

PREFACE



There are many ways of studying the Scriptures. When the reader comes to the Bible with the sole aim of securing spiritual guidance, he will ponder it from a devotional point of view. His principal interest will not be with questions of who wrote what and when certain events happened, but in learning God's message for him now.

Another approach is to study the Bible from a literary point of view. The Old and New Testaments constitute a veritable library of sixty-six books which represent many types of literature—including law, history, sagas, poetry, prophecy, gospels, and letters. A host of problems concerning authorship, date of composition, sources utilized, and literary relationships demand attention.

A third method of studying the Bible emphasizes the historical approach. It is not too much to say that every serious attempt to understand the Scriptures must be historically oriented. Only by being acquainted with the political, social, and religious background of the biblical era can the student understand the allusions to contemporary culture which the biblical writers take for granted will be obvious to their readers.

It is the aim of the present volume, which was written at the request of the Council for Religion in Independent Schools, to supply basic information concerning the content of the New Testament and important aspects of its historical background, as well as to let the reader see something of the critical processes by which scholars have sought to solve some of the chief literary problems of the gospels. It would be out of place in a book of this kind to advocate novel theories, whether historical, literary, or hermeneutical. On the contrary, the author has attempted

to present a balanced account that represents the consensus of present-day New Testament scholarship. The chief danger, as every writer who has attempted to popularize research knows, is that, in making the complex clear, one may also make it appear simple, or, in making the debatable plain, one may also make it appear certain. In more than one New Testament problem the balance of probabilities is close, and the student should be presented with differing interpretations of the evidence. In all historical research one must seek not only to learn what can be known of the past, but also to become aware of what, because of incomplete or conflicting testimony, cannot be known.

Though the concern throughout the book is with questions involving who, where, when, and what, the underlying presupposition of the author is that what is called the New Testament is not just a collection of interesting documents from antiquity, but something much more profound—that it is in very truth the New Covenant. The title “New Covenant” implies that the books contained in the collection witness to the belief that there now exists a new period or dispensation in the dealings of God with men. This new state has been brought about by God’s decisive work in the life, death, resurrection, and lordship of Jesus Christ. Understanding the New Testament, therefore, involves far more than studying the several books as pieces of ancient literature; it involves also an appreciation of the testimony of those who experienced and recorded what God had accomplished in man’s behalf in and through his only Son, Jesus Christ.

What has just been said implies that besides the New Covenant there is also a collection of books which Christians inherited as holy Scripture from their spiritual ancestors and which testifies to a former covenant between God and men. Let it be clear at the outset that of all the “helps” which assist the reader to understand the New Testament, the Old Testament is by far the most important. In that collection of thirty-nine books one finds the religious presuppositions and historical background without which the thinking and experiences of the New Testament writers cannot be understood. For reasons of space, however, it is impossible in the present volume to give consideration to historical, literary, and religious questions concerning the Old Testament. It will be assumed in what follows that the student has, or will acquire, an adequate knowledge of the content of the Old Testament. Such a knowledge

enables the Christian reader to perceive the working of divine providence through long stretches of history in the preparation of a chosen people, to whom at the fulness of time God sent forth his Son "to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:5).

It will be observed that in the following pages footnotes have been kept to a minimum. In another book intended for a different reading public it would have been appropriate to use them more frequently in order to provide full bibliographical references, or to explain ramifications of problems that are set forth here without elaborate qualifications. The author has likewise employed a minimum of technical phraseology, the significance of which would be unknown to the majority of his readers. Within these limits, however, an attempt was made to deal candidly with major problems of New Testament research and to avoid extreme or partisan positions which—as past experience teaches—are almost certain to be modified or abandoned in the future.

In conclusion I wish to express my gratitude to my wife and to the members of the Textbook Committee of the Council for Religion in Independent Schools for reading the manuscript of this book and for making helpful suggestions concerning both form and content. It should also be mentioned that Chapters 4 and 6 contain material that the author presented in 1961 in the Adolf Olson Memorial Lectures at Bethel Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota.

BRUCE M. METZGER