

Third Edition

THE NEW TESTAMENT

A Student's Introduction

STEPHEN L. HARRIS



The New Testament

A Student's Introduction

THIRD EDITION

Stephen L. Harris

California State University, Sacramento



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The New Testament

To Geoffrey Edwin and Jason Marc

Preface

Like its predecessors, the third edition of this introductory text is designed for students undertaking their first systematic study of the New Testament. The purpose of this revision is twofold: to familiarize readers with the content and major themes of each book of the New Testament and to acquaint them with the goals and methods of important biblical scholarship.

In general, this text's organization reflects the canonical order of the New Testament's twenty-seven books. After introducing material essential to understanding the historical and religious milieu in which Christianity originated, the text examines each New Testament document on a book-by-book basis, beginning with the four Gospels and their four diverse portraits of Jesus. Because the early Christian community placed the stories of Jesus first in its collection of sacred writings, New Testament editors accorded Jesus' teachings and deeds a centrality and preeminence that exerts an implicit control over the books that follow in the canon, from Acts' picture of the early church, to Paul's letters, to Revelation's vision of Jesus' climactic return. Honoring the New Testament sequence, this text emphasizes the Gospel accounts, adding to them an expanded chapter on modern scholarship's ongoing attempts to distinguish the Jesus of history from later theological interpretations of him.

As a guiding principle, this text allows each New Testament writer to speak for himself. The text

makes no attempt to force the viewpoints of one writer to conform to those of another, nor does it advocate any denominational or sectarian program. In studying the different Gospel presentations of Jesus, students are encouraged to listen to the individual Gospel author's distinctive voice, to recognize that each Evangelist portrays Jesus according to his characteristic theology. Thus, Mark's "hidden" Messiah, revealed only in suffering and death, differs qualitatively from John's portrayal of Jesus as a virtually omniscient embodiment of divine Wisdom. Similarly, Matthew's picture of Jesus as a teacher of Torah righteousness sent "only to the house of Israel" is balanced by Luke's depiction of an Elijah-like prophet who becomes a universal "savior" and a model of service for Gentile (non-Jewish) nations.

Although united in their conviction that Jesus' life and death are crucial to humanity's relationship to God, the various New Testament authors reveal a rich diversity and range of thought in elucidating the theological meaning of the Christ event. Exploring the various canonical writers' personal expression of their faith offers a liberating approach to investigating the New Testament.

Because biblical scholarship continues to illuminate the cultural, social, and religious environment in which Christianity originated, the third edition incorporates fresh material in almost every section. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 have been revised to illustrate more clearly the multiplicity of Jewish beliefs in

Jesus' day, the struggle the Jewish community underwent to preserve its religious integrity in a sometimes hostile world, and the Hellenistic religious ideas that anticipated some Christian doctrines.

To help readers better comprehend the Greco-Roman context of first-century Christianity, the discussion has been expanded to include new material on the Olympian gods; on parallels in traditions about such heroes or deities as Asclepius, Dionysus, and Jesus; and on the growth of the Hellenistic ruler cult, a practice promoting the posthumous deification of historical figures such as Alexander the Great and some Roman emperors. A new section underscores different New Testament writers' contrasting attitudes toward the Roman government, further illustrating the evolving interaction of social-political forces and religious responses.

Introducing students to the variety of scholarly methods used to analyze the Gospels' origin and development, chapter 6 now examines the role that oral tradition played in shaping traditions about Jesus, as well as recent studies of Q (the hypothetical Sayings Gospel), which many scholars believe was the first written collection of Jesus' words. A new chart shows the theoretical stages by which the four canonical Gospels gradually evolved into their present form. Although discussions of the Gospels (chapters 7–10) have been partly revised to incorporate recent scholarship, the author's principle of allowing each individual Gospel author to speak for himself remains in place. In a new box comparing the last words of Jesus ascribed to him by all four Evangelists, it becomes evident that each Gospel writer presents Jesus' final speech as a summation of that writer's distinctive theological understanding of his subject.

Attracting an ever-growing public interest, modern scholars' quest to recover the historical Jesus is covered in chapter 11, which provides a historical overview of the process, including recent critical responses, both pro and con, to the controversial work of the Jesus Seminar. Illustrating some positive results of current research, a new compilation of Jesus' teachings that scholars believe represents his authentic voice has been added.

The discussions of Paul, including his role in Acts, his crucial assumptions about cosmic duality,

and his lasting influence on Christian thought, have been partly revised. Paul's eschatology, which helped motivate both his theology and his missionary activities, is further clarified in an expanded coverage of 1 Thessalonians, the oldest surviving Christian document. There is also fuller coverage of the problem of pseudonymity in the New Testament, with discussions of 2 Thessalonians and Colossians transferred to chapter 17, "Continuing the Pauline Tradition."

To facilitate student learning about significant issues in New Testament study, more than a dozen new boxes have been added containing mini-essays on selected topics, including the thematic organization and structure of the New Testament; the transmission of New Testament manuscripts; the probable contents of Q; Mark's identification of Jesus as "Son of God" (paralleling the "Son of Man" box); additional examples of Matthew's editing of Markan material; Matthew's use of "Hell" (Gehenna); a comparison of the "Great Feast" parable in Matthew, Luke, and Thomas; the "I am" statements of Jesus; and representative passages from noncanonical writings, such as the Gospel of Peter and the Infancy Gospel (Protoevangelium) of James.

In preparing this third edition, every care has been taken to make the book a more useful study resource. A new and simplified time line, revised chronological charts, completely redesigned maps, and a new table of contents for maps and figures will help orient students to historical causes and effects, providing valuable historical perspective. Additional important terms have been set in boldface type and incorporated in the Glossary; bibliographies have been updated with the latest scholarly publications; many of the "Key Theme" summaries have been revised, and the end-of-chapter questions have been largely reorganized and partly rewritten, distinguishing factual "Questions for Review" from "Questions for Discussion and Reflection."

Students wishing to pursue a particular subject may consult a list of major reference works in the "Recommended Readings" appearing at the end of each chapter. Available at most college and university libraries, these references include the work of leading scholars whose research has illuminated the

field of New Testament study. The author's indebtedness to these scholars is gratefully acknowledged by their inclusion in the bibliographies.

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CHAPTER 1

An Overview of the New Testament

Here begins the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Mark 1:1

Key Themes The New Testament consists of twenty-seven Greek documents — Gospels, a church history, letters, and an apocalypse (revelation) — which the early Christian community added to the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament). Although the New Testament books were com-

posed between about 50 and 150 C.E., many were not generally accepted as part of the **canon** (official list of church-approved writings) for several centuries. The first list that corresponds exactly to the present New Testament appeared in 367 C.E.

People read the New Testament for an almost infinite variety of reasons. Some read to satisfy their curiosity about the origins of one of the great world religions. They seek to learn more about the social and historical roots of Christianity, a faith that began in the early days of the Roman Empire and that today commands the allegiance of nearly 2 billion people, approximately a third of the global population. Because Christianity bases its most characteristic beliefs on the New Testament writings, it is to this source that the historian and social scientist must turn for information about the religion's birth and early development.

Most people, however, probably read the New Testament for more personal reasons. Many readers search its pages for answers to some of life's important ethical and religious questions. For hundreds of millions of Christians, the New Testament sets the only acceptable standards of personal belief and behavior (see box 1.1). Readers attempt to discover authoritative counsel on issues that modern science or speculative philosophy cannot resolve, such as the nature of God, the survival of the soul after death, and the ultimate destiny of humankind.

Jesus of Nazareth, the central character of the New Testament, provides many people with the most compelling reason to read the book. As presented by the Gospel writers, he is like no other figure in history. His teachings and pronouncements have an unequaled power and authority. As an itinerant Jewish prophet, healer, and teacher in early first-century Palestine, the historical Jesus — in terms of the larger Greco-Roman world around him — lived a relatively obscure life and died a criminal's death at the hands of Roman executioners. His followers' conviction that he subsequently rose from the grave and appeared to them launched a vital new faith that eventually swept the Roman Empire. In little more than three centuries after Jesus' death, Christianity became Rome's official state religion.

Clearly, the New Testament authors present Jesus as much more than an ordinary man. The Gospel of John pictures him as the human expression of divine wisdom, the **Word** of God made flesh. Jesus' teaching about the eternal world of spirit is thus definitive, for he is depicted as having descended from heaven to earth to reveal ultimate truth. About 300 years after Jesus' crucifixion, Christian leaders assembled at