The New Testament in Antiquity

By Gary M. Burge, Lynn H. Cohick, and Gene L. Green | Reviewed by Beth M. Stovell

Written by three experienced Wheaton professors, The New Testament in Antiquity represents a helpful introductory textbook for the study of the New Testament for undergraduate and beginning seminary students. The authors' goals for this textbook are fourfold: to be academically rigorous, to be accessible to students, to focus on the ancient context of the New Testament, and to remain "responsive to the confessional commitments of the evangelical tradition" (9). Chapters 1 through 4 provide background into the historical, cultural, and sociological contexts of the New Testament. Chapters 5 through 7 focus on the life, story, and teachings of Jesus. Chapters 8 through 26 provide a book-by-book analysis of the New Testament. Chapter 27 provides a conclusion on the issues of preservation and communication of the New Testament.

Thus, the book begins by explaining the necessity of contextualizing the historical and cultural settings of the New Testament because of the methodological presuppositions each reader brings to the text. Chapter 2 describes the historical setting of the New Testament, from the post-exilic period of 539-332 BC to the second Jewish revolt in AD 132-135. Chapter 3 examines the geographical and religious contexts of Jesus' life and ministry as well as the influential literature of the time. Chapter 4 provides a similar perspective on the mitigating factors of the Mediterranean world of the Apostle Paul. This chapter includes introductions to ancient Mediterranean society, government, religion, philosophy, and rhetoric.

Chapter 5 grapples with the complicated topic of the study of the life of Jesus, including brief discussions of source and form criticism. Chapter 6 moves chronologically through the story of Jesus, while chapter 7 deals specifically with Jesus' teachings.

Chapters 8-26 provide a book-by-book analysis of the entire New Testament. Some books are grouped together because of their overarching similarities (e.g., Ephesians and Colossians, Philippians and Philemon, the Pastoral Letters, 1 and 2 Peter and Jude). Though some of these sections are fairly short, they build on the background material in the previous seven chapters. This allows the authors to engage deeply with the material while maintaining brevity. Each of these chapters follows a similar format, though the challenges of each book are carefully detailed in each chapter as well. Chapters 8-11 discuss the gospels, moving through them canonically. Chapter 13 provides an introduction to the life and teachings of Paul (similar to that for the life of Jesus in chapters 6 and 7) before Paul's letters are discussed in a chronological fashion in chapters 14-21. The general epistles are then discussed in canonical order in chapters 22-26. In the final chapter, the authors explore the areas of text criticism, the canon, and translation.
theory. This chapter allows the authors to provide the readers with insight into how the Bible came to us and how it is presented to us in its translations.

The strengths of this volume are numerous. First, students receive a thorough understanding of the cultural, historical, sociological, religious, and geographical contexts from which the New Testament emerged. Burge, Cohick, and Green carefully craft each element so that they are academically complex while suitably accessible, balancing brevity with depth. Second, the book itself is visually appealing and intellectually stimulating with its abundance of beautiful and pertinent pictures, maps, and timelines, as well as numerous sidebars, providing compelling and sometimes humorous insights into ancient life. Third, this text provides discussion questions and bibliographies at introductory and advanced levels at the end of each chapter.

Yet, this book is not without its weaknesses. Since the focus of the volume is the cultural contexts of the New Testament, these sections have more overall weight than the book-by-book portion, which at times can be overly short. Also, as in many volumes with multiple authors, shifts can at times be detected between the styles of the various contributors. Such shifts are minor, however, and the layout and organization maintain a general continuity throughout. These weaknesses do not detract from the strength of the textbook as a whole.

One important element of this textbook is its treatment of the difficult issues of gender that face any study of the New Testament. First, the book is a collaborative effort between male and female scholars who share equal weight in writing chapters. Second, this book uses the gender-inclusive TNIV for its biblical citations. Third, when the book deals with difficult passages regarding gender issues, it points to the evidence for female leadership in Paul's writings and in antiquity (e.g., their careful analysis of 1 Timothy 2:12 and the use of the Greek word authenteō and the admonition for women to "be quiet" [368-69].)

The New Testament in Antiquity is an excellent textbook whether one is teaching an introductory course on the New Testament or seeking to learn more about the New Testament personally. It will prove an asset to students and pastors alike.

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