

THE LITERATURE OF THE
NEW TESTAMENT

NUMBER XV OF THE
RECORDS OF CIVILIZATION
SOURCES AND STUDIES
AUSTIN P. EVANS, *Editor*

THE LITERATURE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

BY

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SOURCES AND STUDIES

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PREFACE

The aim of the present book is to do for the New Testament what Professor Bewer has done so admirably for the Old Testament in a previous volume of this series. Some change in the method of treatment has been inevitable in view of the radical differences between the two parts of our Bible. The Old Testament covers a period of centuries, while the New Testament writings all belong to the same age. The Old Testament is concerned with the life of a nation, and cannot be rightly understood without some knowledge of general history during the millennium before Christ; the New Testament was written for the Christian community, and has little relation to the wider interests of the time. The Old Testament is not only a book of religion but a national literature, which needs to be studied, like any other literature, from an esthetic and historical point of view. In the New Testament the religious purpose is everything. It may indeed be claimed for Paul and the evangelists that in their religious fervor they unconsciously became great writers. The sheer literary excellence of the New Testament has too often been overlooked, and emphasis has been laid on it in the present volume. Yet it is not merely as literature that we read the New Testament. What we seek from it, almost to the exclusion of all else, is a first-hand knowledge of the origin and nature of the Christian religion.

In the following chapters I have tried to explain the New Testament in the light of the modern investigation. I have kept three objects more especially before my mind: (1) to put each of the writings into its historical setting; (2) to examine the critical problems involved in it; (3) to indicate its value for its own time and its permanent religious interest. New Testament criticism is now a highly complicated study, in which no one can be thoroughly at home without years of special

training. Yet it works by methods which have come to be recognized as valid in every field of knowledge, and all intelligent students can appreciate its main conclusions. My effort has been to avoid the technical terms and academical issues and to offer a plain account of the essential difficulties. I have also done my best to keep my own conjectures and prejudices in the background. A book of this kind ought to represent the general findings of modern scholarship, not the private and perhaps fanciful views of any one scholar.

Broadly speaking, I have taken the New Testament books in the order in which they were written, but this scheme has been subject to necessary modifications. In some instances the date of a book is doubtful; in others, the book belongs in substance to an earlier period though in its present form it may be late. The Synoptic Gospels have a clear right to be considered first. Although they were later in composition than the Epistles of Paul, they not only contain the message on which all Christian teaching was based, but are compiled from sources which reach back to the earlier time. The book of Acts, too, cannot be separated from Luke's Gospel, to which it was meant to be the sequel.

Here and there I have quoted New Testament passages of special significance, but have confined myself for the most part to exposition. The New Testament is a short book, and some acquaintance with its contents may fairly be assumed. It is a book, moreover, which cannot be reduced to a brief collection of extracts. There is hardly a verse in it which is not, in some way, important, and even its greater utterances lose half their value when they are isolated from the rest. No book has been so much misunderstood, and the reason chiefly is that it has seldom been read as a whole. It is familiar to everybody, but only as a bundle of texts and chapters which have no relation to one another. The present volume will have served its purpose if it leads to some genuine reading of the New Testament.

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E. F. SCOTT

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CHAPTER I

THE ORIGIN AND NATURE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

1. *Form of the Book*

The name "New Testament" was at first applied to the Christian religion itself. Jeremiah had declared in a sublime passage that the present relation of God to his people would give place in the future to a more inward and personal one.

Behold the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Jacob, not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers, in the days when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. But this shall be the covenant that I will make with them: I will put my law in their inward parts and write it in their hearts, and will be their God and they shall be my people. [Jer. 31:31-33.]

On the ground of this prophecy, Paul describes the Christian message as the New Covenant, and contrasts it with the Old Covenant which was given in the books of Moses (I Cor. 3:4 ff.). The same idea is conveyed in the words attributed to Jesus at the Last Supper, "This is my blood of the Covenant which is shed for many," and is fully developed in the Epistle to the Hebrews. When the primary Christian writings were brought together, they came to be known as "the books of the New Covenant," and this title was shortened into the "New Covenant" or "New Testament." This latter term, by which the book is now universally known, is due to a mistranslation. The Greek word for "covenant" was also the word for a "will" or "testament," and this was the sense in which it was commonly understood when the writings were translated from Greek into Latin. It was assumed that as a man disposes of his possessions by his will, so God had drawn up two "testaments," of which the later had superseded the first.

As we now have it, the New Testament consists of twenty-seven documents, some of considerable length, others confined to a few chapters or only one. Something will be said later as to how these writings came to be set apart as sacred, but at present it will be enough to think of them as the literature of the primitive church, or at least that part of it which was considered most valuable and authoritative. In the age when these documents were composed, the general writing material was papyrus, made by slitting into thin strips the pith of the papyrus stem, and glueing a number of horizontal strips over the same number laid perpendicularly. The result was a sheet about a foot square, and twenty or thirty of these sheets joined together made up a roll, which the reader held on his knees or rested on a table, unwinding it as he read. These mechanical conditions have to be borne in mind when we consider the nature of the New Testament books. The writers worked under severe restrictions of space. A roll that could be conveniently handled had not to exceed a certain bulk, and the authors of the longer books (e. g., Matthew, Luke, Acts) were evidently anxious to compress their material so as to bring it within the necessary limits. It is noticeable that these books, different as they are in character, all run to about the same length — the extreme length of a manageable roll. On the other hand, we have several short writings, each of which contains approximately the same number of words (II and III John, Philemon, Jude). The presumption is that the writers of these letters wished to make the utmost use of a single sheet of papyrus.

Our New Testament is now bound up in one small volume and the illusion is thus created that although it had a number of authors it is a unity, and that the various writings are meant to illuminate and supplement each other. A great deal of misunderstanding on matters of vital importance is due to the mere fact that since the invention of printing and the vogue of thin-paper editions, the New Testament has been before us in a single book. We speak of "New Testament religion," "New Testament teaching," "the authority of the New Testament."

It is forgotten that the writings at first existed separately and that each of them circulated by itself. An important church would no doubt possess a number of the rolls, but perhaps a century elapsed before any church had access to all of them. The process of gathering them together seems to have been slow and uncertain. Apparently the first step was taken when churches associated with Paul tried to form collections of his surviving letters. Rome, Corinth, and Philippi would make copies of the letters addressed to them and send them to each other, so that all might have a complete set of his writings. In course of time the Gospels were similarly brought together, then the letters ascribed to other Apostles than Paul. Thus the main portion of the New Testament is made up of three separate collections, and to these were added three books, which have nothing in common with each other, Acts, Hebrews, and Revelation. As the sequel to Luke's Gospel, the book of Acts had a natural claim. The Epistle to the Hebrews, though it was certainly not written by Paul, found its way, with some difficulty, into the Pauline collection. For a long time Revelation, which could not be brought within any group, was regarded doubtfully, but was added at last as a sort of appendix to the whole volume.

When we turn from the collections to the individual books, we find that they all have certain characteristics in common. (1) They bear some relation, more or less direct, to the practical work of the church. Their authors were not mere scholars or thinkers, bent on the furtherance of knowledge, but active missionaries. The Gospels, for instance, were drawn up for the fuller instruction of new converts. Paul's Epistles were written for the guidance of his churches when he was unable to visit them personally. The book of Revelation and the First Epistle of Peter were meant for the encouragement of Christians under persecution. There is not one of the writings which cannot be linked in this manner with some practical aim. (2) They are *occasional* writings, intended to meet some given situation. It may almost be said that they belong to the class of

pamphlets, rather than literary works, and they cannot be properly understood without some knowledge of the special emergency which called them forth. From this it does not follow that they were mere ephemeral tracts, hurriedly thrown off and meant to be forgotten when they had once served their purpose. Almost all of them bear the marks of careful composition. Although the authors never dreamed that they would have readers after two thousand years, they yet aimed at producing something of real value. Paul was aware that his letters would be read at a full meeting of the church, preserved in its archives, and copied out for circulation in neighboring churches. Luke intended that his Gospel should be a standard work, replacing the defective narratives which had hitherto been in use. The author of Hebrews had obviously studied every phrase in his Epistle; whatever may have been his original purpose, he meant that it should be reread and treasured. (3) These writings, occasional as they were, claimed from the first to carry authority. At a later date the New Testament was accepted as an inspired book, every word of which had an eternal value. This was certainly far from the mind of the authors, who were intent on some particular difficulty which they had met with in their missionary work. Yet at the time when they wrote, the idea of the Spirit was intensely real. It was believed that Christian teachers were not dependent wholly on their own wisdom, but spoke out of a divine illumination. Paul is everywhere conscious that his mind is that of the Spirit, and this is true in some measure of all the writers. The later view of the New Testament as an inspired book was not based wholly on arbitrary dogma. The writers themselves never doubted that they were inspired. They meant their words to carry a divine authority.

2. *Language and Style*

The New Testament is written in Greek, which in the first century was the language generally employed in the Eastern half of the Roman Empire. There were many local dialects, but every race could be counted on to understand the Greek