

Introduction

For nearly two thousand years, both believers and non-believers have grappled with the New Testament. What exactly does it say? Why do its authors claim divine status for Jesus? Do they mean to speak literally of the end of the world?

These and other questions were posed even before the time all the 27 books of the New Testament were written. During the period when the great majority of Jesus' followers were illiterate, teachers and new believers alike had to rely on oral tradition. Because they saw their tradition as sacred, their own acute interest – and their personal interpretations – shaped what they handed on to their followers. We possess nothing Jesus wrote, since he was in all probability illiterate, but much that he said. Jesus' sayings and actions were transmitted through gospels, letters and sermons in contexts that described his life and death for contemporaries. So the way the New Testament came into being actually invites and encourages further interpretation.

The purpose of this book, as its title says, is to help the reader make a start in the critical study of the New Testament. To achieve that objective, we as authors need to accomplish two aims. The challenging dimension of our task is that we need to accomplish both aims at once.

Any curious reader of the New Testament, no matter what his or her attitude, whether motivated by faith or by secular considerations, needs to balance a familiarity with the specifics of the 27 books of the New Testament with the cumulative impact of the message of the New Testament as a whole. The whole and its parts are constantly in dialog in one's mind in the course of any serious reading. Addressing that tension is our first challenge.

For that reason, we have decided to offer our readers a narrative description of the development of the New Testament, introducing key themes and delving into the social worlds in which the texts emerged. That narrative must begin before the texts themselves were produced, with a consideration of Jesus and the movement

Studying the New Testament

he founded and inspired (Chapter 1). Because Jesus consciously developed a program of action for his followers, as well as featuring as the center of their devotion at a later stage, we prefer to speak of 'Jesus' movement' rather than of 'the Jesus movement'. Then, in chronological order, we treat the letters of Paul, and Paul himself as Christianity's first public intellectual (Chapter 2). A consideration of the Gospels follows, because they emerged after the time of Paul and reflect a period of considerable growth of Jesus' movement in the Mediterranean world a full generation after his death (Chapter 3). Finally, the last chapter treats the writings that complete the New Testament, a combination of books that address the emerging Church at large and deal with questions of how the teaching of Jesus fits into the whole pattern of world history (Chapter 4).

By approaching the New Testament along the lines of how its development unfolded, we hope to give our readers a sense of the environment within which each of the 27 books was produced. But that development is not merely a question of the individual histories of those books. Coherent principles, whether implicit or explicit, were also involved.

Among the implicit principles, Jesus' teachings and actions, although they were not a matter of public record at the time he lived, formed a standard of his followers' faith and ethics. Paul's teaching was by no means accepted by a majority of believers during his life, but nonetheless came to provide non-Jewish Christians with a sense of how they could belong to Jesus' movement. The Gospels represent the broad commitment of Jesus' movement to educating and advancing believers in the significance of their faith, while the last writings of the New Testament raise concerns about the content of faith and its relationship to other forms of thought, such as philosophy and history.

The explicit principles that determined which works would be included in the New Testament were (1) whether they were understood to derive from one of the groups of the apostles, those delegated by Jesus to deliver his message, and (2) whether they were accepted broadly by the Church as a whole. The first principle meant that from the early days of Christianity believers concerned themselves with historical questions regarding how a given document emerged. The second principle committed Christians to a concern

Introduction

for whether, in addition to being originally connected to Jesus, a document was ‘catholic’, that is, universally recognized (*katholikos*). These principles have been named since the second century of the Common Era, when the New Testament as we would recognize it was widely accepted. The actual listing of a table of contents that agrees with ours was finalized during the fourth century.

By attending historically to how the individual books of the New Testament were generated in their times, and fit into a pattern that focused on Jesus, Paul, the communities of the Gospels, and writings to the Catholic Church after the Gospels, we believe that a sense of the whole of the New Testament and its parts will come home to our readers. As we go through this development, we also offer advice on how to move beyond the phase of starting study into study itself. That is our second challenge.

Serious reading of the New Testament will always involve balancing the whole and the parts, but readers will need more detailed advice about the nuts and bolts of texts, as well as about the wider task of interpretation, in order to move ahead. We aim to provide readers with what they need by means of explanatory material within chapters, and exercises after each chapter that are intended to encourage the reader to engage closely with the texts and to build awareness of and confidence in some of the scholarly issues.

As we do so, we call attention to basic methods of study.

Source criticism

Behind every text lie earlier traditions of some kind. Source criticism seeks to identify these earlier traditions and probe how they are used in the present text since this may well reveal an author’s intentions and purpose for writing. As well as finding sources of the text, source criticism tries to determine textual relationships among similar texts and directions of dependence. Source critics propose to isolate materials of different style and vocabulary from a text, arguing that they belong to a different source.

Social-scientific theory

From the social sciences come questions about the social, historical and cultural dimensions of a text inhabiting a pre-industrial world very different from ours. In regard to the social world of the first

Studying the New Testament

century, social sciences propose to clarify organizational structures, kinship systems, family relations, purity and pollution taboos, lineage and inheritance, and economical and political structures. The pre-industrial agrarian world of the first century differs from ours in that 90 per cent of ancient society at the time of the New Testament lived in a rural environment, engaged in farming at a subsistence level. Only 2–4 per cent of the population were literate. Life expectancy was about half of ours, and households with widows and children were not uncommon. New Testament writers presume their readers belong to ancient Mediterranean society and share a social system in which the group is valued over the individual and a premium is placed on honor and avoidance of shame. Slavery is normative. A system of patrons and clients makes things work.

Redaction and tradition criticism

Redaction criticism identifies the way editors (redactors) adapt and arrange source materials in the text they are creating. By identifying these alterations and arrangements in the text, redaction critics try to identify the interests of an author and an author's community. Redaction critics engage with literary approaches to the documents they study, in order to appreciate the theologies that the editors espoused, and how their ideas and beliefs influenced their presentation of the traditional materials known to them. The method necessarily confronts the question of the shape and content of traditions included in the work of redactors. In pursuing that issue, redaction criticism can develop into tradition criticism, intersecting with the identification of sources. But the individual traditions incorporated in a document need not be identifiable with a particular source. Sometimes, the form of a tradition indicates its purpose and provenance. The pursuit of those issues is characteristic of form criticism. Redaction criticism begins with texts as we have them, as the work of editors or authors (sometimes working cooperatively). Once the preferences of these contributors are known, in terms of style, theology and content, it is possible to dig deeper, into the preferences of earlier sources, individual traditions and oral collections of material.

Reader-response criticism

A text has a life of its own, independent of its author, and often with a multiplicity of meanings. And what about the reader? Reader-oriented theories recognize that readers bring to the text different worlds of experience and presuppositions. Such interpretative worlds bring out what is latent in the text. The text has no inherent meaning; indeed, some scholars assert that it is the reader who creates textual meaning. A modified version of this approach would be that meaning comes from engagement between the reader and the text rather than from discerning the intention of the author. Into this meeting-place of author and text, scholars have identified central interpretative questions to address: the social location of the author and reader including a reader's race, class and gender, ideologies of authors and interpreters, the nature of language.

Perhaps it is in the intersection of author, reader and text that interpretation best takes place. When we engage in a dialog with another person, we attend not just to what their language conveys but to the way words are communicated: the phrasing and choice of words, and the inflection of voice and facial expressions, for example. As a dialog partner, we can ask the speaker for clarification. We can also take into account circumstances in which the conversation took place and what we know of the author's own world at that particular time.

In the case of the biblical text, although the author is no longer available to be questioned, the world of the author is. Meaning may be derived from an investigation of what the author of a biblical text intends to convey, alongside what the text articulates, and how the reader perceives the text. To emphasize author, reader or text at the expense of one of the other three is to impoverish the process of interpretation.

As readers proceed into a study of the New Testament, they engage in both exegesis, the identification of meaning as it comes out of the wording of a text, and interpretation, the synthesis of that meaning within an understanding of our world as a whole.

The aim of exegesis is to make explicit the possible particular meanings of the words and ideas in a text. Exegesis is the basis of interpretation. Interpretation cannot exist except as engaging with

exegesis. This occurs when the connotations of words and concepts are explained as fully as possible and when the text is placed in the context of the presuppositions, questions and concerns of its author, community or tradition. Since an author uses language to shape the text, an exegete must attend first to aspects of the Greek language behind the New Testament, including morphology (word forms), lexicology (meaning) and syntax (word relationships).

Readers familiar with the thought system of the text they are reading are able to partner with the text in looking at reality with different eyes. But if readers are no longer part of the thought system of the text, as would be the case with us and ancient texts, they can recreate a framework of meaning from the text, uncover shortcomings and discover dormant alternative answers in the text. Historical distance does not reduce the effectiveness of a text: it can encourage the production of meaning that enables moderns to overcome their own thought system and broaden their reality.

Interpretation involves creating present meaning for an ancient text. While it used to be thought possible to uncover an author's original objective meaning, such interpretations were found to reflect rather too much of the interpreter's perspective. Freeing the text of author and context was one way to address an impasse. Another way is to work with original languages through historical research. Reader-oriented interpretation also opened up the text to address and be accountable to the present. We propose to take none of these approaches in isolation but to value a dynamic between author, text and reader, balancing each and even stressing one but never losing sight of all three in interpretative activity. The text is living and elusive. Its words always lie beyond our reach, reminding us of the unfinished challenge of interpretation.

Bibliographical background

Many comprehensive introductions to the New Testament are available. Among those recently published, we recommend Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997). Brown's work represents a renewed historical interest in the study of the New Testament, after several decades in which theories of interpretation sometimes eclipsed history.

Introduction

Nonetheless, Brown's approach needs to be supplemented by a knowledge of methods of study, and the theories behind those methods. For that reason, we recommend the work of Paul Gooder (ed.), *Searching for Meaning: An Introduction to Interpreting the New Testament* (London: SPCK and Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2008). The social constituencies involved in the production of the New Testament are the particular concern of Howard Clark Kee, *The Beginnings of Christianity: An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2005).

The approach we take in this volume is not confessional, and does not ask the reader to assent from the beginning to the message of the New Testament. During the period in scholarship when theoretical approaches took precedence over historical approaches, an attempt grew to insist on belief as a condition of understanding the texts. Examples of this view include Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) and, more recently, Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999; Third Edition, 2010). In our view, a properly historical approach informs issues of faith, but does not determine a reader's decisions in that regard.