

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

From the time I first proposed this book to Fortress Press in 1980, I determined to write a book for those who wanted to understand the origin and shape of the New Testament writings but were unable to find a comprehensive introduction that is neither too technical nor too trivial. I called the book an interpretation rather than an introduction for the simple reason that most volumes going by the name of *introduction* are either handbooks devoted to the communication of information concerning a narrow range of scholarly issues or popular versions of conventional scholarly wisdom attractively packaged for college students.

In contrast to both, I have tried here to provide a genuine interpretation of Christianity's earliest writings. By so doing, I also draw the reader into the most important critical questions concerning their understanding. In this sense, every interpretation is also an introduction. By no means is every introduction an interpretation.

The organization of this book, its argument, and the choice of topics have all been dictated by the desire to make these writings intelligible and alive for the contemporary reader who wants to meet and understand them more than scholarly discussions about them. I consider here all the critical issues pertinent to a responsible understanding of the New Testament, but I go beyond presenting a consensus of scholarly opinion.

The reader will find in these pages a single reading of the evidence from beginning to end—my own. My approach to the writings and the issues is independent. It is not, I think, idiosyncratic. I owe more than I can credit to the work of other scholars. But in this book, I advance my own understanding of the New Testament in its origin, in each of its parts, and as a collection.

Sometimes I agree with the scholarly majority; sometimes I disagree. In every case, I have tried to provide my reasons for agreement or disagreement. As in every attempt to deal with the whole of a subject within a reasonable space, many discussions are abbreviated, even elliptical. More advanced readers will recognize in my brief remarks a thoughtful yet independent response to scholarly positions.

In order to keep the argument and presentation clean, I have not used footnotes, nor do I refer to other scholars by name in the text. The reader will, I hope, forgive the inevitable air of omniscience that is the result. A brief bibliography at the end of each chapter indicates directions for further reading and research. A more elaborate and annotated bibliography for each chapter is also available at the website for this book. Some entries support the positions I take, others provide alternative positions.

This third edition moves *Writings* more explicitly toward the character of a textbook. The identity has always been implicit, since the book originated in

lectures delivered in the classroom at Yale Divinity School between 1976 and 1982, and has been used successfully as a text by teachers other than myself over the 23 years it has been in print.

But the size of the book, its grown-up diction, its extensive annotated bibliographies, and its serious engagement with all the critical issues pertinent to the study of the New Testament—in short, its unwillingness to convey conventional wisdom in a neat package—made the book seem less than an obvious choice to use as a textbook for undergraduate or seminary students.

The second edition in 1999 tried to correct the situation but in some ways made it worse. That edition, carried out with the able assistance of Todd Penner, accomplished many improvements, since each chapter, indeed each sentence, was reviewed for clarity and correctness, new perspectives were added at a number of points, and the bibliographies were substantially larger. It was, in short, an enlarged edition, whose additions made the book even more weighty, unwieldy, and expensive. The addition of some pedagogical aids such as study questions and an attached CD-ROM appeared to some as afterthoughts rather than a real alteration.

In consultation with Fortress Press (especially Neil Elliott), and with the expert editorial assistance of Richard Manly Adams Jr., then, I have undertaken this thorough recasting. The reader should be aware from the start that in this edition only one chapter has been substantively revised. I have long been discontented with my treatment of Paul's Letter to the Galatians, and have used this opportunity to bring that chapter more into line with my present views. Otherwise, the interpretation found in the first edition—modified slightly but with many small corrections in the second edition—remains the same. From

the first, this was meant to be a “classic” interpretation of the New Testament, in the sense that it was based on the perennial issues posed by the first Christian writings, rather than on changing scholarly fashions.

Here, then, are the changes that I have made in the present edition:

- a) The prose now appears in double columns. This saves space and enables more rapid reading.
- b) The study questions are greatly expanded, enabling students to more thoroughly review the material they have read, or, conversely, to have a guide to important issues as they read the material. Such study questions can also serve as topics for further research.
- c) An extensive glossary of terms assists students in checking and double-checking unfamiliar expressions.
- d) The bibliographies are no longer annotated. They now appear under discrete categories. They are also shorter in length and are updated to reflect resources available through 2009. The annotated version is still available online.
- e) The massive Scripture and Author Indices have been removed, since it is possible now to locate important discussions more easily than before. The valuable Subject Index is retained, though it is simplified and made more usable.
- f) A short Guide for Teachers indicates ways in which the book might be used in real classroom settings.

It is my hope and expectation that these changes will make the book more useful to students in the classroom, without in the least losing its ability to

serve as a resource for readers outside the classroom. My particular thanks go to Richard Manly Adams Jr., for his help in carrying out these changes, and to Fortress Press for encouraging this new edition as

it has supported earlier versions. The one to whom this book is dedicated, my dear wife Joy, remains my great support in every venture.

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