

Introduction

THE INFLUENCE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Probably no group of religious writings has influenced the Western world more than the New Testament. Its appealing message of the life and work of Jesus Christ has profoundly influenced and even transformed millions of lives. It has inspired the authors of such literary classics as *The City of God*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Pilgrim's Progress*. New Testament stories are read, rehearsed, and recited during the Christmas and Easter holidays. The Protestant work ethic derived from the New Testament. In the academic areas of ethics and philosophy, this provocative collection confronts the contemporary person with the ageless questions of ultimate concern: Who am I? Why am I here? Is there a god? Do we have a soul? Is there life after death? The New Testament challenges each generation to formulate anew responses to these enduring questions. Finally, in the disciplines of historical and cultural studies, the New Testament serves as one significant source for understanding Second Temple Judaism, the early Roman Empire, and the origins of Christianity.

THE DIFFICULTIES IN READING THE NEW TESTAMENT

Even though it has been an influential document for much of human culture, the New Testament is a difficult book to read. Not only does this ancient collection assume social structures and customs different from our own, but many of its teachings reflect diverse perspectives on similar topics. Note, for example, the shocking saying in Luke 14:26 about hating one's family in order to become a disciple, and the authoritarian teaching about submission in the household in 1 Peter 3:1–6. Both passages presuppose social structures unlike our own, and both reflect distinct perspectives on faith and family issues.

DISTINCT FEATURES OF THIS BOOK

The focus of this volume is on the development of early Christianity in its historical context. A presentation of the Greco-Roman world and Jewish environment of early Christianity is essential to bridging the historical and cultural gap that separates us from the New Testament. An outline tracing early Christianity from Jesus

to emerging orthodoxy is important for understanding the different New Testament teachings in their respective historical contexts.

Since the New Testament is our basic source for this historical inquiry, chapters on the New Testament language, text, methods of interpretation, and literary genres are included, as are chapters on the formation of the NT canon and on English translations. All these sections seek to answer fundamental questions, such as, In what type of language was the New Testament written? How reliable is our New Testament text? How do we interpret the New Testament? Why are there only twenty-seven books in the New Testament? What type of translation should I read?

Our focus is that of a general introduction (to the NT collection as a whole),

so separate discussions for every book (as in special introductions) are minimal, but our own inclinations about questions of authorship and dating are stated in the historical presentation of Jesus and early Christianity (part 3). Some treatment of these issues is found in the footnotes, with alternate views noted. Illustrations and charts will greatly assist the reader in comprehending the material. Primary and secondary sources are also provided for further study. Select abbreviations at the beginning of the volume, and a bibliography with indexes at the end, should also prove helpful. Studying the New Testament can be a fascinating enterprise, but it takes time, tools, some expertise, and a determination to encounter this collection of writings on its own terms.