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# Preface

Given the fact that there are hundreds, if not thousands, of commentaries on the letters of Paul, one might ask, Why another commentary? Most commentaries are theologically or religiously oriented, underscoring features of Paul's letters that might be of use in articulating contemporary denominational Christianity. Others are linguistically or philologically oriented, based on the belief that written documents can be best understood by literary, aesthetic criteria. The distinctive feature of this social-science commentary is that it draws insights from an array of social sciences such as anthropology, social psychology, sociolinguistics, and the like in order to determine the most culturally plausible interpretation of Paul's letters. The concerns considered here derive from first-century Eastern Mediterranean social systems, with the various social structures, cultural values, and understandings of what it meant to be a person that existed at that time and place. Our concern is to discover what Paul was up to within the social setting of his society by examining the typical Eastern Mediterranean social behaviors witnessed in his letters. What social interactions do the letters evidence? What sort of outcomes in his society did Paul expect?

The New Testament text that is authoritative in the churches is, of course, the critical edition of the Greek. There is no perfect version of the Bible, not even the King James Version, as the Revised Standard Version indicates. The New Testament translation printed in this book is the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). We shall at times have occasion to question the accuracy of some renderings, for reasons that will be specified.

This book provides two types of interpretative material. First, by way of clarification, we offer short **Textual Notes** commenting on each letter. The letters are presented in historical sequence, following the common opinion of historically oriented biblical scholars. This sequence diverges from the canonical sequence printed in Bibles. These **Notes** draw the reader's attention to dimensions of the social system expressed in the language of each letter and provide a small-scale social-science commentary that supplements the traditional, more theologically oriented studies available on the authentic Pauline documents.

Second, later in this book we provide a collection of **Reading Scenarios** drawn from anthropological studies of the Mediterranean social system. This is the social system that has been encoded in the language of the letters in ways that are not always obvious to modern readers. Since most of the reading scenarios apply throughout Paul's letters, however, we have duly referenced them in the commentary for the convenience of the reader. Together with the **Textual Notes**, the **Reading Scenarios** offer clues for filling in the unspoken or implicit elements of the writing as a Mediterranean reader would certainly have done. The **Notes** and **Reading Scenarios** help the modern reader develop a considerate posture toward the ancient author and prevent imposing on that author's work interpretations that would be culturally incompatible. An index of reading scenarios is provided at the close of the book. On general introductory questions about the Pauline writings as well as on questions concerning the dating and sequence of these letters, we have followed Dennis C. Duling's *The New Testament: History, Literature, and Social Context* (4th ed.; Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth/Thomson, 2003).

Finally, the illustrations, map, and charts included are intended to serve as a reminder that in reading the New Testament we are indeed in a different world. The scenarios that these and our written comments evoke and that we ask the reader to understand come from a time and place that for all of us remain foreign territory. It is unlike anything we are likely to imagine from our experience in the modern West. It is a world we invite you to enter as a thoughtful and considerate reader.

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