any other academic discipline these days, the guild of New Testament studies has more cliques than a Hollywood Oscar party. A-list historians don’t want to be seen alongside B-list literary theorists; nobody wants to appear on the cover of *People* magazine standing next to a theologian, not that the theologians

would want to be there anyway. Unfortunately, even when interdisciplinary studies are all the rage, there is a kind of methodological snobbery which remains firmly in place. New Testament scholars can be notoriously dismissive of other sub-disciplines, and tend towards microscopic specialization within their own fields. As Markus Bockmuehl puts it, ‘Scholars tend to concern themselves with primary and secondary literature only in their own postage-stamp-sized bailwick.’³

It is better, though riskier, to see history, literature, and theology as belonging together. To continue our whimsical biblical parallels, we might liken this to the three friends in Daniel 3 who testified together to God’s kingdom in the face of a megalomaniac monarch. The New Testament *is* history *and* literature *and* theology, all at once, and we should not try to reduce it to any one of these at the expense of the others. A close reading and thick description of the New Testament will necessarily involve the messy business of history, the hard work of literary criticism, and the arduous task of theological reflection.

As such, an informed reading of the New Testament, especially for a believing audience, will involve pursuing three main questions. First, the historical one: how did Christianity begin, and why did it take the shape that it did? Second, the literary one: why did the early Jesus-followers write the way they did, and what does this tell us about their worldview? Third, the theological question: what did the early Christians believe about God and the world, and about humans in general and Jesus in particular within that, and what kind of sense might their beliefs make? This volume will not answer all those questions in full. But, as we survey the New Testament writings, the present book offers a first guiding step on how to think about them.

³ Bockmuehl 2006, 35.

Further reading

- Blomberg, Craig. 2004. *Making Sense of the New Testament: Three Crucial Questions*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.
- Bockmuehl, Markus. 2006. *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.
- Moule, C. F. D. 1967. *The Phenomenon of the New Testament*. London: SCM.
- Wright, N. T. 1992. *The New Testament and the People of God*. COQG 1; London: SPCK, pp. 1–28.
- . 2011. *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today*. New York: HarperOne.



The New Testament as History

*The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.*¹

CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

This chapter explains how the New Testament is a historical source for reconstructing the historical Jesus, for identifying the impression that Jesus made upon his earliest followers, and for mapping the formation of the early church.

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- articulate the importance of history for New Testament studies;
- understand the complex problems inherent in trying to excavate history from ancient texts like the New Testament;
- appreciate a critical-realist epistemology as a way of exploring historical questions.

READING THE NEW TESTAMENT AS A HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

Christians have ordinarily claimed that God has decisively revealed himself, not in the realm of existential consciousness, not in the recess of religious feelings, but in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. In other words, God has acted within the space-time universe, specifically in the dirt and drama of first-century Palestine, to make good on his covenant promises to Israel by sending his son in the likeness of human flesh. If so, as George Caird used to say, ‘Christianity appeals to history, and to history it must go.’²

Sadly some will object to this historical enterprise, like a teenager complaining about being made to catalogue the boxes of parental memorabilia in the basement. For many grumblers the historical task seems irrelevant to their own situation: historical events might have provided the foundations for the church, they think, but no-one invests much time inspecting the foundations when there are prayers to pray, sermons to write, the elderly to visit, and services to prepare. Others will complain, not so much about the time-consuming nature of the task, but about the contents they have to pick through.

¹ Hartley, 1976 [1953], 7.

² Caird 1965a, 3.

How can Iron Age texts possibly be relevant in the Internet Age? Whatever people think the texts once ‘meant’, it is mostly irrelevant to the ‘meanings’ that we ascribe to them now—or the fresh insights we believe we possess in our own day.

Yet in counter-point to such recalcitrance, the reason why we engage in a study of the history of the New Testament is because of the conviction that Jesus and the apostles constitute the basis for normative Christianity. This ‘normativity’ emerges from the belief that God has revealed himself in the historical events behind the New Testament, in the writings that make up the New Testament, and in the experiences evoked by the New Testament (see ‘Emails from the edge: NT history’). This belief grows out of the ineradicable Christian conviction, held from very early times, that being a Christian means living, believing, and behaving in some sort of continuity with the New Testament (and the Old Testament!). This belief gained additional momentum as a result of the Protestant Reformation, when the principle of *sola scriptura* was articulated, placing the Bible in the position of supreme authority. Reading the New Testament, it has always been felt within Protestantism, is where the Christian begins, and in doing so he or she is equipped, challenged, reinforced, and given a sound basis for belief and life. If that is the case, then study of the New Testament in the context of the early church is a necessary part of Christian discipleship.

EMAILS

from the edge



From: Alan_Daley@aol.com

To: Professor Dana Schuler

Date: Sat, 16 Jan 2016 at 10:02 p.m.

Subject: NT history

Dear Prof.,

I'm a bit confused about the paper you told us to write: ‘How Does Knowing Historical Background Help Us to Understand Mark 12.14–17?’ I mean, when Jesus says, ‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s’ (KJV), surely he means Christian folks should simply be honest and pay their taxes. What else is there to understand? Sorry, but I just don’t see the point of the question.

Thanks

AD

From: Professor Dana Schuler
To: Alan_Daley@aol.com
Date: Mon, 18 Jan 2016 at 2:25 p.m.
Subject: Re: NT history

Dear Alan,

Sorry to disappoint you, but this is one passage where knowing some historical background is crucial.

First, remember that the question is actually a trap set for Jesus by the Pharisees and Herodians, not a sincere question about whether Jews (let alone Christians) should be upright tax-payers. How does the trap work? Well, if you read Josephus (*Ant.* 18.23; *Wars* 2.118; 7.410) you'll see that some zealous Galileans had a motto, 'No king but God', and since paying taxes to Caesar meant recognizing him as king, paying taxes was in fact a type of blasphemy or cowardly betrayal of their religion. So when Jesus is asked about paying taxes to Caesar, he's put in a Catch-22. If he says, 'Yes, pay them', Jesus will look like he's compromised and sold out. If he says 'No, don't pay them', then the Herodians can have him arrested on charges of sedition as forbidding the payment of taxes, which was an offence—precisely the claim they fabricated against Jesus at his trial (see Lk. 23.2).

Second, notice Jesus' response: he doesn't try to bluff his way through an answer. Instead, he requests a denarius, and asks, 'Whose image and inscription are on it?' (See attached image.) Now various coins were minted in Palestine, mostly without imperial images, usually with floral designs; only Pontius Pilate printed coins depicting pagan cultic utensils (see Kindler 1973, 37–8, 94–103). But this denarius is probably a Tiberian tribute penny which had on one side an 'image' of Tiberius's bust with an inscription that read, 'Son of the divine Augustus'; then on the other side it said 'High priest', accompanied by a depiction of Tiberius's mother Livia posing as the goddess Roma. The rub is that if Caesar is 'divine', and if this is his image, then it is a violation of the second commandment (see Ex. 20.4; Dt. 5.8). In other words, Jesus is saying, you guys are carrying around pagan money which is an affront to our religion, so give the pagan king back his pagan money.

Third, perhaps there is even more to it. Perhaps Jesus is saying that Caesar should receive taxes because he should get EVERYTHING that he deserves, and he means everything!

Much like how the father of Judas Maccabaeus could urge his fellow-Judeans to ‘Pay back the Gentiles in full’—by which he meant violent retribution (1 Macc. 2.68)! So, far from acquiescing to the view that Jews or Christians should pay taxes, Jesus is being subversive, affirming a critique of pagan power over Israel, and avoiding the trap set for him.

Now do you see the value of historical background knowledge?

The grace be with you

Prof. Dana Schuler

When it comes to doing history, an emerging problem we have to wrestle with is that since the Enlightenment what counts as ‘history’ has been very much conditioned by purported ‘laws’ that have no place for God and (what has come to be called) the ‘supernatural’. (In earlier times the ‘supernatural’ was an extra dimension that enhanced the ‘natural’ world, not an alternative to it.) Consequently many historians are quite happy to write off ‘god’ and the description of his actions as the mythic husk that must be peeled away so that the historical kernel behind Christian origins can finally be exposed. As a result, many Christians are somewhat afraid of history, frightened that if we really find out what happened in the first century our faith might collapse. The problem is that without historical enquiry there is no check on Christianity’s propensity to remake Jesus, never mind the Christian ‘God’, in its own image. Equally, much Christianity is afraid of scholarly learning, and insofar as the Enlightenment programme was an anti-dogma venture, Christianity has often responded by retreating into the safe space of a ‘confession’, a self-reinforcing church circle. But, granted that learning without love is sterile and dry, enthusiasm without learning can easily become blind arrogance. Again, much Christianity has been afraid of reducing a ‘supernatural’ faith to rationalist categories. But, as I have just suggested, the sharp distinction between the ‘supernatural’ and the ‘rational’ *is itself a product of Enlightenment thinking*, and to emphasize the ‘supernatural’ at the expense of the ‘rational’ or ‘natural’ is itself to capitulate to the Enlightenment worldview at a deeper level than if we were merely to endorse, rather than marginalize, a post-Enlightenment rationalist programme. Thankfully there is a better way for us to be proper New Testament historians.

There is no time to offer a full-sized philosophy of historiography, or to provide a detailed map of historical methodology.



Tiberian denarius
Jay King Collection

Others have plotted how that task might be done, and done, moreover, within a supposedly ‘open’ universe where theism can be part of the wider reality.³ The rationalistic positivism spawned by ‘modernity’ supposed that historical truth was accessible simply by laying down your epistemological foundations and setting up your methodological machinery, producing a God’s-eye view of history ironically unfettered by the interventions of any god. In contrast, we must remember that there is no ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’ history out there to be found. The hope of discovering anything like that was always a figment of the post-Enlightenment imagination. There is no such thing as uninterpreted history nor the possibility of discovering something ‘as it really happened’ in some neutral sense. Everything in history, including our earliest sources as well as the latest historical analyses thereof, is already enmeshed in an interpretative process. There is no point of view which is nobody’s point of view. This does not, of course, mean capitulating to ‘postmodernity’, with the notion that all knowledge is not only conditioned but also, at the end of the day, artificial. Postmodernists proclaim that no-one sees things as they are, only as they appear to be. Consequently, there is no grand story of history, only local stories that collide, collide, and coalesce. For postmodernists, there is no naked history to be found, only a plethora of historical interpretations to be laid out and compared, with subtextual power-games in the sources waiting to be unmasked, and—in some cases—with drunken celebrations of diversity and *différence* to be held along the French Riviera.

Between the Scylla and Charybdis of ‘modernity’ and ‘postmodernity’ is *critical realism*. This is a way of describing the process of ‘knowing’ that acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence ‘realism’), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiralling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known* (hence ‘critical’). This path leads to critical reflection on the products of our enquiry into ‘reality’, so that our assertions about ‘reality’ acknowledge their own provisionality. Knowledge, in other words, although in principle concerning realities independent of the knower, is never itself independent of the knower.⁴

To give an analogy, consider three windows. Modernity liked to think of itself as looking through a transparent window that allowed one to see perfectly through to the other side as long as it was sunny (that is, truth is easily found if you have good

³ See discussion in McKnight 2005, 3–46; Sheppard 2012; Deines, Ocles, and Watts 2013.

⁴ For a similar approach see Schnelle 2005, 26–30. Thiselton 2015, 265, provides a concise explanation of critical realism for beginners. For an introduction to the philosophy of critical realism, including its association with philosopher Roy Bhaskar, see Kaldis 2013, 790–1. Very helpful too, though somewhat more advanced, is the collection of essays in López and Potter 2001 about critical realism as an alternative to both positivism and postmodernism. On the relevance of critical realism to New Testament studies, see Meyer 1989 and 1994; Denton 2004, 80–90, 210–25; and Stewart 2008, 77–112; for Christian theology, see Lonergan 1972; Vanhoozer 1998, 299–303; McGrath 2006, 195–244; and A. Wright 2013; for science and theology, see Losch 2009.

sources and good methods). Postmodernity is basically saying that the window is really a mirror and all you see is little more than your own reflection, though you may get lucky if you unconsciously peer through one of the cracks and catch a glimpse of something behind the mirror (that is, truth may be out there, but you'll have a hard time telling it apart from your own reflection). Critical realism says that the mirror has a dark tint caused by the gaps in our knowledge and the shading of our own location, and that part of our own reflection does indeed appear on the window, but we really can see something through it that is not ourselves, nor part of our own making (that is, truth can be seen, but never crisply or perfectly). Modernity exalted itself in claims of incorrigible certainty (and claimed that what you couldn't have certainty about either didn't matter or didn't exist). Postmodernity basked in ambiguity and irony, exposing power-games real and imaginary. Critical realism aims to provide clarity and sobriety to the historical task.

The need for critical realism should be clear. Modernity lauded itself, much like the builders of the tower of Babel, for its progressive ascent towards a God's-eye view of the world, stressing the accumulative acquisition of knowledge in the sciences by an academy of so-called disinterested observers. However, it was two European wars, the discovery of non-western ways of thinking, the realization that science rests on paradigms rather than on brute facts, and the 'linguistic turn' (which showed how language shapes ideas) that made people realize that the modernist assertion to have a monopoly on absolute truth was naive at best and arrogant at worst. It was much like the boastful claims of the ancient king 'Ozymandias' described in Percy Shelley's famous poem. In the poem, Ozymandias makes self-adulating boasts about the greatness of his empire, but his kingdom, and indeed his statue, is later found in ruins. The only thing he is then remembered for is not his greatness but his arrogance. Similarly, the modernists' claim to be able to attain indisputable facts has become a shattered visage that memorializes their failure (see box: 'Ozymandias').

Postmodernity then came running through the streets like Nietzsche's madman Zarathustra, shouting that God is dead and truth with him! If so, history is never found, it is written by the victor, and its meaning is imposed by the historian.

OZYMANDIAS

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—'Two vast and trunkless legs
of stone

Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless
things,

The hand that mocked them, and the heart
that fed;

And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.'

(Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1818)

Meaning does not exist in texts or in artefacts; it is purely in the eye of the beholder. Works such as Tacitus's *Annals* or Josephus's *War of the Jews* have no inherent meaning, only what we assign to them. Thus, history is more like art than fact; it is aesthetic rather than scientific. If there is no meaning in history or in texts, then the motto might be that 'everything is permissible'. Whether one believes Jesus was a messianic claimant or a Cynic-like philosopher is less about genuine evidence and more about ideological tastes. Understandably, postmodernity became a great way of using the indeterminacy of language and the conditionality of all knowledge to dismantle the permanent structures of human existence and to replace them with a convenient vacuum that was conducive to a particular social project that could deflect any criticism of itself as merely the attempt to reinstate the old modernist regime.⁵ Even worse, as José López and Garry Potter argue about postmodernity:

The alleged loss of hegemonic meanings in the social world were (sic) not so much explained but reproduced in texts through all type[s] (sic) of narrative and rhetorical strategies. This led to a type of writing, and argumentation, which was rich and seductive, dense almost mystical. A type of writing that celebrated ambiguity, and enthroned irony. A type of writing that, at its worst, demanded little in terms of evidence, and argumentative coherence and consistency; the playfulness of language took precedence.⁶

In contrast to this, the critical realist says that there is something in the text to be known, and something in history to be found, even if the knowing and finding is never infallible. The alternative to *absolute* claims is not *anarchic* interpretation but an *adequate* knowledge attained by a critical interaction between the subject and object of study.⁷ One can believe in a thing called 'history' without thinking that one has full possession of it. (This discussion can become confusing, because the word 'history' itself is used both for 'things that happened in the past' and for 'things that people write about what happened in the past', and indeed for other things, like the

⁵ For example, the scholars participating in the Postmodern Bible Project are unapologetically explicit in this aim (Aichele 1995, 2–3, 15), seeing themselves as radical: '[B]y sweeping away secure notions of meaning, by radically calling into question the apparently stable foundations of meaning on which traditional interpretation is situated, by raising doubts about the capacity to achieve ultimate clarity about the meaning of a text, postmodern readings lay bare the contingent and constructed character of meaning itself. Moreover, by challenging traditional interpretations that claim universality, completeness, and supremacy over other interpretations, postmodern readings demonstrate that traditional interpretations are themselves enactments of domination or, in simpler terms, power plays.' They claim to be 'certain that the future of biblical criticism hinges squarely on its ability and willingness to make gender, race, ideology, and institutional power substantive concerns—which means a change in its institutional structures, discourses, and practices.'

⁶ López and Potter 2001, 5.

⁷ Vanhoozer 1998, 139.

entire sweep of all events past, present, and future, or the scholar's task ['doing history'] in researching all of these.) After all, knowledge, including historical knowledge, is provisional and open to correction. Even the well-tested hypotheses of the hard sciences remain just that: well-tested hypotheses. The relativity of all historical knowledge is no insurmountable barrier to the realism of the past. If so, then the gas chambers of Auschwitz are not a discourse to be interpreted according to one's wishes, nor a text to be deconstructed at one's pleasure; the Holocaust was an event with a context and an after-effect, which is retrievable and intelligible.⁸ So, for the critical-realist historian, history is there, independent and accessible, yet it is indescribable apart from the interpretative schemes used to understand it.⁹ We may accordingly consider historical hypotheses about the past to be justified and warranted when they exhibit explanatory power to account for all of the known variables or until new data emerges, or new interpretative schemes appear, that force current hypotheses and interpretations to be revised.

But what counts as a justified hypothesis or a warranted belief when it comes to history? One needs a large framework on which to draw, a way of describing the coherence of people and events in their own context. There must always be a leap, made by an imagination that has been attuned sympathetically to the subject-matter, to form a hypothesis, *a story*, that explains the phenomena before us. Stories, after all, are one of the most basic modes of human life and are a characteristic expression of worldview. Human life is constituted by a series of stories, implicit and explicit, that makes sense of experiences, and allows us to describe them in a coherent manner. Consider the story recited at every Passover:



Passover scene, Barcelona Haggadah, fourteenth century, The British Library

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⁸ See Esler 2005, 74–5.

⁹ Vanhoozer 1998, 322–3.

My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians ill-treated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labour. Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our ancestors, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey . . . ¹⁰

This story is a summation of the events and experiences that define the Jewish people, which speaks to their beliefs, identity, and hopes. As historians, then, we are principally storytellers, trying to get inside the storied lives of ancient peoples—filled with diverse and often competing stories—and constructing our own successful explanatory story to account for theirs.

The relevance of this for our historical enquiry into the New Testament is that we find ourselves describing a certain group of first-century Jews, namely the ‘early Christians’, who held one particular variant of the first-century Jewish worldview. This strange group was saying in effect, ‘The hope which characterizes our worldview has been fulfilled in these events.’ And they chose to say this in the most natural and most obviously Jewish way they knew, by telling a *story*—from gospel to apocalypse—encoding in a narrative the sum of their worldview and beliefs. Therefore, a chief task of New Testament study is to construct a hypothesis which explains the story of the first Christians within the storied world of Jews, Greeks, and Romans. This critical-realist theory of story and hypothesis accordingly acknowledges the essentially ‘storied’ nature of human knowing, thinking, and living, within the larger framework of worldviews. It affirms, in fact, that all knowledge of realities external to oneself takes place within a worldview-framework, within which stories form an essential part. In the end, our task is to construct a hypothesis, a story encompassing the beliefs, aims, identity, praxes, and hopes that constituted the early church’s own story, and to show that this hypothesis makes good sense of the evidence and does so in a clear and coherent way, with such simplicity as is appropriate for the dense subject-matter of actual human life.

What does all this mean for the student who wants to wrestle with the New Testament? Several things. (1) Remember that the study of the New Testament as history is not an optional extra. It is a crucial part of any course in ‘biblical studies’. (2) You need to be aware of the complexities of what it means to ‘do history’ (it isn’t simply about ‘looking up facts in a book’), and critical realism is a way of attempting to acknowledge the possibility of historical retrieval while fully recognizing the

¹⁰ Dt. 26.5–9.

limitations of the historical enterprise. (3) The past is a very different place. You cannot just jump from Atlanta to Antioch or leap from Rochester to Rome without doing some serious historical, hermeneutical, cultural, and social studies along the way. You will need to roll up your sleeves and be prepared to get your hands dirty.

Further reading

McKnight, Scot. 2005. *Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, pp. 3–46.

Meyer, Ben F. 1989. *Critical Realism and the New Testament*. Allison Park, PA: Pickwick.

Stewart, Robert B. 2008. *The Quest of the Hermeneutical Jesus: The Impact of Hermeneutical Issues on the Jesus Research of John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Wright, N. T. 1992. *The New Testament and the People of God*. COQG 1; London: SPCK, pp. 81–120.

Western Wall,
Jerusalem
Temple Mount



Praise for NEW TESTAMENT IN ITS WORLD

Two of today's most prolific evangelical New Testament scholars have now combined their expertise to produce an amazing volume: part introduction and survey, part 'cliff notes' on Wright's four volumes to date in his Christian Origins and the Question of God series, part a sneak preview of what he might say in his remaining two volumes, and part showcase for Bird's always sensible judgments, often nicely alliterated prose, and now and then particularly funny humor. Special features include the book's lavish illustrations, sidebars quoting choice ancient primary sources and hilarious 'emails from the edge' from a confused student to his patient professor who always replies wisely. Overall, the genre, like the quality, is one of a kind.

CRAIG L. BLOMBERG, distinguished professor
of New Testament, Denver Seminary

For all who have been anticipating a comprehensive and coherent reading of the entire New Testament from N. T. Wright, the wait is over. Wright and Bird offer their vision for the New Testament, with a lovely interplay of interpretative insights from the world behind the text, the world of the text, and the world in front of the text. Both look and content are energizing and engaging. This magisterial work provides an ideal textbook for courses on the New Testament.

JEANNINE K. BROWN, professor of New Testament,
Bethel Seminary, St Paul, Minnesota, USA

Masterful job by Wright and Bird, written with characteristic jauntiness and scholarly rigor. The numerous sidebars add spice to the substantial meal presented in the text. The book's power lies in its thorough historical study combined with its missional voice to the church today.

LYNN H. COHICK, provost/dean, Denver
Seminary, Denver, Colorado, USA

This is a distillation of Wright's quarter-century, multi-volume project exploring Christian Origins and the Question of God. Choice nuggets of Wright's most important discussions have been selected and blended with new material by both authors, enhanced with visuals, teaching aids, and online resources. If you want to introduce time-starved seminary students to the New Testament through the eyes of N. T. Wright but can't assign thousands of pages of reading, this is the book you need.

DR J. P. DAVIES, tutor of New Testament and MA
course leader, Trinity College, Bristol, England

Those beginning to study the New Testament for the first time can easily become overwhelmed by the sheer volume of what they need to know before they begin. This splendidly clear but wide-ranging introduction is a brilliant way in to serious study of the New Testament and will, deservedly, become the go-to textbook for a large number of readers.

PAULA R. GOODER, Canon Chancellor,
St Paul's Cathedral, London

Professors Wright and Bird have essentially given students and scholars alike two books in one: a detailed introduction to the major historical and theological topics of New Testament study, and a primer on each of the New Testament's writings. Their world-class scholarship (wonderfully peppered with images, excerpts from ancient and modern writings, and more) rightly recognizes that the New Testament's aim was—and is—to promote worship, discipleship, and mission.

MICHAEL J. GORMAN, Raymond E. Brown
Chair in Biblical Studies and Theology, St Mary's
Seminary & University, Baltimore, Maryland, USA

Wright has proven himself a discipline-shaping scholar, Bird a master textbook writer. When you put their minds and skills together, you get an excellent introduction to the New Testament: witty, accurate, accessible, eye-catching. This is a must-have resource for students.

NIJAY K. GUPTA, associate professor of New
Testament, Portland Seminary, Portland, Oregon, USA

This is the New Testament introduction of all New Testament introductions! Not only is this a superb New Testament introduction from the keyboards of two of today's most prolific and balanced New Testament scholars, but more advanced students will find here an accessible and mature synthesis of and primer for N. T. Wright's voluminous work.

CRAIG S. KEENER, F. M. and Ada Thompson
Professor of Biblical Studies, Asbury Theological
Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky, USA

Wright and Bird have done a great service to the church and the academy with this volume. They introduce readers to the major historical, literary, and theological themes of the New Testament in a way that is highly readable, yet they do not shy away from the difficult questions. They manage to avoid the twin dangers of excessive skepticism and uncritical pietism. It is the epitome of faith seeking understanding, and it will find a welcome home in many colleges and seminary classrooms as well pastors' libraries.

ESAU MCCAULLEY, assistant professor of New
Testament, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois, USA

N. T. (Tom) Wright can't write anything that is not interesting and suggestive and even at times provocative. His shelf or two of books is now condensed, reworked, and put in digestible form for even more readers. This is a lifetime of scholarship and a landmark publication by one of the world's leading New Testament scholars. I'm grateful too for the creative contribution Mike Bird makes in pulling all of this into one final heap of fun.

SCOT MCKNIGHT, Julius R. Mantey Chair of New
Testament, Northern Seminary, Lisle, Illinois, USA

The big, bold theological interpretation of the New Testament that N. T. Wright has been building, piece by piece, in monographs and commentaries over the years now appears here in an accessible, single-volume New Testament introduction.

DR MATTHEW V. NOVENSON, senior
lecturer in New Testament and Christian Origins,
University of Edinburgh, Scotland

Tom Wright and Mike Bird give us the opportunity to appreciate the breadth and detail of Wright's vision of the New Testament—one of the most far-reaching of recent times. The format of a New Testament introduction means that we also get to fill in the gaps on New Testament books that have not featured extensively in Wright's major books. We also get to find the answers to many 'So, what would he say about . . . ?' questions. This book will be highly valued by students, scholars, and churches.

PROFESSOR PETER OAKES, Greenwood Senior
Lecturer in Theology, School of Arts, Languages and
Cultures, University of Manchester, England

With inimitable verve and piquancy, two of this generation's scholarly juggernauts give us a New Testament introduction that unapologetically sets up shop at the all-too-untraveled crossroads of history and theology.

NICHOLAS PERRIN, president, Trinity
International University, Trinity Evangelical
Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, USA

From beginning to end, Tom Wright and Mike Bird relentlessly orient the study of the New Testament to questions of faith, transformation, worship, and mission. Not only does the book assemble Tom's massive scholarship in one volume, but also integrates it with the concern of his ministry as Bishop of Durham, to serve the church. If you are invested in the development of theological students, pastors, and congregations, you should get this book. In fact, no matter what your view, you will find much to benefit you, from discussions of primary texts to practical examples.

ELIZABETH E. SHIVELY, University
of St Andrews, Scotland

Interpreting the New Testament is a complex task and Wright and Bird work at it with customary passion and a commitment to clarity and coherence. These qualities make it an ideal starting-point for anyone who wants to understand early Christianity and its canonical texts.

DR SEAN WINTER, Pilgrim Theological College,
University of Divinity, Melbourne, Australia