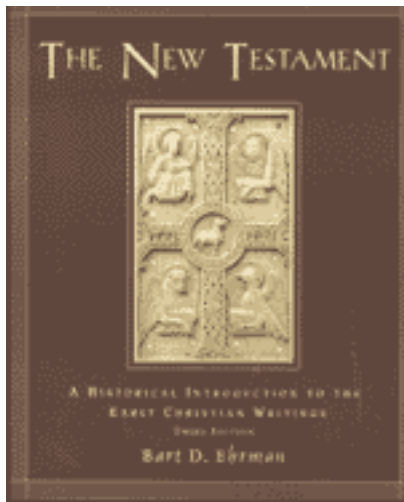


RBL 10/2004



Ehrman, Bart D.

The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings

Third edition

New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. Pp. xxxvi + 506. Paper. \$49.95. ISBN 0195154622.

Lincoln H. Blumell
The University of Calgary
Calgary, AB T2N 4E6

Bart D. Ehrman has written a book that New Testament scholars are sure to envy. In *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (3rd ed.), Ehrman has updated and improved upon his two previous editions to render a scholarly masterpiece. Though the previous editions hardly needed improvement, Ehrman somehow managed to make this edition even better. He has updated and added additional material on the archaeology of early Christianity, included more maps and illustrations to bring the material to life, offered a more thorough treatment of Judaism and its role in shaping the early church, and included helpful study aids at the end of each chapter that will certainly benefit the student.

Upon picking up the book one is immediately struck by the amount of information sandwiched between the two covers. With twenty-nine chapters, the work covers a diverse array of material, including extensive treatments of every New Testament book, the later writings of the apostolic fathers, and even some of the noncanonical Gospels. In addition, there is considerable attention given to such issues as the historical Jesus, Christianity in the Greco-Roman world, New Testament textual criticism, Josephus, and an array of other pertinent topics.

The opening chapter of the book sets the tone of the volume by challenging the conventional view of Christian orthodoxy. Ehrman points out that many forms of competing Christianity existed for several centuries and that it was not until the fourth

century, when the church attained a unique status in society and the canonization of the New Testament was taking place, that orthodoxy really began to be established. Consequently, it is anachronistic to talk about either canon or orthodoxy in the first century, when many, if not all, of the books that came to make up the New Testament were written.

In chapters 2 and 3 Ehrman introduces early Christian writings by offering a concise introduction to the greater social, political, and religious world in which they were written. Besides the obvious informative value of these two chapters, one of the main points is to show that early Christian writings were not altogether very different from their Greco-Roman counterparts. In fact, Ehrman demonstrates that most books in the New Testament employed the same literary styles and conventions as contemporary non-Christian writings.

Chapters 4–10 are devoted to the study and exploration of the four canonical Gospels. In addition to discussing their intricate relationship, Ehrman devotes one chapter exclusively to each Gospel. Ehrman's examination of the respective Gospels is guided by his attempt to identify the central theme and message of each Gospel as it relates to the portrayal of Jesus. Hence, chapter 5, which examines the Gospel of Mark, works from the presupposition that Jesus in Mark is best understood as a suffering son of God. Likewise, chapter 7 argues that Matthew primarily portrays Jesus as the promised Jewish Messiah, chapter 8 with Luke that Jesus was the savior of the world, and chapter 10 with John that Jesus was a divine figure sent from heaven.

Moving beyond the Gospels, chapters 11–17 are bound together by their common focus on the historical Jesus. This section of the book begins by discussing the noncanonical sources for Jesus and their importance for accessing the historical figure. Ehrman then devotes considerable attention to placing Jesus within first-century Judea by firmly locating him within the context of Second Temple Judaism. This section is concluded by an examination of the transition of the Jesus of history to the Jesus of the Gospels.

The next seven chapters (chs. 18–24) of the text are devoted exclusively to Paul, his work, and his writings. Ehrman begins by examining the historical figure and then moves onto an investigation of his genuine writings followed by an investigation of the New Testament writings commonly attributed to him that are of questionable authorship. As part of Ehrman's analysis of the Pauline corpus he includes a brief but concise commentary on each epistle.

While the next three chapters (chs. 25–27) of the text are not directly related in that they do not address a single figure or specific topic, they can be grouped together because they

discuss early Christianity's interaction with various groups and institutions. Chapter 25 addresses Christianity's interaction with Jews and Judaism and examines the categories of "Jew" and "Christian" in the first century and whether these terms are yet applicable. It also examines such texts as Hebrews and *Barnabas* to highlight the evolving understanding of Jews and Judaism in Christian texts. Chapter 26 examines the encounter of Christianity with the Roman state and is primarily devoted to debunking the belief that Christians were violently hunted out and persecuted by Roman authorities until the edict of Milan and instead proposes that Christians were only subject to periodic localized persecution in the first two centuries. Chapter 27 examines the sometimes-hostile relationship between various groups of Christians by examining such texts as 1 and 2 Peter, James, and Jude.

The final two chapters of the book address two unrelated topics. In chapter 28 Ehrman examines early Christian apocalypses by looking at the book of Revelation, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, and the *Apocalypse of Peter*. In this chapter Ehrman is not as interested in dating and placing these texts as he is in identifying common themes and genres in apocalyptic writings. The final chapter of the book is devoted to one of Ehrman's specialties, textual criticism, and raises the question whether we have the original text of the New Testament preserved in the various New Testament manuscripts and papyri. While Ehrman points out many of the current problems with the text of the New Testament, he maintains that it is possible to recover with some degree of precision the original text.

One of the greatest strengths of *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writing* is the format and presentation of its material, allowing the reader easy access. The chapters are clearly laid out and follow an orderly format that roughly mirrors the order of the New Testament. Each chapter begins with a clearly marked paragraph laying out the purpose and content of the chapter. Chapters are then broken up into subtitled sections that are neatly knit together. Almost every chapter contains pictures, timelines, and maps, greatly enhancing the presentation and adding nuance to the material. These extras are not mere space fillers but actually tie in quite well with the diverse topics being addressed. At the end of each chapter Ehrman gives a concise summary highlighting the most important features and provides a short bibliography for further reading.

Despite the many worthy aspects of the book, it does have several shortcomings. For one, it lacks a full bibliography. Though Ehrman has included short bibliographical sections at the end of each chapter, it would have been helpful for both student and instructor alike to have had access to a full bibliography at the end of the work. Also, the work could still give more attention to Judaism and its place in early Christianity. Although this edition

does make a better attempt at addressing this issue than did its forebears, it could still do a little more given the prominence of this important issue in contemporary scholarship. If there is a chapter in the text that is perhaps a little weaker than the rest, it is chapter 26, which deals with the relationship between Christianity and the Roman state. Although Ehrman has rightly argued that the persecution of Christians was on a far more limited scale than many have supposed, it appears that he has gone too far in this direction to the point of even denying that there was an imperial policy against Christians in the second century. His interpretation of the correspondence between Trajan and Pliny is problematic and out of step with most of scholarship.

Despite these minor inadequacies, it would be wrong to end a review of this book on a negative note. The book is a vast storehouse of information on the New Testament and other early Christian writings. Its readability combined with its lucidity on a diverse array of material makes it a useful resource for any introductory course on Early Christianity. It is arguably the best textbook on the subject currently available. In point of fact, the best compliment I could possibly give to Ehrman's work is that I will certainly be using this text the next time I teach an introductory course on either the New Testament or early Christianity.