

**Study Guide for *Encounter with the New Testament: An Interdisciplinary Approach*
by Russell Pregeant**

This study guide is designed to help you read *Encounter with the New Testament* more effectively. For each chapter there is a summary that suggests themes to notice and issues to consider and, when appropriate, readings from the New Testament. There are also questions to guide your reading and related bibliography. Other student resources are available on the companion website, found at fortresspress.com/pregeant.

Introduction: Encountering the New Testament

Chapter Summary

It is important to acknowledge our assumptions about basic values and perspectives on life as we confront the perspectives of the New Testament on foundational personal and societal issues. A brief survey of the early Christian movement from the activity of Jesus to Constantine's efforts to give Christianity a favored position in the Roman Empire is followed by comments on the formation of the Christian canon, the translating of the New Testament, and the aims and methods of textual criticism.

Study Questions

1. How would you describe the educational philosophy presented in section 1? State your agreements and/or disagreements with it. Should an academic text be "objective"? Should it be "value-neutral"? Do these two terms mean the same thing?
2. Explain, in a few brief sentences, the steps through which the New Testament came into being. Which writings are the earliest of all the canonical works? When, approximately, did the gospels begin to appear?
3. After reading this Introduction, how would you, answer the question, "Who wrote the New Testament?"
4. Define each of the following: apostle, canon, Gentile, manuscript.
5. Why is it important to pay attention to which translation of the New Testament one uses?
6. What is the task of textual criticism?
7. In which language were the materials in the New Testament written?

For Further Reading

Dungan, David L. *Constantine's Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007.

MacDonald, Lee Martin. "Canon of the New Testament." In *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* 1, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld. Nashville: Abingdon, 2000.

Chapter 1: Some Ways of Reading the Bible

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 explores the diversity of biblical interpretations today and then discusses the varieties of scholarly approaches to the Bible. After describing historical-critical, theological, and ideological approaches, the chapter introduces the student to psychological and literary methods of interpretation and concludes with a description of “the hermeneutical question” and a comment on the contemporary relevance of ancient texts.

Study Questions

1. What advantages and/or disadvantages do you see in the way this book approaches the New Testament?
2. Evaluate the statement, “You can make the Bible say anything you want it to say.” How would a proponent of the historical-critical method respond to it? Reader-response critics? Deconstructionists?
3. Explain why it is or is not important to take into account the historical situations in which the biblical authors wrote.
4. Does the historical approach have any limitations? If so, what are they?
5. Name some types of interpretation based on specific theological or ideological commitments, and give your own preliminary evaluation of such approaches.
6. What advantages and/or disadvantages do you see in interpreting the Bible psychologically?
7. How do literary approaches to the Bible differ from the historical approach?
8. Explain each of these terms: form criticism, redaction criticism, narrative criticism, reader-response criticism, deconstruction, exegesis, hermeneutics.
9. Try to identify the presuppositions, biases, and commitments that you bring to a study of the New Testament. How might each of these help you to become genuinely engaged with the New Testament? In what ways might each make such an engagement difficult? Do you think that you can maintain an appropriate balance of objectivity and subjectivity as you approach this study?

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- Sugirtharajah, R. S. *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Tiffany, Frederick C., and Sharon H., Ringe. *Biblical Interpretation: A Roadmap*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1996.

Chapter 2: Christian Beginnings in Context

Chapter Summary

Chapter 2 describes the two components of the New Testament context that are most fundamental for understanding the early Christian movement, namely, the pre-Christian history of the Jewish people and the religious, political, and philosophical realities of the Greek-speaking world.

The widespread ancient assumption that all reality is spiritually related, bound in a kind of cosmic empathy, was shattered by both Hebrew monotheism and by Greek philosophy. Hebrew monotheism fostered a shift from nature to history and also a heightened moral conscience, while the Greeks fostered a way of thinking that demystified nature and ultimately led to the rise of modern science. In our time postmodernism has introduced relativity into our quest for knowledge.

Ancient Hebrews placed importance on both moral and ritual laws, particularly regulations designed to maintain a state of ritual purity. An important basis for their culture was the concept of covenant, a codified relationship between God and people. This concept was altered by the rise of the monarchy. After the end of the monarchy and the beginning of exile in the sixth century B.C.E., however, the traditions came to be ever more important as a protector of community identity.

Greek culture and language came to dominate the ancient Near East after the conquests of Alexander in the fourth century B.C.E. Greek philosophy—Plato, Aristotle, Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Cynicism—were widely represented.

In the time of Jesus, Jewish communities flourish throughout the Mediterranean world (the Diaspora). In Palestine itself, the active policy of enforced Hellenization by the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes led to the Maccabean War and one century of Jewish independence. At this time apocalyptic writings became prominent, among the first of which was the book of Daniel. Jewish factions prominent in the first century C.E. also arose—Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes.

Noteworthy Jewish scholars of the first century were the Alexandrian philosopher Philo and the historian Josephus.

Roman occupation of Palestine began in 63 B.C.E. Some years later Rome appointed Herod “King of the Jews.” Jewish unrest under Roman occupation resulted in rebellion and the destruction of Judea and the temple in 70 C.E. Jewish survivors of the war preserved their traditions, ultimately codified as the Mishnah and, later, the Talmuds.

During the first century, Christians, having used the Septuagint from the beginning, developed their own writings. Followers of Jesus, originally all Jews, gradually came to include Gentiles and at times came into conflict with Roman practices like the emperor cult. Christians in the Roman Empire faced rivals, for example, the mystery religions, Mithraism, and Stoicism. A special challenge was the rise of Gnosticism, a dualistic and syncretistic movement that emerged among and along with the early Christians.

The earliest Christians shared the Jewish belief in one God while holding to the centrality of Jesus in God’s saving activity. They practiced baptism, communal worship, the Lord’s Supper, and missionary activity.

Study Questions

1. How did Hebrew monotheism and Plato's thought alter the ancient consciousness? How does the modern consciousness differ from the ancient, and how does the postmodern differ from both of these?
2. How did the development of a monarchy change the social structure and religious outlook of ancient Israel? What changes came about as the result of the Babylonian exile?
3. Give a brief description of the Hellenistic "world," with particular emphasis on the religious and philosophical options it offered.
4. Explain each of the following terms: cosmic empathy, demystification, materialism, idealism, dualism, exodus, prophet, Yahweh, covenant, rule of God, Messiah, Messianic Age, Torah, Judah, Samaria, *koine*, syncretism, Logos, Septuagint, eschatology.
5. How was Judaism affected by Hellenism?
6. What is apocalyptic literature, and why are historical apocalypses written? Discuss the benefits and dangers of apocalyptic literature from the point of view of a religious community.
7. Give a brief description of the sociological makeup of Jewish society during the Hellenistic Age.
8. Describe the main characteristics of the Essenes, Pharisees, and Sadducees.
9. What specific Hellenistic ideas can be found in writings of the Jewish Diaspora during the Hellenistic Age?
10. What would it have been like to have been a Palestinian Jew during the Roman occupation? How might your social standing have affected your evaluation of the occupation government?
11. Explain the origin of the terms *New Testament* and *Old Testament*. Many recent scholars and theologians have abandoned the use of the latter in favor of such terms as *Jewish Scriptures*, *Hebrew Bible*, and *First Testament* (replacing *New Testament* with *Second Testament*). Can you state why this might be appropriate in our time?
12. Explain the terms Apocrypha, zealots, midrash, Mishnah, Talmud.
13. Give a brief description of the patron-client relationship in the world of the Roman Empire. How does the concept of debt figure into this relationship?

14. Give a brief description of how the concepts of honor and shame functioned in the ancient Mediterranean culture. Compare that culture's understanding of the human self with our own view.
15. Discuss the status and role of women in the world into which Christianity was born.
16. What are the specific characteristics of Gnosticism, and what are the various theories of its origins?
17. In what ways did Gnosticism reflect the "spirit" of the Hellenistic Age? Compare Gnosticism to Christianity as you understand the latter.
18. Give a brief description of the "internal life" of the Christian community.

For Further Reading

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- Malina, Bruce J. *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. London: SCM, 1983.
- Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Random House, 1979.
- Robinson, James M., ed. *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*. 3rd ed. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988.
- Roetzel, Calvin J. *The World that Shaped the New Testament*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1985.
- Saldarini, Anthony J. *Pharisees Scribes and Sadducees: A Sociological Approach*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.
- Vermes, Geza. *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*. 2nd ed. Hammondsworth, England: Penguin, 1975.

Chapter 3: The Gospels, Jesus, and the Earliest Tradition

Read Matthew 5:39-46; 13:44-45; Mark 1:14-15; 3:21-27; 7:15; 10:25; 1:17; Luke 6:20-21; 10:29-37; 13:20-21; 14:16-24; 15:11-32; 17:20-21.

Chapter Summary

What kind of materials are the Gospels, and how did they come to be? What is the relationship between the Gospels and the historical person of Jesus?

The titles of the Gospels were added after they were widely accepted as authoritative. Moreover, an analysis of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) shows that they have a literary relationship, the most widely held explanation being that Matthew and Luke both used Mark and a second written source, “Q,” in writing their Gospels. This suggests that, because according to tradition Mark was a disciple of Peter and not an eyewitness of Jesus’ ministry, it is probable that none of the four Gospels was written by an eyewitness.

We can identify the earliest strata of the Gospel tradition by applying several criteria—environmental appropriateness, distinctiveness, embarrassment, coherence, and multiple attestation—and thus discover both sayings and deeds of the historical Jesus.

Jesus’ parables, some as metaphors or similes and others as allegories, often reflect the central theme of his preaching, the “rule of God.” God’s rule comes as a reversal of fortune, as grace, as gift, and as justice. Jesus’ non-parabolic sayings likewise deal with reversal and hyperbole, but also inculcate love of God and of neighbor and—surprisingly—love of enemy.

Among Jesus’ deeds, which likewise reflect the theme of God’s rule, are healings and exorcisms, his association with “marginalized” people, and his maintenance of a group of disciples. Some of his deeds, however, brought him into conflict with Jewish interpreters of their law. In the end, the priestly aristocracy handed him over to the Romans, who executed him as a potential threat to the stability of their occupation.

Did Jesus proclaim the rule of God as present or future or both? Was it individual or communal? Did he predict the end of history as we know it?

Jesus often used the familiar Aramaic term *abba* as an address of God. But his self-designation, Son of man, has left readers puzzled.

Study Questions

1. In what sense did the early Church understand the four gospels as of “apostolic” origin?
2. Explain the terms “Synoptic Gospels” and “Synoptic problem.”
3. Explain the “two-document” hypothesis.

4. What criteria do scholars use in determining the authentic teachings of Jesus (or the earliest level of the Jesus-tradition)?
5. How do the parables Jesus told differ from allegories?
6. What do the parables of The Treasure and The Pearl teach about the rule of God?
7. Illustrate each of the following theses by references to specific parables: reversal, demand, freedom, grace. In what sense are the parables “scandalous”?
8. What types of deeds seem to belong to the earliest level of the Jesus-tradition? How do these deeds complement Jesus’ teachings?
9. How would you respond to someone who says, “The Jews crucified Jesus”?
10. Does the earliest tradition present the rule of God as present or as future? As individual or as communal? Does it present that rule as the “end of the world”?
11. Show how the formula “radical grace/radical demand” does or does not adequately summarize the content of Jesus’ ministry.

For Further Reading

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- Schweitzer, Albert. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*. 3rd ed., Trans. W. Montgomery. London, 1954.
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- Theissen, Gerd, and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998.
- Vermes, Geza. *Jesus the Jew: A Historian’s Reading of the Gospels*. New York: Macmillan, 1973.
- Via, Dan Otto. *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967.
- Wright, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997.

Chapter 4: The Resurrection Faith and the Expanded Tradition and Epilogue to Part I

Read Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 9:2-8; 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-11, 15-16, 37-43; John 1:1-14; 20:1-18, 27; Acts 6; Romans 3:25; 1 Corinthians 15:3-8

Chapter Summary

The Jesus movement evolved in significant ways as it moved from Jerusalem to the Diaspora and then to the Gentile world.

Belief in the resurrection of Jesus, attested by stories of his appearances to his followers and also by stories of the empty tomb, constituted something new in the Jesus movement. This conviction involved the idea that eschatological events had been inaugurated; the new age would arrive in two stages, Jesus' exaltation to heaven and his future return, which would signal the general resurrection and the final judgment.

The resurrection faith involved a developing Christology with new titles, such as *Mar*, *Christos*, Son of God, Logos. It involved also a reinterpretation of Jesus' death as a redemptive event, a sacrifice or ransom for sin.

The Jesus tradition expanded in Gnostic directions, as with the Gospel of Thomas, but also by additions to the Synoptic tradition, e.g., legal materials, prophetic statements, apocalyptic materials, stories of the glorification of the earthly Jesus, controversy narratives, and legends. The classic Christian view of Jesus was formulated at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E., which held that Jesus was of the same "substance" (or "being") as God and that he was of two natures, human and divine.

The question remains whether the original Jesus movement consisted of the poor themselves or a socially mixed group that stood in solidarity with the poor. The movement in any case exemplified social egalitarianism, especially when compared with its wider context.

Study Questions

1. Through what stages of development, defined by geography and culture, did the early Christian tradition go?
2. What are the different kinds of resurrection traditions found in the New Testament? What seems to be the origin of the resurrection faith?
3. What evidence is there that women were among the first, or even perhaps the very first, to proclaim the resurrection?
4. What was the meaning of the proclamation that God had raised Jesus from the dead?
5. How did the early Christians come to think of Jesus as "God incarnate"?

6. What are the various theories as to when and how Christians began to think of Jesus' death as having atoning, redeeming, or saving power?
7. What is the "other direction" of the development of the Jesus-tradition that is represented in the Gospel of Thomas?
8. In what ways was the Jesus-tradition expanded in the post-resurrection community?
9. In what ways did the Jesus-movement depart from existing social norms?
10. What issues are at stake between Theissen and his critics?

For Further Reading

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- Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad, 1983.
- Theissen, Gerd. *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*. Trans. John Bowden. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978.
- Wright, N. T., *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.

Prologue to Part II

Chapter Summary

This section indicates the way the author will deal with the four Gospels and Acts, beginning with questions of authorship, date, and place of composition. It continues with a description of the method to be used, namely reader-response criticism and its central roles of “narrator” and “reader.” Finally the reason for calling four New Testament “Gospels” is given.

Study Questions

1. Explain the terms *narrator* and *reader* as used in reader-response criticism.
2. Explain the difference between reader-response criticism and narrative criticism.
3. Are the Gospels written from an “objective” point of view? Should they be?

For Further Reading

Burridge, Richard A. *What are the Gospels: A Comparison with the Graeco-Roman Biography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Chapter 5: Mark

Read the Gospel of Mark.

Chapter Summary

Tradition assigns the writing of this Gospel to a certain John Mark, a disciple of Peter, around 70 C.E. in Rome, although each of these details is disputed by some.

The Gospel begins with John the Baptizer and Jesus' baptism and temptations. Jesus then begins his ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing, arousing opposition from the religious authorities, from demons (who recognize his true identity), and even from his own family. Jesus nonetheless continues to perform exorcisms and to teach his disciples, both in parables and in sayings and in astounding deeds. He encounters opposition from the Pharisees with respect to ritual aspects of the law.

Jesus rebukes Peter when he confesses that Jesus is the Messiah and commands the disciples to be silent. His glory is revealed to the disciples and then Jesus announces to his disciples that he is going to Jerusalem, there to suffer, die, and rise again. After passing through Jericho, he enters Jerusalem triumphantly and begins to teach in the temple, creating more conflict. On the Mount of Olives he predicts the destruction of the temple and the events leading to the end.

After eating the Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus is arrested and faces charges by the religious authorities, who hand him over to Pilate, who had him crucified. The portrait of Jesus arrested and executed stands in stark contrast to the powerful wonder-worker of the early chapters. The Gospel ends with startling abruptness as several women discover Jesus' tomb empty and say nothing to anyone.

The Gospel as a whole, even with its male-centeredness, offers several examples of an egalitarian society, with its respect for women and children, its challenge to Roman power, and its subversive aspects. Jesus' ministry and fate are expressed with a curious mixture of determinism and secrecy—all programmed in the mind of God.

Study Questions

1. How does the narrator try to convince the reader of Jesus' identity in Mark 1– 5? Describe Jesus' ministry in these chapters. What is the “strange tension” that develops as he carries out this ministry?
2. What is the meaning of the “strong man” story in 3:21-30?
3. Why, according to Mark, does Jesus tell parables?
4. Does Jesus accept Peter's profession of faith in Mark 8? Explain your answer.
5. What distinctive themes hold the section 8:27—10:45 together? What is the specific role and meaning of the two stories of healing the blind?

6. What questions does Mark 13 answer, and what effects might it have on the reader?
7. Where does the ending of Mark leave the reader? Explain why you do or do not think this ending is effective.
8. Evaluate the approaches to Mark discussed in the sections “Mark and Liberation” and “Free Will, Determinism, and the Power of God.”

For Further Reading

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- Robbins, Vernon K. *Jesus the Teacher: A Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation of Mark*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.
- Tolbert, Mary Ann. *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989.

Chapter 6: Matthew

Read the Gospel of Matthew.

Chapter Summary

Second-century tradition attributes the writing of the Gospel of Matthew to a tax collector among Jesus' disciples about 80–90 C.E., probably in Antioch of Syria.

Matthew arranges most of Jesus' teachings into five thematic discourses, the most celebrated of which is the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5–7, where Jesus inculcates a radical interpretation of God's will, a "higher righteousness" that centers on the demand of love. The author has a special interest in Jewish tradition and law but considers Jesus as the definitive interpreter of the Jewish law. There is also a special interest in matters of church life.

Special Matthew themes emerge in the introductory section: Jesus' Jewish heritage, his significance for Gentiles, the "fulfillment" of Jewish Scripture, and the proclamation of the rule of heaven (kingdom of God).

Jesus speaks of conflict between the rule of heaven and that of Satan, but he promises that his "church" will survive, even through inner tensions. Growing conflict with the "scribes and Pharisees" leads Jesus to pronounce divine judgment on that generation (chapter 23).

Several distinctive themes appear in Matthew's account of events leading to Jesus' death: Jesus' oblique response to the high priest's question of his messiahship, Judas's suicide, the tendency to absolve Pilate of responsibility for Jesus' death, several prodigies at the time of the crucifixion, and others.

Throughout the Gospel, Matthew exhibits interest in the relation of church and synagogue, in the central role of Peter, in the uniqueness of the person of Jesus, and in the universal mission of the disciples.

Study Questions

1. What specific contributions does each of the following make to the reader's understanding of Jesus, prior to the beginning of his ministry: the genealogy (1:2-17); the birth (1:18-25); the baptism (3:13-17)?
2. Identify as many elements as you can in 1:1—4:16 that stress the Jewish nature of the story being told. Now identify the passages that stress Gentiles. How would you explain the meaning of this dual emphasis?
3. How would you summarize Jesus' teaching in chapters 5–7 (the Sermon on the Mount)? Why do you think scholars refer to Jesus' demands as constituting a "higher righteousness"?

4. What does the discourse in chapter 10 reveal about the role of the disciples? Which aspects of the discourse apply most directly to the post-resurrection church?
5. What contrasting views of Jesus are found in 13:52—16:20? What is the significance of 16:13-20?
6. What is the purpose of Jesus' teaching of the disciples in 16:1—18:35?
7. How does the parable (allegory) beginning at 20:1 draw together all the material from 19:1?
8. Give allegorical interpretations of the parables in chapters 21–22. How are they related to the conflicts in which Jesus has been involved?
9. What is the function of chapters 24–25?
10. What is the significance, for the reader, of the behavior of the disciples as Jesus is arrested, tried, and executed?
11. In what ways does 28:16-20 draw together the mes from the Gospel as a whole?
12. Compare the treatment of the resurrection in Matthew to that in Mark.
13. Looking back over the entire Gospel, compare Matthew's over-all treatment of the disciples to Mark's.
14. Imagine that two of your friends, one of whom is Christian and one of whom is Jewish, are discussing the question of whether the New Testament is anti-Judaic, or possibly anti-Semitic? What would you contribute to the discussion?

For Further Reading

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Chapter 7: Luke–Acts

Read the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

Chapter Summary

Several facts demonstrate the common authorship of Luke and Acts, although there is some doubt that early tradition is correct in assigning these works to Luke, “the beloved physician,” companion of Paul.

Luke 1:1-4 suggests that the author was not an eyewitness of the events of Jesus’ ministry. The opening chapters echo the style of the Septuagint and include several striking poems and references to the fulfillment of ancient promises, the Spirit, forgiveness of sins, God’s concern for the poor and the prominence of women.

Jesus in his ministry identifies himself as a prophet in his work of healing and teaching. Much unique material in Luke is included in the section describing Jesus’ journey from Galilee to Jerusalem (9:51—19:27), including many of his best-known parables. Luke’s unique sayings of Jesus from the cross also reflect the themes of forgiveness and promise.

Acts begins where Luke leaves off—with the “ascension” and the commission of the disciples to begin a worldwide mission. This mission begins in earnest at Pentecost, when Peter speaks of repentance and the offer of forgiveness. Tensions between “Hebrew” and “Hellenists” among the early believers leads to the speech of Stephen and his death by stoning. Acts then introduces Paul, whose missionary journeys spread the new faith into Greek areas and, ultimately, to Rome itself. Important early leaders are introduced, including Priscilla and Aquila and Apollos.

The book of Acts balances the work of Peter (the Jerusalem church) and Paul (missionary to the Gentiles). Both books exhibit a periodization of history, a concern for social justice, and an egalitarian perspective with respect to race and gender.

Study Questions

1. In what ways does Luke 1–2 prepare the reader to understand the role of Jesus? In what ways does this material encourage the reader to connect Jesus to the history of Israel? In what ways does it point beyond historical Israel?
2. How does Jesus define his mission in the story at 4:16-30? What links can you find between his definition and the themes in Luke 1-2?
3. How does the narrator play up the theme of decision regarding Jesus in 9:51–13:30?
4. Identify materials in 13:31–19:27 that seem particularly relevant for life in the post-resurrection community. At what points does the narrator focus on economic concerns? At what earlier points were such concerns emphasized?

5. In what ways does Jesus, as his death grows imminent, point beyond the disciples' coming failure to their positive role in the post-resurrection community?
6. How do Jesus' words on the cross reprise themes already familiar to the reader?
7. How does the ending of Luke parallel its beginning? Describe the role of the disciples as Jesus defines it in Luke 24.
8. What links can you find between Acts 1 and Luke 24?
9. What is the significance of the dramatic event described in Acts 2?
10. What does the reader learn from the speeches of Peter and Stephen in the early chapters of Acts?
11. What is the significance of the account of Peter's encounter with Cornelius?
12. What is the issue at the "conference" described in Acts 15, and how is it resolved?
13. What does the reader learn from Paul's speech in Athens at Acts 17?
14. How do Jews respond to Paul's preaching? How do Gentiles respond? How does the narrator want the reader to evaluate the progress of the mission?
15. Give a brief description of how Paul eventually comes to Rome.
16. What is the significance of Paul's final speech to the Jewish elders in Rome?
17. Identify the themes that you think are most prominent in Luke-Acts.
19. Was the author a historian? Explain your answer.
20. Assess the various attempts to describe the author's purposes in writing.
21. What seems to be the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection in Luke-Acts?
22. Describe the roles played by women in Luke-Acts.

For Further Reading

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Chapter 8: John

Read the Gospel of John.

Chapter Summary

The second-century tradition that John, son of Zebedee, wrote this Gospel is unlikely, given the evidence for the lateness of its writing (around the end of the first century). The date is made more uncertain by the probability that this Gospel went through more than one edition and also by the sectarian nature of the contents.

The author announces a “high Christology” in verse 1: Jesus is the incarnate Logos (word) of God. Astoundingly, this preexistent Logos was made flesh (1:14). As such, Jesus in John is in charge of his actions and also of those who oppose him. And his death, far from one of ignominy and humiliating and suffering, is a victory over the forces of evil and an exaltation to the presence of the Father.

Jesus’ public actions in John are called “signs,” indicating that they have symbolic—and often ironic—meaning. Thus, the multiplication of loaves is symbolic of Jesus as the bread of life (chapter 6). Jesus often introduces his discourses and sayings with the phrase “I am,” an indication of his divine origin and of his giving true life to the believers. Both actions and discourses reflect a postresurrection perspective.

Heated controversy between Jesus and “the Jews who had believed in him” (8:31-59) involves some of the most divisive comments in the history of Jewish-Christian relations.

The question of the relation of history and theology is thus acute in the interpretation of this Gospel. It seems to have its origin in a sectarian group that was separate from more mainline churches.

Study Questions

1. What does the narrator tell the reader about Jesus’ identity in John 1–4?
2. How do Jesus’ “signs” contribute to the reader’s understanding?
3. List ways in which the narrator “educates” the reader in how to read this Gospel.
4. What are the most prominent examples of symbolic language in chapters 5–12?
5. Describe Jesus’ interactions with the Jewish people in chapters 5-12. How is Jesus’ relationship to God understood in these chapters?
6. What theological points does the raising of Lazarus make, and how does this story contribute to the plot?
7. Give examples of the use of irony in chapters 1–12.

8. What is the significance of Jesus' symbolic action in 13:1-30?
9. What is the primary content of Jesus' farewell discourses and prayer for the church?
10. What can you tell from this Gospel about the identity of the "beloved disciple"? What does his significance seem to be?
11. What is the significance of Mary Magdalene's post-resurrection encounter with Jesus? What is the significance of Thomas's encounter with Jesus?
12. What themes are developed in chapter 21?
13. Explain why some scholars doubt that we have John in its original form.
14. Explain how Bultmann employs this Gospel in his demythologizing project, and give your own evaluation of his use of specific passages.
15. How does the Gospel of John contribute to Jung's interpretation of the Self?
16. Explain how some theologians find John 1 useful in reflecting on ecological themes.

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Epilogue to Part II

Chapter Summary

The four Gospels of the New Testament differ in content and theology. But the many Gospels that were not included in the canon differ even more starkly from those in the New Testament. Many such Gospels are Gnostic in tendency, centering on esoteric teaching supposedly given by Jesus either before or after his resurrection. Other Gospels center on events between Jesus' birth and his baptism, including miracles attributed to Jesus as a child or youth. In yet other Gospels, women are equally or more prominent than the male disciples. These books therefore raised important questions of interpretation: What should the church consider to be authoritative sources of doctrine and practice?

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Prologue to Part III

Read Romans 11:1; 15:22-29; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8; 2 Corinthians 11:22; Galatians 1–2; Philippians 3:5-6.

Chapter Summary

Thirteen letters in the New Testament are attributed to Paul. Of these, the seven undisputedly authentic letters take precedence as a source for Paul's life and thought over the picture of Paul in the book of Acts. Acts has a tendency to homogenize Paul and the Jerusalem church.

Paul gives several details about his background and life. He was a practicing Pharisee thoroughly familiar with the Jewish Scriptures. In response to an appearance of Jesus, Paul became a leading evangelist for the new faith, working tirelessly in Syria, Asia Minor, and Greece. The book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome, under house arrest and awaiting his trial.

Paul's letters were written to groups of his converts (except that Philemon is addressed to an individual), and they follow the pattern of typical letters of the time, including exhortations for appropriate behavior. Traditional elements in his letters reveal that he stood within a preexisting Gentile mission.

Some chronologies of Paul's career are based on the book of Acts, while others take their point of departure from the letters. By all accounts, Paul's "conversion" took place early in the Christian movement, sometime between 30 and 35 C.E.

Study Questions

1. Assess the historical value of the various sources for the life and work of Paul.
2. Why is it not appropriate to speak of Paul as the "second founder" of Christianity?
3. Assess the function and style of Paul's letters. Which letters are generally accepted as written by Paul?
4. What issues are involved in studying the chronology of Paul?

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Chapter 9: Philemon, 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, and Galatians

Read Philemon, 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, and Galatians.

Chapter Summary

Paul wrote to Philemon, who lived in Colossae in Asia Minor, to urge him to receive back his slave Onesimus as a free man, a brother in Christ.

Paul, hearing that his converts in Thessalonica wondered what would happen at the return of Christ to those who had already died, wrote to assure them that the dead in Christ would rise first, then to join the believers who had not died. He urges them to live quietly and productively.

Philippians, another “prison letter,” exhibits breaks in the sequence of thought, leading some to think that it is a composite writing. He encourages humility but warns against “evil workers” who propose circumcision, asserting that his former blamelessness under the law was of no worth. Of special interest in this letter is the “Christ hymn” of 2:6-11.

Galatians is a heated letter in which Paul vehemently defends his preaching of justification apart from the law—apart from circumcision. His opponents—either Jewish Christians or a kind of Gnostic group—asserted that circumcision was required of male Christians. His argument includes an autobiographical section that is important in reconstructing his chronology and self-image.

These four letters illuminate Paul’s activity as apostle and pastor.

Study Questions

1. Reconstruct the “story” behind Philemon.
2. Explain the “socio-literary method” Petersen employs in studying Philemon. What does Petersen learn about the letter through this method?
3. Are Paul’s ideas on slavery adequate for our own time in history?
4. Reconstruct the “story” behind 1 Thessalonians. What are the main theological themes Paul stresses in this letter?
5. Contrast the views of Malherbe and Jewett on the reason for Paul’s writing 1 Thessalonians.
6. Reconstruct the “story” behind Philippians.
7. Why do some scholars think Philippians might be a composite of fragments?
8. Characterize Paul’s relationship to the church at Philippi.

9. Reconstruct the “story” behind Galatians.
10. Characterize the understanding of Paul’s relationship to the leadership of the Jerusalem church expressed in Galatians. From what source does Paul claim to have received the message he preached?
11. What issue was at stake in Paul’s confrontation with Peter at Antioch?
12. Explain Paul’s understanding of the Jewish law in Galatians.
13. What role does the Spirit play in Christian life, according to Galatians?
14. What are the competing views of the meaning of the term *stoicheia*?
15. What are the competing views of the identity of Paul’s opponents in Galatia?

For Further Reading

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Chapter 10: 1 and 2 Corinthians

Read 1 and 2 Corinthians.

Chapter Summary

Although 2 Corinthians appears to be a composite of more than one letter, the material in both 1 and 2 Corinthians was written by Paul in the first half of the 50s C.E.

First Corinthians was occasioned by two letters from Corinth, one from “Chloe’s people” and another that asked Paul’s opinions on a number of matters. The first letter reported serious divisions in the congregation, especially between adherents of Paul and others of Apollos. Paul says that Christ cannot be divided. He then deplors a case of sexual misconduct and another involved civil lawsuits.

The other letter deals with questions of marriage, sex, and divorce, followed by the issue of eating food offered to idols, the behavior of women in worship, conduct during the Lord’s Supper, and spiritual gifts, the greatest of which is love. The final question deals with the relation of the resurrection of Jesus and the future resurrection of the dead.

The Christians at Corinth generally belonged to the lower classes, although there were some affluent members. Class conflict—and possibly gender conflict—was becoming an issue in the congregation.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul’s authority is challenged, possibly as a result of his gathering of an offering of money for the Jerusalem church. He vigorously defends his credentials as an apostle and his integrity as an evangelist.

Study Questions

1. Reconstruct the “story” behind 1 Corinthians.
2. What issues are at stake between Paul and his opponents in 1 Corinthians?
3. Summarize Paul’s views, as expressed in 1 Corinthians, on sex, marriage and divorce, eating meat offered to idols, and participation in “pagan” worship.
4. Characterize Paul’s understanding of the nature of Christian community as expressed in 1 Corinthians 12.
5. What is Paul’s understanding of spiritual “gifts” in 1 Corinthians 13–14?
6. What does 1 Corinthians 15 reveal about Paul’s eschatological views?
7. What use does Theissen make, in his sociological analysis of 1 Corinthians, of the categories of “the strong” and “the weak”?

8. Compare Wire's views on the controversy in 1 Corinthians to those of Theissen.
9. Why do many scholars think 2 Corinthians is composed of two or more separate letters?
10. What is problematic about 6:14—7:1, and what are the different views about its origin?
11. Reconstruct the "story" behind 2 Corinthians.
12. How does Paul meet the challenge regarding letters of recommendation in 2 Corinthians?
13. What, according to Paul, is the meaning of the sufferings he endures?
14. What strategy does Paul adopt in making his argument in 2 Corinthians 10–13? Give your own evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of such a strategy.
15. Why do many scholars think Paul is arguing against a different set of opponents in 2 Corinthians than he is in 1 Corinthians?

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Chapter 11: Romans

Read Romans.

Chapter Summary

Paul wrote to the Roman Christians in the hope that he might visit there and that they would support him in his plans to travel to Spain. In the letter he deals with issues of concern to them, for example, Jewish-Christian relations.

After greetings (1:1-15) and the announcement of his theme of the “righteousness of God” (1:16-17), Paul tries to show that all humans are enmeshed in sin (1:18—3:20). But, he insists, the “righteousness of God” is now revealed in the saving event of Jesus’ death, a “sacrifice of atonement” freely granted to those who believe (3:21—4:25). The results are peace, hope, union with Christ through baptism, and new life in the Spirit that brings freedom from sin and the law (chapters 5–8).

But why have most Jews of his time not accepted this new life in Christ? Paul wrestles with this in chapters 9–11, arguing that there has always been a faithful remnant and that God would ultimately remain true to his promises to Israel.

Paul comments on issues of Christian living in Romans 12–15, including the attitude toward the Roman Empire, the exercise of mutual love, and common sense when dealing with contentious issues.

Finally, in Romans 16 he greets several individuals at Rome, a section that some consider a separate letter.

Study Questions

1. Reconstruct the “story” behind Romans. On what points do scholars disagree in the reconstruction of this story?
2. Why do many scholars think that chapter 16, although written by Paul, might not have been part of his original letter to Rome?
3. How, according to Romans 1–8, are human beings enabled to stand justified before God? What are the steps in his argument on this matter? What role is played by his statement at 1:15 that the demands of the law are written on Gentiles’ hearts?
4. What does Paul seem to mean by the phrase “righteousness of God”?
5. What does Christian baptism mean for Paul, and what role does his discussion of it in chapter 6 play in his argument?
6. How does Paul answer, in Romans 7, the hypothetical charge that because the law increases sin it is itself sinful?

7. What, according to Romans 1–8, are the characteristics of the Christian life?
8. What role, according to Romans 9–11, does Israel play in God’s plan for salvation? Explain why you do or do not find Paul’s argument logical and/or meaningful at this point.
9. What is the specific meaning of Paul’s metaphor of the body in Romans 12?
10. What advice does Paul give Christians in terms of their relationship to the Roman Empire?

For Further Reading

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Chapter 12: Perspectives on Paul

Read Romans 1:24-27; 3:21-31; 8:1-39; 13:1-7; 16:1-5; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; 7:21, 23; 11:2-26; 14:33-36; 15:50; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 3:28; 6:15; Philippians 4:3.

Chapter Summary

Protestants have generally viewed *dikaiosyne* (“righteousness” or “justification”) in Paul’s letters as the central image of salvation and interpreted it in a juridical way, that is, as signifying a legal status, that of acquittal before God. Catholics have tended to view the term as signifying that the believer actually becomes morally righteous. Others have found participation in Christ to be the central Pauline theme. In any case faith (Greek *pistis*) is the prime human stance.

Salvation in Paul’s thought involves “life according to the Spirit,” a life free from sin, death, and the law that continues into the next age, when humans and the cosmos itself will be redeemed.

Attempts to show Paul’s relevance for today include Rudolf Bultmann’s existential interpretation and various Freudian approaches.

Paul’s views of the status and role of women and also of same-sex relations have produced volumes of responses from a spectrum of perspectives, as has his opinions on slavery and Christian attitudes to secular authorities.

Study Questions

1. Describe the roles played in Paul’s thought by each of the following: Spirit, spirit/flesh, body, faith/fullness, grace, *dikaiosyne*, freedom, love, present age/age to come, hope, resurrection, salvation, the death of Christ/the cross. Then discuss the relationship between Paul’s “juridical” language and his “participationist” language.
2. Assess the potential of Bultmann’s existentialist interpretation and Scroggs’s Freudian interpretation for showing the relevance of Paul’s thought today.
3. Give and defend your own views as to whether and how Paul’s views on the status and role of women, same-sex relations, and the governing authorities have relevance for the contemporary discussion of these issues.

For Further Reading

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Chapter 13: The Disputed Letters: 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus

Read 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus.

Chapter Summary

The Pauline authorship of six letters in the Pauline corpus is widely disputed.

Second Thessalonians develops a sequence of end-events that is at odds with 1 Thessalonians' caution that the "day of the Lord" will come without warning. According to 2 Thessalonians, the end will not come before "the rebellion" and the revelation of the "lawless one," whose arrival was being restrained by an unidentified force.

Colossians has a cosmic thrust that is different from the undisputed letters. This letter also consistently presents salvation as already having taken place, and includes a Christ hymn of cosmic dimensions. And "faith" now refers to a body of teaching more than a personal stance. And the interest in a "household code" of behavior reflects a more developed stage than in earlier letters.

Ephesians includes a large number of words that do not occur in the undisputed letters. References to "the holy apostles and prophets" is rather un-Pauline. Moreover, the overlap in content with Colossians suggests a literary dependence. The main theme in Ephesians seems to be the unity of church, and the inclusion of the Gentiles in it is called a great "mystery."

The terminology of the Pastorals seems to be post-Pauline. Some words, like *eusebia* ("godliness" or "piety") occur frequently but not at all in the undisputed letters. Other terms, like "faith" and "bishop" occur with different meanings. The Pastorals combat false teachings, provide instructions on worship, and offer exhortations on moral living.

When MacDonald applies her three stages in the development of an institution—community building, community stabilizing, and community protecting—to the Pauline corpus, she assigns Paul to the first stage, Colossians and Ephesians to the second, and the Pastorals to the third.

Study Questions

1. Summarize the arguments against Pauline authorship of each of the letters treated in this chapter.
2. What point does 2 Thessalonians make regarding eschatology?
3. What seems to be the specific nature of the Colossian "heresy," and how does the author argue against it?
4. What, according to Ephesians, is the role of the church in God's plan? How are the readers expected to express their loyalty to the church?

5. Explain how Wink intends his “postmodern” interpretation to enable contemporary readers to get hold of the “language of power.”
6. How does the author of the pastorals make use of the figure of Paul himself in 2 Timothy as a way of engaging the reader?
7. Characterize the “false teaching” combated in 1 Timothy.
8. In what ways does the author of the pastorals present the church as an “orderly household”?
9. What attitude toward the world outside the church is expressed in the pastorals? How do the “household codes” express this attitude?

For Further Reading

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Epilogue to Part III

Chapter Summary

The reference to Paul's letters in 2 Peter 3:15-16 indicates that a collection of Paul's letters existed before the middle of the second century. The earliest collection we know of is that of Marcion, whose theology had some affinities with Gnosticism and whose canon consisted of a shortened version of Luke and a collection of ten letters of Paul.

Paul's letters were known by certain groups of Gnostics, for example, the followers of Valentinus, a prominent theologian. Like all Gnostics, Valentinus taught a dualism of this world and "the Fullness," the spiritual light-world, with intermediaries, "aeons," one of whom was Jesus, who united with another aeon, the Christ. Paul's contrasts of law and grace and of spiritual and fleshly were taken up in Gnostic anthropology.

The Pastorals also are a part of Paul's legacy, bringing his apostolic authority to serve "sound teaching" and a church structure to maintain it. Moreover, popular legends like *The Acts of Paul* preserved Paul's heroic memory.

Study Questions

1. Compare and contrast the "Paul of legend" to the Gnostic Paul, the Paul of the pastoral letters, and the Paul who wrote the seven undisputed letters. State which aspects of these various "Pauls" you personally find acceptable or unacceptable, interesting or uninteresting, and explain why.
2. Give your own arguments as to whether the "mainstream" church was justified in rejecting Gnostic teachings.
3. It has been argued that many Gnostic teachings actually survived within the "mainstream" church. Give your own opinions regarding this claim.

For Further Reading

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Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Paul*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975.

Prologue to Part IV

Chapter Summary

The canonicity of several of the “General Letters” of the New Testament was disputed, while other writings were considered scripture by some church leaders. Among these were the following:

First Clement was sent from the church at Rome to the church at Corinth, where a dissident group had replaced the leadership. The letter advises restoring the former leaders.

The Didache combines a treatise on the “two ways,” a moral catechism, with a manual of church order that gives advice on baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and eschatology.

The Letter of Barnabas is devoted to Christian allegorical interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures.

The Shepherd of Hermas recounts three sets of visions of Hermas, a freed slave. It includes a call to repentance between a coming persecution and/or the end of the age.

The Apocalypse of Peter describes the rewards and punishments in heaven and hell.

Study Questions

1. Based on the treatments of the noncanonical works in this prologue, try to formulate arguments both for their inclusion and for their exclusion. What aspects of each do you think you would value? What aspects might you not value? Why?
2. State why you agree or disagree with the author’s statement that the approach to the Jewish Scriptures in the Letter of Barnabas is not that different from the approach employed in other New Testament writings.
3. Did the early Christians do the right thing in settling on a definite canon? Give arguments on both sides of the question.

For Further Reading

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Chapter 14: The General Letters: Hebrews, James, 1–2 Peter, Jude, 1–3 John

Read Hebrews, James, 1–2 Peter, Jude, 1–3 John.

Chapter Summary

The author of Hebrews, an anonymous document, is unknown, as are the place and date of writing. It is a written sermon with an epistolary ending. The author insists on the finality of Christ as high priest in the order of Melchizedek, an obscure figure in Genesis 14. (According to tradition, Jesus was from the tribe of Judah, not the priestly tribe of Levi.) Hebrews, unlike Paul, interprets the work of Jesus from the perspective of the cultic institutions of Judaism—the priesthood, the temple, the sacrificial system.

The Letter of James consists of exhortations to moral behavior, with special concern for the poor and helpless. Its emphasis on works is often seen as an antithesis to Paul's emphasis on faith.

First Peter is written to “the exiles of the Dispersion.” It describes the church as “a royal priesthood and a holy nation” and encourages faithfulness during persecution. References to Christ preaching to “the spirits in prison” has generated much comment.

Second Peter appears to have made use of Jude. Both documents opposed false teachings and call for doctrinal purity, although there is little theology in either.

The letters of John are related in style, dualistic assumptions, and vocabulary to that of the Gospel of John. First John is anonymous, while 2 and 3 John purport to be written by “the elder,” the identity of whom is unknown. The central theme of these letters is the command to practice love, especially among the believers. Only in these letters does the term “antichrist” occur in the New Testament.

Study Questions

1. What is it possible to say about the authorship and original audience of Hebrews?
2. What problem does the author of Hebrews seem to be addressing?
3. What is distinctive about the way Jesus is presented in Hebrews?
4. What is the role of the list of heroic figures in Hebrews 11?
5. Explain the role of each of the following in the argument of Hebrews: Melchizedek, shadow (or copy) versus reality, Jesus' faithfulness to God.
6. What is it possible to say about the authorship and original audience of James?
7. Martin Luther thought James was theologically weak, but contemporary liberation theologians think highly of it. Explain why, in each case.

8. Summarize the teaching of the Letter of James on poverty and riches.
9. What is it possible to say about the authorship and original audience of 1 Peter?
10. How does the author of 1 Peter expect Christians to relate to the outside world?
11. Why do scholars think 2 Peter is dependent upon Jude? What is it possible to say about the authorship of these two works?
12. To what specific problems are 2 Peter and Jude directed, and what are the authors' strategies for dealing with them?
13. What is it possible to say about the authorship of the Johannine letters?
14. At what stage of the Johannine community's development was each of these letters written, according to Raymond Brown's theory?
15. What, on Brown's view, was the teaching of the "secessionists"?
16. What is central in Christian teaching according to 1 and 2 John?
17. Give your own arguments on the question as to why each of the works studied in this chapter should or should not have been accepted into the canon.

For Further Reading

Hebrews

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James

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Chapter 15: The Revelation to John

Read Revelation.

Chapter Summary

Revelation was written by an unidentifiable person named John toward the end of the first century to Christians in seven locations in Asia Minor, some of whom were facing or enduring persecution. The author writes to show “what must soon take place” (1:1), namely, the end-events—not events of our time.

The book begins with letters to seven churches, encouraging faithfulness under duress. Then follows a series of apocalyptic imagery depicting the final struggles between the forces of God and the Lamb against the Satanic forces—the great beast, Babylon, the whore—aligned with the power of the Roman state.

The book ends with a glorious picture of the end of evil, of death, and of mourning.

Study Questions

1. What is it possible to say about the authorship of Revelation?
2. Describe the situation of the original audience, and explain why the author uses such dramatic language to address this situation.
3. What are the competing views regarding the relationship of the “events” mentioned in Revelation and actual human history? How do the interpretations of critical scholars differ from those of many popular interpreters?
4. What is the function of the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 1–3?
5. What emotions might chapters 4–9 elicit from those who hear it read? What is the intended function of the “eschatological woes” described in these chapters?
6. With what or whom would a first-century reader have identified the symbols of the beast, Babylon, and the whore?
7. What effect might it have had on a first-century congregation to hear chapters 17–22 read aloud during worship?
8. Evaluate the claim that Revelation predicts events in the late twentieth century.
9. Does the book of Revelation have any relevance, *when not interpreted literally*, for people living in our place and time? Compare and contrast the views of Yarbro Collins and Schüssler Fiorenza on this issue, and then give reasons for your own judgment.

10. Explain the role of the distinction between coercive and persuasive power in Farmer's interpretation. Then give your own evaluation of his reading.

11. In what specific ways does Revelation suggest the necessity of hermeneutics in interpreting the New Testament?

For Further Reading

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