

As I mentioned in my previous post, I have finished editing my textbook on the New Testament for its seventh edition (title still: The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings). The book was first published in 1997 and has always been designed for college/university students taking a one-semester course on the New Testament. In it I do not presuppose any knowledge of the topic, but begin at ground zero.

When I started doing research on the first edition of this textbook back in the mid-90s, I had very clear ideas about what I wanted it to be. First and foremost, I wanted to approach the New Testament from a rigorously historical perspective. It is not that I had any difficulties at the time, either professionally or personally, with introductions that were more geared toward theology, or exegesis, or literary criticism. But I wanted my book to be different. I wanted to situate the writings of the New Testament more thoroughly than was typically done in the historical, cultural, social, political, literary, and ideological worlds from which it emerged; I wanted it to plow beneath the surface to find clues not only about such traditional issues as authorship, sources, and dates, but also about what was then still a vibrant field of study, social history; I wanted it to ask historical questions of the texts and of the events that they either narrated or presupposed. I was interested in the history of the text and the formation of the canon of the New Testament. In the historical Jesus. In the historical Paul. In the history of the Johannine community. In the historical realities lying behind Matthew, and 2 Corinthians, and Revelation.

Relatedly, I wanted the book to be highly comparative: how does John compare with the Synoptics? How do they compare with each other? How does the preaching of Jesus compare with the accounts of the Gospels? Or the theology of Paul? How does Paul's theology stack up against the letter of James? Or the book of Hebrews? How does the book of Revelation compare with everything else? And on and on. In my view these questions are central to the historical study of the New Testament, and are inherently interesting.

I also wanted the book to be critical, engaged in rigorous scholarship so that students reading it could see what the critical questions were and what evidence was typically adduced in order to answer them. I absolutely did not want to emulate some of my predecessors in trying to introduce students to the prominent scholars of the past who took one position or another, and pretend that this is the same thing as introducing them to actual evidence. In my experience, 19-20 year olds are simply not all that interested, and do not need to be, in the different positions taken on the nature of Justification in Paul by Bultmann, Käsemann, J. Louis Martyn, E. P. Sanders, N. T. Wright, and Douglass Campbell. They've never heard the names of these scholars (fine ones, all of them), and, so far as I'm concerned, in an introductory class, they have no need to hear of them. Far more interesting than a list of names of modern scholars is a grappling with the texts themselves, to try to make sense of Romans or Galatians.

Finally, I thought this kind of approach could be achieved at a level that a 19-or 20-year old might appreciate. The really difficult task was satisfying that audience and the other audience of a textbook: the university professors who decide whether to use it. My goal was to make the book interesting, even intriguing, for beginners and yet fully competent in its scholarship. As far as making it interesting, I realized that the choice of content was fundamental: the study of the New Testament is absolutely fascinating if you know where to look, but dreadfully dull if you look elsewhere. At least as important was the style of writing and the layout of the page.

So now it's in the seventh edition. I have made a number of changes here and there,

including adding a number of “boxes” throughout. The boxes in the book are like inserted discussions (such as you might find in a news magazine like Time or Newsweek) on a related topic that is particularly interesting but not *directly* germane to the narrative of the chapter itself. The two most common boxes that I have are titled “Another Glimpse Into the Past,” where I give some additional factual information about the topic and “Something to Think About,” where I discuss a controversial topic that can generate different opinions.

For this new edition there are a dozen new boxes scattered throughout (I’ve eliminated others - especially the ones I thought were the ... least interesting!). I’ve thought it might be a useful exercise to post these new ones on the blog. They are like short snippets on interesting topics, each of which could be discussed in 30 pages or more, but which I devote usually 300-400 words on only.

Since these are shorter than my normal 1000-word blog posts, my idea is to have *two* postings a day (so you can get your money’s worth on the blog!). (I had thought about combining them to give two in each post, but since they are all on topics vastly different from each other, I decided that might be confusing). And so these will be my upcoming mini-posts, two a day for a week or so, starting tomorrow, unless something more pressing comes up that I need to post about instead!



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