

1-1-1992

Introduction to The New Testament: Books That Changed the World

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Recommended Citation

Wimbush, Vincent L. "Introduction," *The New Testament: Books That Changed the World* (Norwalk, CT: The Easton Press, 1992), vii–xiv.

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The New Testament

TRANSLATED OUT OF THE
ORIGINAL TONGUES
IN THE YEAR 1611

INTRODUCTION BY
VINCENT L. WIMBUSH


COLLECTOR'S EDITION
Bound in Genuine Leather

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The Easton Press
NORWALK, CONNECTICUT

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Introduction

I

THE “New Testament” is the late ancient and modern religious and cultural designation given to the second part of the Christian Bible (in distinction from the “Old Testament,” which constitutes the Hebrew Bible). The designation itself (*he kaine diatheke*, “new covenant,” or “new testament”) is a religious/theological one, not an historical or literary one descriptive of the character of historical events or literary documents. It is found in a number of passages from the twenty-seven book collection, and in subsequent customary usage first among Christians. The initial reference was not to the collection of documents, but to the “new” relationship Jesus was understood to have established with followers. Later, certainly by the second and third centuries, the reference was to the collection itself. Thus, the collection of twenty-seven documents that we know today, codified by the fourth century, came to be understood as a manifesto of the Christian movement, notwithstanding the facts that Jesus, the founder of the movement, was not the author of any of the documents, and that the different authors (some authors wrote more than one document) present different, even conflicting, worldviews of the movement. So the designation “New Testament” was intended to reflect neither the compre-

hensive historical “facts” about the teachings and doings of the historical Jesus, nor the full complexity of the worldviews and orientations of the movement inspired by him.

The New Testament is a selective complex of portraits of Jesus and of the earliest period of the history of followers of Jesus as understood by some ancient communities (up to the fourth century). Thus, it functions as a reflection of certain communities’ understanding of the appropriate rule or boundaries (*kanon*, “canon”) of behavior and beliefs. These communities, obviously powerful, if not in the majority of followers of Jesus up to the third and fourth centuries, made decisions about what portraits of Jesus and the early church communities were appropriate and meaningful, what portraits were not, about what types of behavior and discourse were appropriate, what types were not. The New Testament, then, is not the (complete or unbiased) historical record of Jesus and of early Christianity; it is designation for a particular, certainly powerful complex of visions and rhetoric about Jesus and his earliest followers, reflecting back upon particular worldviews and orientations of communities that first created them and those that subsequently have preserved them.

II

THESE documents were written by a number of different authors, some identified, some anonymous (and pseudonymous, or “falsely named”). All are presumed to be male and generally oriented toward the use of developing traditions with a view toward the establishment and consolidation of peculiarly understood ethos for communities addressed. Determination of the precise provenance of the documents is difficult, but scholarly consensus assumes that most of the writings come from centers in Palestine/Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, and from Rome.

The constitutive documents are of three distinctive major literary/rhetorical types – “gospel,” “letter” and “apocalypse.” None of these types is pure. Each contains various formal parts of other types of literature from Greco-Roman antiquity. Each also contains formal parts included in the others.

The first major type includes the first four documents – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – in canonical, or religio-political order, not according to historical priority. Few scholars are satisfied with the designation of the type; it comes from the term (*euaggelion*, “good news,” “gospel,” Mark 1:1) the writer of the second document provided as a description of what is immediately to follow. Each of these documents, reflecting different literary and rhetorical strategies, presents a different narrative portrait of Jesus through the representation of oral and written traditions (different types of sayings, narratives), some of which are borrowed among the four (e.g. Matthew and Luke from Mark, the chronologically prior document). The type that each represents is, then, less an historical than a religious and theological portrait of Jesus (and with Luke’s second volume, the Acts of the Apostle, also of the early church leaders) that conforms to the writer’s religious sensibilities and that of the original community addressed.

The “Gospel” type (including Luke’s Acts), then, is much like the “biographies” of the revered figures of antiquity. The provocative representation of shared traditional materials used in the context of preaching and teaching and participation in rituals functioned not only to inspire and challenge communities addressed. It is also clear that polemical and missionary propaganda with outsiders was also important.

The second major type of document in the New Testament, the letter, is by far the most numerous (a total of twenty-one). Actually, there are far fewer documents that fit under the “pure” genre of the letter as real correspondence; a number of documents fall into separate sub-categories (homilies; testament; church manual, etc.) that merely include the larger

framework (e.g. greeting, closing) and other constitutive elements of a real Greco-Roman letter.

The genuine letters of Paul (a total of seven) are considered examples of the “pure” letter of correspondence. These are letters that include many different types of rhetorical materials and references to traditional beliefs and rituals of the movement; but they are marshaled so as to commend in absentia pastoral commands and/or advice for immediate situations for the time being; they were not written with the assumption that they could or should function as complete theological statements for all situations for all times to come. As real, occasional letters of correspondence they reflect more than anything else snapshots of the actual dynamics within the fledgling communities founded by Paul – the struggles for self-definition, the internal power skirmishes, the conflicts with outsiders, the challenge of understanding the commands and advice, and accepting the authority, of Paul and the traditions he represented. Any theological statements within these documents must take the social dynamics and responses to them as presupposition.

The third major literary type found in the New Testament – the apocalypse (from the Greek *apokalypsis*, “revelation”) – is represented by one example. The last positioned document in the New Testament, it was understood by early churches to be about the “last things” to take place, especially with respect to the blessed destiny of the persecuted faithful, the judgment against the world whose seat of power was Rome. Although it has many of the elements – esoteric symbolism, numerology, vivid images and caricatures – of ancient Jewish and other revelatory documents, the canonical Revelation to John is at best mixed genre. It has the super framework of a Pauline letter, and includes several letters addressed to churches in Asia Minor. Within and beyond these letters there is consistently the alternation of proclamation and exhortation, such that the apocalyptic symbolism and imagery seem to be governed by, actually subsumed under, it.

In addition, the symbolism itself is such that it raises questions about the classification and agenda of the document. In many other documents classified as apocalypses, there is revelation of the unfolding of history from beginning to the dramatic, often cataclysmic end, told from the privileged perspective of the seer. Heavy symbolism normally serves as vehicle for the revelation. But what is noteworthy about the last document of the canon is its lack of sustained attention to the revelation of future events: there is throughout the document a curtailing of such material by the insertion of proclamation and exhortation. The writer seems to have been more interested in directing prophetic critique against contemporary worldly governing authorities and accommodating believers, in comforting “true” believers being addressed, than in relating the course of future events — other than the big outcome — in any detail.

III

THIS collection of twenty-seven documents of three major literary types that was widely recognized by Christians as religious canon and manifesto by the fourth century is the same collection that is today almost universally accepted as such by Catholics and Protestants, and Greek Orthodox. It is also the collection long generally recognized as a force in the making of western culture. At least three different major functions of the collection that is the New Testament can be isolated.

First, the New Testament is a measuring stick or source of authority for religious identity and cultivation. The precise nature of the authority might differ from tradition to tradition, but that the New Testament is at least one of the most important sources of authority for all Christians is beyond dispute.

In this sense, then, the New Testament functions for Christians as “Scripture,” as “Holy Book,” in the same way that the Koran functions as “Holy Book” for Muslims. To be sure, different readings of the New Testament both reflect and influence different “Christian” self understandings and orientations. There can be readings that are predominantly, but not necessarily exclusively, moralist, ethical, dogmatic, devotional or culturalist and political in character. What these and other religious readings have in common is the presupposition that in the New Testament is the ultimate or penultimate source of authority, the final or near final guide for Christian existence.

Second, the New Testament has been viewed, only partly on account of its status as “Holy Book,” as one of the most important literary and rhetorical achievements and treasures in western culture. It has been the inspiration for works of art of every conceivable genre of expression – poetry, novels, songs, sculpture, painting, to name only a few. All of the major literary genres discussed above that constitute the New Testament have been imitated in some form. Western imagination in literature, music, and styles of rhetoric have long been influenced by the New Testament.

Third, not even the so-called secularization of the West has rendered it less arresting and influential in societies and culture outside religious communities; its influence in some quarters, no doubt in response to the phenomenon of secularization, has even increased; in some other quarters, it has simply assumed either a more subtle or more complicated or diffuse presence. But that it continues to be a powerful cultural force around the world can be seen in the manner in which its haunting phrases and powerful images are invoked in the rhetoric and literature of dissident groups around the world (South Africa, Eastern Europe, China, Latin America; and among minority groups – conservative and liberal – in North America and Europe). In Europe and in the United States, it is clear that national identities and actions were from

the beginning defined and justified with the rhetoric and images of both Old and New Testaments. European world hegemony was justified through Jesus' call for missionizing and disciplining efforts throughout the world. The New World that became the United States was "discovered" by those Europeans for whom the New Testament provided ideological legitimation and images for the conquering of native peoples and the founding of a "New Jerusalem," the establishment of a "New Covenant." These images resonate still with most citizens in an era — the tradition and law of separation of church and state notwithstanding — when a president can feel the (political) need to declare a "Year of the Bible." The raging debates over controversial issues such as abortion are for many more than a matter of private rights; they are a matter of national and cultural identity, and are to be determined by interpretation of the explicit teaching or implicit thrust of the New Testament.

In every facet of cultural life in the West generally and in the United States in particular, the New Testament figures quite prominently. In popular culture and imagination (from the naming of children and cities to the picking of themes for movies), in the impetus behind the founding of and in the curricula of educational institutions from pre-school to colleges and universities, in jurisprudence and politics (from the quoting of texts to the embracing of certain values), the New Testament is of enormous influence. It has functioned as rhetorical and ideological playing field in almost every major, controversial development and change in western history.

IV

THAT the New Testament has been an important force in the world from late antiquity to the present is without question. It has inspired and ennobled and troubled spirits,

sparked and resolved political and other controversies. It has brought out the best and the worst in individuals, groups and nations. It has been used as authority to legitimize behavior from slave-holding to celibacy and self-immolation. It has been used to identify saviors and demons, prophets and quacks. It has provided the language of philosophical and general intellectual critical moral discourse and of fanaticism. It has been embraced as the manifesto of both the dominant and the dominated in history. It has been many things to many for almost nineteen centuries. It has not merely changed the world; in many cases and for many it has been the world. What has made the New Testament so powerful a force in the history of the world is likely to remain as long as human beings feel the need to be religious, to stand outside themselves, to be challenged and provoked and inspired, and to find warrant and legitimation for their thinking and behavior.

New York City
August, 1992

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This Introduction was written expressly
for The Easton Press
Books That Changed The World
edition of
The New Testament