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Ehrman, Bart D.

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

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There could hardly be a more daunting task for a NT scholar today than to write a comprehensive introduction to the NT. To the traditional massive amount of material to be covered one must now add consideration of new methods (e.g., sociology of the NT, narrative criticism) and new questions (e.g., feminist perspectives, anti-Semitism in the NT). More daunting still is the prospect of writing such an introduction for undergraduate students, whose biblical literacy and historical knowledge are at a low ebb.

Taking on this challenge with courage and skill, Ehrman has produced a very useful tool for professors facing that *tabula rasa*, the undergraduate mind. Ever conscious of his audience, Ehrman employs a simple, breezy, humorous style, replete with contemporary metaphors and examples. He often addresses his students directly (e.g., p. 56): "My working assumption . . . is that you have already familiarized yourself with the contents of . . . [Mark's Gospel] by reading it carefully. . . ." At times one feels as though one were hearing a tape of his classroom lectures. In keeping with this interactive, *viva voce* tone, the text dispenses with footnotes and most references to modern authors; a short annotated bibliography follows each chapter.

Sensitive to his students' weak grasp of the ancient world, Ehrman takes nothing for granted. He begins by explaining how Greco-Roman religiosity, apart from Judaism, was almost the exact opposite of what many Americans today take to be religion. Throughout the book, he is at pains to disabuse his students of popular misconceptions about ancient Christianity and the NT. His emphasis on the diversity of early Christianity is the *basso continuo* pervading the volume.

A basic problem for any author of a NT introduction is how to order the immense and unwieldy material. Should one follow the canonical order, the chronological order of the writings (hence Paul first), or the chronological order in which major NT figures

appeared on the historical scene (hence Jesus first)? In a sense, Ehrman adopts the last approach, but with a twist. After a general introduction to oral and written Jesus traditions, Ehrman treats Mark, Matthew, Luke-Acts, John, the Johannine Epistles, and a number of noncanonical Gospels from the 2d century. Only then does he move back to discuss the historical Jesus in three chapters. He opts for an apocalyptic Jesus in the mode of E. P. Sanders as opposed to the Cynic Jesus of the Jesus Seminar. Ehrman finally comes full circle by tracing the development of the tradition from Jesus to the Gospels.

The second major section of the volume is devoted to Paul and the Pauline tradition. Contrary to the first section, Ehrman begins with the historical Paul. He notes the difficulties involved in reconstructing the historical Paul (which epistles are pseudepigraphic? how reliable is Acts?). After providing a thumbnail sketch of Paul's life, Ehrman does the same for Paul's theology. He then moves through all the undisputed Paulines, beginning with a full treatment of 1 Thessalonians, but focusing especially on Romans. The Deutero-Paulines (Colossians, Ephesians) are treated with, but distinguished from, the Pastorals. At this point he inserts a separate chapter on "the oppression of women in early Christianity," tracing the shift he sees from the relative freedom of women in the early Pauline churches to their subordination in the Pastorals. Not all will find his inclusion of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* in the discussion convincing; some scholars still date the work toward the end of the 2d century.

After these two major sections, Ehrman faces a problem: how to organize the more disparate material left in the canon, as well as related noncanonical works? He imposes a pedagogically useful if somewhat artificial grid on the material. Hebrews and the *Epistle of Barnabas* come under "Christians and Jews"; 1 Peter, Ignatius, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, and some of the Apologists come under "Christians and Pagans"; James, the *Didache*, the *Letter of Polycarp*, 1 Clement, Jude, and 2 Peter come under "Christians and Christians"; the Revelation of John, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, and the *Apocalypse of Peter* come under "Christians and the Cosmos." The volume concludes with an introduction to text criticism, Ehrman's specialty. The work ends somewhat abruptly; one might have expected a final chapter of reflections, drawing together various insights into a final synthesis.

One marvels at the wealth of material Ehrman has digested in a clear and orderly format. As the subtitle indicates, the overriding method is historical, but Ehrman takes care to introduce his students to other methods: e.g., narrative criticism in Mark, a comparative method in Luke (i.e., Luke as compared to the other Gospels, without concern for literary dependence), a thematic approach in Acts, and all four approaches in John. This pedagogical program means that not every part of every Gospel is covered in detail. For instance, the chapter on Matthew focuses on the Sermon on the Mount. Surprisingly, there is no great discussion of the literary structure of each Gospel; nowhere is a detailed, chapter-by-chapter outline of each Gospel given.

In tune with his emphasis on the diversity of early Christianity, Ehrman makes a great effort to represent a variety of scholarly and religious views fairly. It is therefore curious that, just as he is inculcating the wide diversity of NT Christianity in his opening chapter, he presents the list of the books of the Jewish Scriptures/OT that has been adopted by Jews and by most Protestants. The longer canon adopted, with variations, by Catholic, Orthodox, and Oriental churches is ignored. Moreover, despite his concern to be even-handed, it becomes clear that Ehrman has no great sympathy for the "proto-orthodox" party, which is associated with such evaluative descriptions as "rigid." On the whole, though, this introduction is as fair to all sides as one can reasonably expect. Ehrman strives to present the results of mainstream scholarship. Rarely does he mention unusual views of his own (e.g., that Peter and Cephas were two different persons), and then only tentatively.

Needless to say, writing a NT introduction for undergraduates with little or no background imposes severe restrictions on an author who could have easily composed a much more detailed treatment for his peers. Sweeping generalizations and oversimplifications are perhaps unavoidable when addressing undergraduates. At times, though, the need for simple explanations collides with the complexity of the material, as, e.g., when Ehrman tries to lay out the arguments for the priority of Mark and the existence of Q. At other times, the vast range of the material to be covered seems to occasion self-contradictions. For example, on p. 3, Ehrman states that "the only Christian writings that can be reliably dated to the first century are found in the New Testament itself. . . ." Yet, on p. 390, Ehrman appears to accept a date around AD 95-96 for *I Clement*.

Obviously, these critical observations are mere quibbles. Ehrman has done a masterful job of supplying professors with a first-rate introduction for undergraduates. All those who teach that challenging group are in his debt.