
Survey of New Testament Literature

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Introduction

There is no end to the stream of literature which is published on various aspects of the New Testament (NT). As I have done in previous literature surveys, I have chosen to note a selection of volumes on the grounds of their usefulness or their significance (the two terms are certainly not synonymous!), not because I agree with everything claimed within the covers or wish to commend them without reservation. I make no claims to providing an exhaustive survey but I trust that there will be something to interest most readers. I must say at the outset that anyone who regards such a survey as having some value must make the purchase of D.A. Carson's *New Testament Commentary Survey (Fifth Edition)* a priority.¹ Carson's comments are judicious and my own convictions regarding what is useful to the student or minister reflect his closely.

How to Read the Biblical Text

Let me mention first of all some useful books on the act of reading and interpreting the scriptural text. Of great usefulness to the interpreter of the NT is the third edition of D. Stuart's *Old Testament Exegesis*.² While the author clearly devotes most space to issues of OT interpretation, he consistently treats the OT as part of the whole canon, indicating connections with the NT. Look out for the third edition of Gordon Fee's companion volume on *New Testament Exegesis* due out soon. While probably rather demanding for many readers, the first two volumes in the *Scripture and Hermeneutics Series* are important and worthy of attention. Volume 1, entitled *Renewing Biblical Interpretation*,³ considers ways of bringing new life to the interpretation of Scripture and includes essays on both OT and NT issues, as well as some more philosophical and theological essays. The second volume, *After Pentecost*,⁴ draws heavily on recent scholarship on hermeneutics, particularly work on 'speech-act theory'. This will not be for everyone, but it is an example of serious reflection being done by authors such as K.J. Vanhoozer and A. Thiselton on the principles by which we interpret the Bible. M.A. Powell's book, *Chasing the Eastern Star: Adventures in Biblical Reader-Response Criticism*,⁵ is written in a friendly style and with substantial doses of humour (which readers may or may not appreciate!). It is nonetheless a rather demanding study of how one reads the NT, taking Matthew's narrative about the Magi as his basis for discussion.

Biblical Theology

It is good to see quite a number of studies appearing which seek to foster interpretation of the biblical texts as part of the whole Christian canon. G.J. Wenham's monograph, *Story as Torah*⁶ discusses two portions of the OT text (Genesis and Judges) using 'Rhetorical criticism' as a foundation for considering the significance of these texts for ethics. In the last main chapter of his book, Wenham examines the place of the OT in formulating NT ethics, interacting with significant writings by B. Witherington and R.B. Hays. This is a concise, well-written book, which is worth reading both for its helpful

insights into the OT narratives and for its guidance on using the Bible in ethics. O.P. Robertson's book, *The Israel of God, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*⁷ is a scholarly, yet clearly presented discussion of an issue that is of unmistakable contemporary significance. Robertson devotes himself to careful biblical exegesis but does so with awareness of the highly charged political issues which make the headlines in our modern world. As you would expect of this author, he demonstrates great competence in dealing with both OT and NT texts, treating Scripture with respect yet engaging carefully with many who would hold very different views to his own. This is a model of biblical theology done in service of today's church. A.J. Köstenberger and P.T. O'Brien have written a superb volume on the biblical theology of mission entitled *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*.⁸ After an important, but relatively brief, chapter on the OT material and a chapter on attitudes to mission in 'Second Temple Judaism', the authors survey the NT material in Mark, Matthew, Luke-Acts (not surprisingly, a substantial chapter), Paul, John, and the General Epistles and Revelation. Of a similar character is the important study by T.R. Schreiner and A.B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance*.⁹ The authors take a topical approach to their subject, attempting to hear both OT and NT texts in context and devoting substantial discussion to difficult matters such as the warning passages in Hebrews. They conclude that 'God's election establishes and sustains our perseverance' (p. 330). Also by Schreiner is his superb theology of Paul, *Paul: Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*.¹⁰ This volume is a substantial conservative alternative to the major book by J.D.G. Dunn and deserves to be considered alongside it. It will be very useful to students and ministers. *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet*,¹¹ edited by D. Peterson, is an interdisciplinary defence of penal substitutionary atonement which provides careful biblical and theological reflection on this foundational issue. Of quite a different character to all the above, G. Strecker's, *Theology of the New Testament*¹² is sceptical about the Gospel records and full of standard critical assumptions about the NT documents in general. It will be important for students to be aware of the continuing significance of such scholarship, particularly in the German-speaking world (although P. Stuhlmacher's two-volume work in German is quite different in tone), and they will certainly find lots of information in this book, but since Strecker does not find any coherent theology in the NT as a whole, students and preachers would be better advised to spend their money on the standard older volume by G.E. Ladd or the stimulating recent volume by G.B. Caird. Probably also belonging to the category of 'Biblical Theology' is A.B. Rhodes and W. E. Marsh, *The Mighty Acts of God*.¹³ This book is a mixture of introduction to the Bible, biblical theology and Bible study notes. It provides brief comments on all sections of the biblical text plus occasional illustrations and regular questions for personal reflection. It is aimed at a lay readership, although some of the scholarly issues raised would be taxing for many study groups. There is a tendency to accept the findings of mainstream critical scholarship, although the author clearly holds a relatively positive view of the Bible as scripture.

Introductory Issues

Several important introductory volumes have appeared in the last couple of years. P. D. Wegner has written an excellent volume on 'the origin and development of the Bible' entitled, *The Journey from Texts to Translations*.¹⁴ Wegner has combined high quality research with excellent presentation to provide an astonishing reference tool which

provides accurate and accessible information on everything from ancient inscriptions through approaches to textual criticism to 'the NET Bible'. Richly illustrated (in black and white), this book is highly recommended both to those who need to know and those who want to know. A volume which covers some of the same material and is written by a gifted communicator is *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus* by Alan Millard.¹⁵ This book is certainly more demanding than Wegner's but will be equally fascinating to those who are intrigued by biblical archaeology and it has important positive implications for the demonstration of the reliability of the NT text. On a related issue, M. Silva and K. Jobes have written *Invitation to the Septuagint*.¹⁶ While this topic may not be of prime importance to many preachers, students would do well to gain some understanding of the issues relating to a major source of OT quotations in the NT from this reliable book. The first part is quite accessible while the second and third parts demand more competence in the biblical languages. On the history of NT times, B. Witherington's *New Testament History: A Narrative Account*¹⁷ is typically well written and well researched and provides clear and helpful maps and illustrations. Readers who do not possess Witherington's many previous books and commentaries may, however, find the frequent citation of these volumes as sources of further discussion rather frustrating. L. McDonald and S. E. Porter have collaborated in writing *Early Christianity and its Sacred Literature*¹⁸ which provides detailed discussions on the background to the NT and the origins of the various biblical documents but very little on the biblical text itself. It is an important resource for students and so theological libraries should have it, but will probably be of less immediate use to the preacher. Of a similar nature, but with more emphasis on the theological and literary character of the NT texts is P. Achtemeier, J.B. Green and M.M. Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology*.¹⁹ This is in many respects a very useful volume, but it is disappointing that, having been co-written by two evangelical authors (Green and Thompson), it should accept so many standard 'critical' conclusions. Watch out for a revised edition of Carson, Moo and Morris' important introduction which, it is said, will pay more attention to literary and theological features of the biblical text than the first edition. On one section of the NT, D. Wenham and S. Walton's new textbook, *Exploring the New Testament: Volume 1, Introducing the Gospels and Acts*,²⁰ is presented in such a way that its function as a textbook is unmistakable. While this may put some more seasoned readers off, this book is full of helpful material, clearly expressed and will be of particular help to students. A second volume on the remaining NT documents written by S. Travis, I.H. Marshall and I. Paul should be published quite soon. P.J. Tomson's *'If this be from Heaven...'*²¹ is an unusual introduction to the NT which reads the biblical text in order to consider whether it contains 'anti-Judaism'. He concludes that such material is found in every Gospel bar Luke's and that modern Christians must therefore read the NT documents in a way that compensates for this fact. Tomson appears to argue for a 'two covenant' theology, arguing that both Judaism and Christianity are legitimate. While this is an interesting book (particularly for those concerned with dialogue between Christians and Jews), it does not really function effectively as an introduction to the NT and is not an indispensable resource. Finally, in this category, B. J. Malina's well-known book, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, has been reissued in a 'revised and expanded' third edition.²² Malina's book is important in that it reminds a modern reader of the NT that words make sense in context, including social context and that the social context of, say, a modern western

reader is very different from that of a first-century Mediterranean hearer. Malina helpfully highlights the importance of, for example, honour and shame; kinship and marriage; and purity, for understanding the NT. Malina draws on studies of modern Mediterranean society and one might wish to raise the caution that ancient Mediterranean society may not have shared precisely the same values, but, in general, this book is valuable in allowing modern interpreters to bridge the cultural gap between themselves and the NT. It is likely to be of most interest to students and teachers but preachers could benefit from the book also.

Studies of ‘the Historical Jesus’

S.E. Porter’s book, *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research*,²³ includes a very clear history of the most recent phase of research on Jesus as a figure in history and in his ancient setting (the so-called ‘Third Quest’) and a good discussion of the various criteria by means of which scholars have evaluated the material in the canonical Gospels. However, the second half of the book is a detailed discussion of suggested criteria for authenticity based on features of the Greek text of the Gospels which will be very demanding for most readers, even those who have quite competent Greek. This is probably a volume which libraries might wish to hold but which individuals can live without. *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*,²⁴ although perhaps bearing a rather peculiar title, is in fact a useful collection of essays by recognised experts written at an accessible level. The book is divided into two parts: the first historical and the second more theological, although a number of contributors emphasise the need to hold such distinctions lightly. The contributors reflect a range of theological perspectives. It was rather frustrating to find some of the language typical of mainstream critical scholarship assumed without question by even the more conservative scholars. Particularly interesting (if not completely convincing) is the contribution by Francis Watson who argues that ‘the real Jesus’ cannot be discerned by historical scholarship alone but must be known in the act of Christological confession. G.W. Dawes has written a companion volume to his reader on ‘The Quest of the Historical Jesus’ (which I mentioned in my last literature survey) entitled *The Historical Jesus Question*.²⁵ Dawes provides a detailed engagement with some of the key figures in the field up to Bultmann. He ultimately comes to very pessimistic conclusions regarding the significance of the ‘historical Jesus’ for the modern church, which are quite different from many recent contributors to ‘Life of Jesus Research’.

Commentaries

Mark’s Gospel has been well served recently with the production of four substantial commentaries by evangelical authors. B. Witherington’s latest offering in his series of ‘socio-rhetorical’ commentaries is on *The Gospel of Mark*.²⁶ The strengths of the commentary are a strong emphasis on literary structure and progression, helpful use of historical and sociological data, good use of contemporary scholarship by means both of appropriation of insights and of engagement with contrary positions and a concern to ‘bridge the horizons’ between the ancient text and the modern world. Also on Mark is the most recent addition to the *Pillar* series by J.R. Edwards.²⁷ Edwards’ commentary is full of useful detail and discussion and is sensitive to literary, historical and theological issues. Finally, R.T. France has produced a contribution to the

excellent *New International Greek Testament Commentary* series and C.A. Evans has completed the commentary on Mark 9–16 for the *Word Biblical Commentary* series.²⁸ On an entirely different scale, N.T. Wright has produced the first two volumes in an ambitious project to provide accessible commentaries on the whole NT. *Mark for Everyone* and *Luke for Everyone*²⁹ are not detailed commentaries but they do present Wright's generally helpful perspectives on the Gospels in a way that might be interesting to a Bible Study group, students or even preachers who have not read any of Wright's major works. Wright is an excellent communicator and these commentaries may well provide a much more conservative alternative to W. Barclay's readable, but dated and Liberal, series.

G. Keddie's volume on *John 1–12*³⁰ is the first NT volume to appear in a new series aimed at serious students of the Bible. Keddie's comments reflects the origins of the material in a preaching ministry, tending towards exposition rather than exegesis. While he does draw on some modern exegetical commentaries by evangelical scholars, more often he draws on older theological works. Future volumes in the series will be exegetical without being technical. J. Currid's excellent two-volume commentary on *Exodus*³¹ illustrates the series editor's vision for the future volumes. Also on John's Gospel are three important volumes which are not commentaries. C.L. Blomberg has helpfully developed previous work into a full-scale book on *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*.³² This book is required reading for students of John and would-be apologists. M.M. Thompson has written a true Theology of the Gospel in *The God of the Gospel of John*.³³ Careful and well informed studies of, for example, 'The Meaning of "God"', 'Knowledge of God', 'The Spirit of God' and 'The Worship of God' will prove very useful to preachers. A.T. Lincoln has written an ambitious book, *Truth on Trial*,³⁴ which seeks to move beyond a literary and historical study of the trial motif in John's Gospel to a theological appropriation of the biblical material for the modern world. This substantial work, which draws on NT scholarship, literary theory and theological reflection from the Fathers through Barth to the present is a stimulating study and will repay careful reading by a serious reader, even where one would not wish to follow Lincoln.

Those who have used volumes in the *International Critical Commentary* will know what to expect from M. Thrall's second volume on *II Corinthians*, which covers chapters 8–13.³⁵ Thrall believes that the letter as we have it now is in fact composed of three letters combined: letter 1 in chapters 1–7, letter 2 in chapter 9 and letter 3 in chapters 10–13. In addition to painstaking exegesis of the Greek text, in discussion with a huge number of ancient and modern authors, Thrall provides nine excursuses and two essays on Paul's opponents and 'Paul the Apostle'. Students and scholars with good Greek skills who are working on 2 Corinthians must engage with this commentary. Preachers are unlikely to find this commentary so useful because of both detail and critical position. On a somewhat smaller scale, R. Schnackenburg's commentary on *The Epistle to the Ephesians* has been republished in paperback format. Although Schnackenburg reflects mainstream critical views about non-Pauline authorship, his comments on the text are theologically rich and his detailed notes on the Greek text will prove very useful to students. This is not an easy commentary but neither is it highly technical. It is well worth a look and is worth buying for those with the skills necessary to use it. Following closely after the publication of I.H. Marshall's important ICC commentary on the Pastoral

Epistles comes W.D. Mounce's contribution to the Word Biblical Commentary series on the Pastorals.³⁶ Mounce provides a useful conversation partner for Marshall as he holds to Pauline authorship of these letters and takes different positions from Marshall on a number of significant issues. It is unfortunate that the commentaries were being written at almost the same time so that the two scholars could not engage with each other's views. Although Mounce provides plenty of detail, as one would expect of a volume in this series, he set out (as did Marshall) to write a commentary for the church. Although the comments are based on the Greek text, Greek is normally translated.

While not truly a 'commentary', L.R. Donelson's, *From Hebrews to Revelation: A Theological Introduction*³⁷ is a collection of 'theological readings of the NT documents from Hebrews to Revelation', which attempt to hear the 'proper historical and literary voice' of the biblical texts. Although some suggestions for further reading are offered at the end of the book, there is no explicit engagement with the work of others in the body of the book. Those who cannot pluck up the courage to tackle G.K. Beale's superb but mammoth commentary on Revelation have been well served in the last few months. P. Gardner has written a very sane and accessible commentary on the apocalypse in the *Focus on the Bible* series³⁸ while V.S. Poythress has written *The Returning King*³⁹ which draws on the best scholarship to provide a very readable guide to this daunting biblical document. For those who wish a more substantial treatment, D.E. Johnson's, *Triumph of the Lamb*⁴⁰ is a sober exegetical treatment of Revelation which draws on the best contemporary scholarship without providing exhaustive detail. While he occasionally engages with more maverick interpretations, Johnson most often treats the biblical text on its own terms, being particularly sensitive to OT allusions. Readers who carefully heed Johnson's clearly stated hermeneutical principles will save themselves from numerous exegetical disasters.

General NT Studies

R.N. Longenecker's new book will be appreciated by those who have valued previous examples of his careful exegesis. *New Wine into Fresh Wineskins*⁴¹ argues that a substantial number of portions of early Christian confessions may be discerned in the NT texts. Part one aims to demonstrate how such material may be identified. Part two shows how Longenecker believes the NT authors 'contextualised' such confessional material in their writings, looking at examples from most of the NT documents. Part three considers how such confessional material might be 'contextualised' today. The book is interesting, but as it is mainly a study of method there is little detailed exegesis of NT texts. The value of this book to any given reader hinges on how convinced one is of Longenecker's fundamental point concerning the identification of confessional material. I think that there are too many propositions which are highly debatable for this to be a must-have book. On the other hand, the latest offering in the *McMaster New Testament Studies*⁴² series which is edited by Longenecker is a highly useful contribution to the study of a topic which is of great importance to the life of the church. *Into God's Presence* is a collection of essays on prayer in the NT, as well as several on the background material in the OT and other Jewish writings. As usual, the authors have been instructed to write in an accessible style, although some readers will find some essays a bit demanding. Francis Watson has written a number of stimulating books and articles arguing for a closer relationship between the disciplines of biblical studies and

theological studies. In *Agape, Eros, Gender*⁴³ he works out these methodological principles in a study of a highly controversial but highly relevant topic: sexual ethics. Three chapters on important secular authors are each followed by an essay in theological exegesis. While I cannot endorse all of Watson's views, he is such a stimulating thinker that those who dare (and can afford!) to wrestle with this book will come away with a more nuanced perspective on a topic which is of crucial importance not simply for Pauline studies but for the life of the church. Dealing with similar issues is S.C. Barton's, *Life Together*.⁴⁴ This is a collection of previously published essays which seeks to relate the biblical text to the contemporary world in a careful way.

The 'New Perspective on Paul', most effectively articulated by Professor J.D.G. Dunn has had many advocates over the last two decades, but recently there has been a spate of books which raise challenges to this view. The slightest is by the veteran Tübingen professor, Peter Stuhlmacher, and is entitled, *Revisiting Paul's Doctrine of Justification: A Challenge to the New Perspective*.⁴⁵ This brief discussion of justification argues for a forensic understanding of 'justification'. On a more substantial scale, S. Kim's new book, *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul's Gospel*⁴⁶ engages directly with the work of Dunn and others, particularly in a substantial first chapter which defends the thesis of his published doctoral thesis. Unnecessarily technical for most preachers, yet exceptionally important for advanced students, a so deserving of a brief mention, are the responses to E.P. Sanders by M.A. Elliott⁴⁷ and Carson, O'Brien and Seifrid.⁴⁸

Preaching Like Paul by J. W. Thompson⁴⁹ moves from a useful study of the NT evidence concerning Paul's preaching to a discussion of homiletics based on the pattern of Paul. There is much useful material here for those who preach. The collection of essays edited by P. Bolt and M. Thompson and entitled, *The Gospel to the Nations*,⁵⁰ is a *Festschrift* in honour of P.T. O'Brien and is a very valuable collection gathered under the broad theme of Paul's missionary theology and activity. Very worthwhile for students and those who enjoy such collections. G.D. Fee is perhaps best known for very substantial expositions of Pauline theology. In *Listening to the Spirit in the Text*,⁵¹ however, a number of his shorter published articles have been brought together. These studies reveal clearly a scholar with a heart for the church. Particularly powerful is the chapter 'On Being a Trinitarian Christian' which deserves a wide readership. Likewise, while many readers will not share Fee's views expressed in 'Toward a Pauline Theology of Glossolalia', one could hardly wish for a more careful presentation of a 'Pentecostal' perspective on this topic. More demanding but equally valuable is the collection of Fee's scholarly articles, *To What End Exegesis?*⁵² There are some real treasures in this collection of previously published articles—Fee's study of Philippians 2:5–11 stands out as an exegetical model—but most readers will find that there are a limited number of essays which are of direct relevance to them.

Conclusion

No one reader is likely to find all the above volumes equally important and useful. It is well worth giving some careful thought to one's priorities before parting with one's hard-earned cash. Some preachers may be tempted to buy nothing but commentaries (and perhaps not even the exegetical kind suggested above), while some students may wish to seek out the latest monograph. I would encourage all readers, however, to treat

their reading as continuing education and therefore to buy and read books that will stimulate as well as inform, challenge as well as instruct. My particular commendations (for what they are worth) are Wenham, *Story as Torah*; O'Brien and Köstenberger, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*; Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*; Wegner's *The Journey from Texts to Translations*; Bockmuehl (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*; Witherington or Edwards (or probably France) on *Mark*; and Longenecker (ed), *Into God's Presence*. In this coming year, may we read not simply as a means to the end of the next sermon or essay but as an opportunity to develop our Christian thinking so as to be more effective as a student and communicator of the words of eternal life to our contemporary world.

References

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