



Burge, Gary M., et al.

The New Testament in Antiquity: A Survey of the New Testament Within Its Cultural Contexts

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Introduction

To put it bluntly, New Testament introductions and surveys are a dime a dozen and have been for quite some time. One wonders what might persuade a publisher who already publishes a rather popular and useful NT intro in Carson & Moo's volume to put another one out just a few years later. What sets this particular intro/survey apart from the rest and what makes it worth our time, attention, and hard earned money? It's no secret that for the past few years Zondervan has been publishing some of the most exquisite books in terms of aesthetic appeal. My introduction to this publishing revolution came in 2006 when I first got a copy of the *Archaeological Study Bible*. I thought to myself, "Wow! Zondervan went all out in the production of this one!" Then last year I was fortunate enough to receive a review copy of Mark Strauss' *Four Portraits, One Jesus* courtesy of Chris Fann at Zondervan. My amazement with the visual quality of that volume was just as high. So by the time I got *The New Testament in Antiquity* (hereafter *NTA*) it was no great shock that it would be of great aesthetic quality. This volume is beautiful throughout; from the tastefully reserved black hardcover to the myriads of photographs, maps, and charts that line its pages. Zondervan has done it again!

But the old adage remains true; you can't judge a book by its cover. So what about the overall quality of *NTA*? How useful a survey/introduction is it? I think that for its intended audience (i.e., undergraduates) it's a very useful resource. We need to keep the authors' four goals in mind

when flipping through this volume. They wanted a text that was: academic, accessible, contextual, and confessional. I submit that they've succeeded on all counts but I'll grant that it's this last goal that will throw many readers. The authors say:

[W]e wanted a volume that is responsive to the confessional commitments of the evangelical tradition. Too often academic treatments of the New Testaments view faith commitments as passé. We wanted a scholarly text that treated the pages of the New Testament *as Scripture*, which has spoken to the church through the centuries. (9)

I think it's rather refreshing to see this kind of honesty from the beginning, and it's also commendable that the authors haven't thought it necessary to check their faith at the door. They're quite content to view the NT as divinely inspired Scripture recognizing that "God is at work in and through th[o]se chapters to bring life and transformation to all who seek him there." (16)

Contents

The book contains 27 chapters with chapter 1 serving as an introduction to the volume itself, describing its various features, the necessity to study the ancient cultural backgrounds and contexts of the NT, etc. Chapters 2-7 give all of that great background information that one expects to find in such a survey, i.e., a brief history of the periods leading up to the NT, the worlds of Jesus and Paul, ancient non-Biblical sources for the life of Jesus, and some space in chapter 5 is devoted to discussing literary and historical criticism of the Gospels as well as the Synoptic problem and the authenticity of the Gospels. This section is littered with valuable information to aid the budding scholar.

Chapters 8-26 address the NT books themselves and of course cover issues of genre, date and authorship, as well as pointing out significant features of each book. Each chapter gives an outline of the book(s) discussed and they highlight the theological arguments of each book as well. Certain books are broken down according to large pericopes, e.g., Luke is addressed according to the following scheme:

- The Infancy Narrative (2:5 — 2:52)
- The Beginnings: John and Jesus (3:1 — 4:13)
- The Galilean Ministry (4:14 — 9:50)
- The Journey to Jerusalem (9:51 — 19:44)
- Jerusalem Ministry (19:45 — 21:38)
- The Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus (22:1 — 24:53)

The authors are careful to provide plenty of cultural and contextual information to help the reader shake off the effects of their modern mindset, but there's never so much information that you feel overloaded or burdened. Reference is made to honor/shame cultures, client/patron relationships, collectivist societies, etc. When the subtitle says "A Survey of the New Testament within Its Cultural Contexts" it means it. From Jewish law and custom to Greco-Roman excesses, this survey covers it all.

Chapter 27 is on the preservation and communication of the NT. This chapter covers textual criticism, the formation of the NT canon, and finally translation, both past and present.

Features

The features such as the photographs, maps, charts, and especially sidebars are really the best thing about *NTA*. The photos are beautiful, plain and simple. They're all relevant to whatever topic is under discussion and they help those who learn better visually to really grab a hold of the material. The charts are quite helpful as well, and maps, well, they're maps, nothing overly spectacular about those. But the sidebars are awesome. These are exactly the kind of pithy little summaries and treatments of subjects that will really stick with a reader. I can only speak for myself, but when I study or listen to someone teaching I have a tendency to summarize things in my head as I go along. This way I can retain the information easily without getting lost in all the details. That's how I'd describe these sidebars. I'd also mention the end of chapter bibliographies. These all contain an introductory and advanced list of material that will aid the student in further study.

Errata

Dr. Rod Decker pointed out¹ a while back that on p. 16 of *NTA* there is an image labeled P52 that is not in fact P52. I later discovered² that it was P.Oxy. 52. Interestingly enough, there is a photo of P52 on p. 442 that is correctly labeled. Jesse Hillman of Zondervan informed me that this error will be corrected in subsequent editions. And I was also informed by Andrew Rogers before receiving my review copy that the back cover misspelled Scot McKnight's last name and that this was being corrected before *NTA* hit the shelves for retail, so while my copy contains this misprint yours probably will not.

Complaints

¹ <http://ntresources.com/blog/?p=475>

² <http://rdtwot.wordpress.com/2009/03/11/papyri-mix-up/>

I don't have many complaints for this volume at all. One thing I would have liked to have seen would be Luke-Acts treated together rather than separately. I think it would have also been helpful to structure the chapters according to the book outlines that they provide. I would normally complain about the use of chapter end notes but there aren't a lot of notes at all, and the ones that are there are mainly bibliographic, which fits in nicely by placing them after the end of chapter bibliographies.

Recommendation

I'd recommend this volume to any undergrad or motivated layman looking for a good survey/intro to the NT. I think it serves this audience well; the grad or post-grad student would largely be rehearsing things that they already know and in many places disagreeing with the authors' presentations (e.g., on the issues of date and authorship). I think Pat McCullough's suggestion³ of using *NTA* in conjunction with another (less conservative?) survey is a good one. It never hurts to see what "the other side" is saying about the NT as well.

³ <http://patmccullough.com/2009/01/27/new-testament-in-antiquity/>