

# INTRODUCING THE NEW TESTAMENT: ITS LITERATURE AND THEOLOGY – A REVIEW ARTICLE

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## **Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology**

*Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, Marianne Meye Thompson*  
Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001,  
xii + 624 pp., h/b., £24.99/\$35.00

It has been twelve years since Donald Guthrie's classic evangelical New Testament introduction was last revised. Carson, Moo and Morris' widely-used, scaled-down equivalent is now a decade old. As a result a highly-touted, fresh, relatively conservative New Testament introduction immediately raised my hopes that I would have an excellent new textbook to use for my year-long introduction and survey required of all our students. My anticipation rose even higher when I read that historical-critical concerns were to be abbreviated with much more of a focus on theological and literary questions, precisely the balance I already try to create in my classes.

This nicely laid-out hardback is handsomely furnished with black and white photographs, maps, and charts. Numerous sidebars present interesting and relevant excerpts from inter-testamental or Greco-Roman literature that help us put a given NT text or theme into cultural perspective. There are almost no footnotes and only three to six items listed for further reading at the end of each chapter. Thus students will not learn which scholars support which views.

The opening three chapters are very clearly written with the introductory student obviously in mind. 'What is the New Testament?' accurately describes the contents of this collection of Scriptures. 'The World of the New Testament' treats the most essential historico-political, religious and sociological background material, though the first two of these are treated much more briefly than one is accustomed to in a book of this nature. 'The Nature of the Gospels' surveys the three quests of the historical Jesus, discusses gospel genre, and introduces source, form and narrative criticism. Matthew, Mark and John are labelled biography, but Luke by adding Acts as a sequel to his Gospel writes 'historiography'. The selection of Gospel forms chosen for detailed scrutiny overlaps with traditional presentations only via parables, Proverbs, pronouncement stories, miracle stories, I-sayings and sentences of

holy law are all eschewed in favour of the genealogy, symposium, type scene, farewell discourse, passion narrative and summary.

The next four chapters introduce the four Gospels, one at a time, in their canonical sequence. By far and away the largest subsections of each of these chapters are surveys of the contents of each Gospel, sometimes merely paraphrased, sometimes interpreted, but the promise of focusing on actual literary and theological concerns is not entirely fulfilled. The promise to do very little with historical questions, the staple of standard introductions, is however fulfilled. Usually this material appears last, ending with a statement about our inability to know the identity of the authors, accompanied by disclaimers as to how little it matters anyway! The authors do seem somewhat more confident, however, that Luke may have written the two books traditionally assigned to him.

Chapter 8 may be the strongest in the book. The most secure results of a moderately conservative study of the historical Jesus are summarised, with particular sensitivity to placing him in his Jewish context and presenting the issues as they would have appeared to his original audiences. Without coming out and explicitly saying so, the authors apparently believe in Jesus as having understood himself to be (a significantly unconventional) Messiah, offering his life as a substitutionary atonement for the sins of humanity, and genuinely resurrected from the dead.

Chapter 9 treats the Acts of the Apostles, but its summaries of the book's contents are dramatically briefer than with the four Gospels. The question of historicity, however, is given greater treatment, but the conclusion is simply that there is some substantial historical substratum, by no means as much as conservatives are used to finding.

Two very short chapters introduce the topics of letter-writing in the ancient world and 'Paul and His World', respectively. The former is a helpful introduction, especially to conventional form; the latter seems unnecessarily agnostic about several historical details of Paul's life.

Subsequent chapters deal in turn with the Pauline epistles in canonical order. Here a greater unevenness of treatments emerges. Romans and Galatians are summarised in great detail but the two Corinthian epistles, far more quickly. 'Justification by faith' is helpfully explained as 'righteousness by trust' in light of OT covenantal backgrounds, but none of the recent flurry of scholarship on patronage in Corinth makes its way into the treatment of Paul's letters to that city. The authors lean toward the North Galatian hypothesis and a later date for Galatians.

Our trio doubts that the case for dating 1 and 2 Thessalonians to the early 50s is strong. They are quite sure that Ephesians was not intended first of all for Ephesus and doubt that Paul wrote it, but they show no acquaintance with Clinton Arnold's or Peter O'Brien's recent, strong arguments to the contrary. They are somewhat more agnostic with respect to Colossians, but curiously think the most

decisive issue is whether Paul could ever have spoken of Christians as sharing in Christ's resurrection in this age. Still, Philemon and Colossians must have been composed 'at roughly the same time and place', and the authenticity of Philemon is not in question, so it is hard to see how they can even leave the door open for a deutero-Pauline Colossians. Philippians probably comes from an Ephesian imprisonment in the mid-50s. The authenticity of 2 Thessalonians seems to be left up in the air, while the Pastorals are all but certainly pseudonymous.

The proposed outlines for each of the biblical books vary greatly in plausibility. Beginning with the Pastoral Epistles, in several instances, the authors give up making sense of the narrative flow as it stands and propose thematic outlines, combining passages otherwise out of sequence. The only place where a really plausible case for doing this exists is with 1 John but at this point they revert to following the book's sequence! With Hebrews and the general epistles, the pattern of leaving typical introductory information until the end of each chapter is reversed, without any explanation. There is also less thorough and less consistent actual summarising of contents and more thematic treatments. Even then coverage is spotty; the detailed chapter on Hebrews manages to avoid the issues surrounding the apostasy passages altogether!

The treatment of James is the best in this part of the book, stressing the coherence of this letter with other parts of the NT and avoiding the caricature of its author, probably the elder of the Jerusalem church, as a thoroughly law-abiding Jewish Christian. The parallels between 1 Peter and other parts of the NT are also helpfully canvassed, but we read nothing of the recent sociological approaches, so highly touted in the beginning of the book. 2 Peter is assuredly pseudonymous, not least because of its testamentary nature. The discussion of interpreting Revelation is inherently sound but general enough that post-, a- and historic pre-millennial interpreters could largely all agree.

A final chapter rapidly surveys the formation of the NT canon, but ultimately adopts a self-consciously circular argument that usage in the church was the most fundamental criterion for selection. A combined index of names and subjects rounds out the volume.

There are several glaring mechanical mistakes in the volume, the most striking of which is the omission in the outline of Matthew of 1:1 – 4:22. More disconcerting are a number of factual errors. It is not the case that 'in the last two centuries ... almost all students of the Gospels [have posited] Johannine independence from the Synoptic Gospels'. It is not true that, apart from the feeding of the 5000, 'all the other miracles narrated in John are found only in that Gospel'. Paul's letters are not entirely arranged in descending order of length. Tiberius' dates as emperor are not 17–37, and 1 Corinthians 9:5 does not necessarily imply Paul himself was married. Assuming that 'secular' means 'non-Jewish' (as elsewhere in the book), it is not the case that Paul only quotes secular authors once. The explanation of 1 Corinthians 14:33–38 claims that Paul

chides certain women for 'seeking to dominate the worship services', an interpretation that is suggested by neither the details of the text nor any of the major, recent explanations of it. That the masculine generic plural of verse 36 must refer to men only strikingly misrepresents Greek grammar.

More common than outright errors are noticeable overstatements – calling the 'Christian Paul' view of Romans 7:14–25 'impossible', denying the existence of any form of Jewish gnosticism, unequivocally distinguishing 'elder' and 'overseer' in 1 Timothy, and not even acknowledging the existence of the historic, Christian (i.e., complementarian) interpretations of all of the vexed gender role passages.

The upshot of my review of Achtemeier and company was disappointment. Great promise did not produce consistently good results. I'll stick with Carson, Moo and Morris for my classes and await the revised edition, especially since it promises to come soon and with an added focus on the content of each NT book.