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典藏版

通识读本

《新约》入门

The New Testament

A Very Short Introduction

Luke Timothy Johnson 著

陆巍 译

外语教学与研究出版社

FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND RESEARCH PRESS

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Chapter 1

Approaching the New Testament

The twenty-seven slender compositions of the New Testament were written in the ordinary Greek (*Koine*) of the early Roman Empire. Leaders of the new cult that arose in Palestine after the death of Jesus and spread explosively across the Mediterranean world in the last part of the first century CE wrote letters to newly formed communities, and twenty-one of them are preserved. Four narratives concerning Jesus (the Gospels), another concerning the movement's first expansion (Acts of the Apostles), and an intense visionary composition (Revelation) were also written over the last three decades of the first century and complete the collection.

1

The religious and cultural impact of this tiny assemblage of writings is out of proportion to its length, the circumstances of its composition, and its literary merit. As the Christian religion gained a more decisive identity in the mid-second century, these twenty-seven compositions became its official collection (or canon) of sacred writings and, together with the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, became the Christian Bible, or Holy Scripture.

From that point on, the New Testament lost much of its human and historical character. For Christian believers, it was God's inspired word, divine revelation, the definitive sourcebook for theology and morality. For despisers of Christianity, the New

Testament—above all the letters of Paul—represented all the intellectually and spiritually repressive tendencies they disliked in the religion that had, through the accident of imperial appropriation, become the dominant cultural force of Europe and the world that European colonization shaped.

Three kinds of readers can profit from a very short introduction to the New Testament. Christians can use a fresh look at the compositions they usually engage through acts of piety, and can discover in them both an alarming complexity and a comforting humanity.

Despisers of Christianity likewise deserve an appreciation of these writings unencumbered by the weight of theological and cultural significance. They may be surprised both by the New Testament's variety of viewpoints and generosity of spirit.

For those who already have strong views concerning the New Testament, this book can serve less as an introduction than as a reorientation. But there are other readers who, in increasing numbers, simply have never read the New Testament, have not experienced it as a cultural force in their lives, and have little notion of what has made its compositions controversial or even interesting. They can learn what the excitement has been about.

Potential readers in all three categories should be aware that a completely neutral introduction to the New Testament is impossible, probably not even desirable. But fairness to readers requires that any introduction be clear about the way it approaches the subject. This very short introduction recognizes and engages four distinct dimensions of the earliest Christian writings.

Anthropological dimension

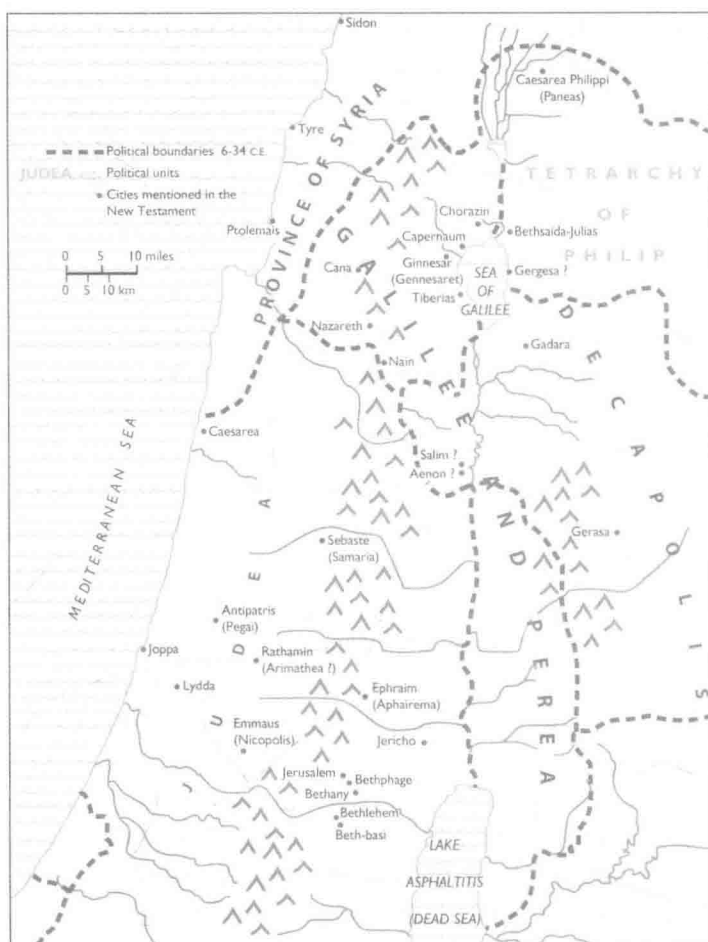
The term “anthropological” indicates that the New Testament compositions were written by human beings, a fact candidly



acknowledged by the writings themselves: the Gospels are “according to” Matthew and Mark and Luke and John; it is “Paul the Apostle” who writes to local assemblies. The present introduction does not take divine causality into account, either with respect to the birth of the Christian movement or for the composition of these writings. Divine agency is not thereby denied, simply not computed.

Because they were written by real human beings of the first-century Mediterranean world, the New Testament compositions are limited in their perceptions of the world, of social situations, and even of the divine will, as all human productions necessarily are. Readers are therefore not surprised to find a diversity of such perceptions and even disagreement among them. All human witness, after all, is specific, embodied, perspectival, limited. But if the New Testament compositions are fully human creations rather than the passive product of divine intervention, neither are they merely the result of psychological impulses or social dynamics. In all their particular and partial character, they represent human creativity.

Creativity is found in the process by which early believers interpreted their experience through the symbols made available to them by their culture. The earliest Christian writings sprang into existence within a compressed period of time and within a highly specific cultural context. They wonderfully illustrate the kind of human behavior that most intrigues those calling themselves cultural anthropologists. Within the framework of a fragile intentional community, the followers of Christ reinterpreted their inherited symbols and in the process produced a new cultural reality. To appreciate the New Testament anthropologically, then, means to appreciate that these compositions emerge from a tension-filled process of human self-interpretation, not after centuries but within decades of the experiences that launched the movement in the first place.



1. Map of Palestine.

Historical dimension

Readers who instinctively approach the New Testament compositions as timeless truth especially need the reminder that they speak from and to historical and social situations of first-century Greco-Roman and Jewish life. Anthropology acknowledges that these writings involved a human process of interpretation; history recognizes that such interpretation happened in the specific social realities of the first-century

Mediterranean world. Among them is the intractable fact of language. The New Testament is written in first-century Greek: diction, grammar, and syntax are not subject to the whim of readers. Writings can say only what the *Koine* of that time allows them to say. The only truly responsible reading of the New Testament, consequently, is one based on the Greek text in its historical specificity.

The historical dimension includes the New Testament's "symbolic world," a term that is shorthand for the complex combinations of social structures, dynamics, and symbols within which the first Christians lived, whether they had entered the movement directly from the dominant Gentile (Greco-Roman) culture or from Judaism. Archaeological discoveries of the past two centuries have given impetus to an unparalleled growth in knowledge of the historical context of the New Testament, enabling a fuller and more responsible reading of these ancient texts.

Finally, the New Testament compositions themselves serve as sources for the effort to historically reconstruct the ministry of Jesus, the birth and expansion of the messianic movement, and the particular historical circumstances and rhetorical goals of the respective New Testament compositions. The quest for such historical reconstruction has been a prime motivation for scholarly analysis of the New Testament since the mid-nineteenth century.

The results have been mixed, in terms of real historical knowledge. The New Testament compositions wonderfully witness to the broad historical/cultural context out of which they were written, but they are both too partial and too prejudiced to satisfy the longings for a full historical record of Christian beginnings.

Literary dimension

The New Testament is an anthology of discrete literary compositions. However much early Christians expressed or

interpreted their experience orally, only deliberately shaped literary compositions are available to us.

The compositions do not speak with the same voice or from the same perspective. Each composition should therefore be considered on its own terms, without harmonizing them. Recognition of the distinct compositions is slighted, for example, when one refers generally to “the Gospels,” without acknowledging how each narrative renders Jesus’ ministry, or to “Paul,” without recognizing the impressive variety in the letters attributed to him.

The literary dimension also demands that specific literary genres and styles are taken seriously as the vehicles for expressing meaning. Letters and narratives, for example, make meaning in distinct ways. Since literary genres and modes of rhetoric are, furthermore, those of first-century Mediterranean culture, literary attention demands as well historical awareness.

Religious dimension

Readers who are perfectly willing to acknowledge the anthropological, historical, and literary aspects of the New Testament writings often miss this dimension, partly because it is easily misunderstood. “Religious” is not the same as “theological.” The New Testament has certainly been used by Christian theology through the ages, and there are arguably elements of “theology” in some of its compositions.

But theology is best thought of as a disciplined reflection on religious discourse and practice, and such religious discourse and practice is precisely what we find everywhere in these compositions.

Three terms need definition. *Religious experience* is the human response to what is perceived as ultimate power, a response involving mind, body, and will as well as feeling, a response



characterized by peculiar intensity, and one that issues an appropriate response. *Religion* is a way of life organized around such experiences and convictions concerning ultimate power, seeking mediation of power through myth, ritual, doctrine, and moral behavior, and often seeking direct access to power through unmediated mystical experience. *Religious discourse* is the entire complex of language used for religious experience and in religious practice: the language of myth and prayer, of exhortation and correction.

The New Testament is religious literature in the most obvious sense that it arises from and is directed toward adherents of a religious movement on its way toward becoming a religion (this does not fully happen until the second century CE). Paul does not write as a personal friend to people in Corinth, but as “an apostle of Christ Jesus” to “the church of God in Corinth.” So with all the compositions gathered into this collection; they are the official literature of an organized religious movement.

The New Testament writings are religious also in the sense that the experience of ultimate power, and convictions connected to such experience, and the way of life that should follow from such experiences and convictions form their exclusive subject matter. If a reader misses the profoundly religious character of the New Testament’s discourse—remarkable in its world for its intense and tension-filled concentration—then the reader has missed the character of the New Testament altogether.