



Metzger, Bruce M.

***The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, & Content
Third Edition, Revised and Enlarged***

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Nick Norelli

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth
New Jersey

Now in its third edition, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, & Content* is what I would consider a *tour de force* in New Testament introductions. There are few scholars who have been as highly prized and appreciated as the late Bruce Metzger, and this book is a testimony to why exactly this is. Split into three main sections, this book covers (1) The Background of the New Testament Period, (2) Aspects of the Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ, and (3) The Apostolic Age.

In the first section Metzger covers everything from the social and political climate of the Hasmonean Dynasty up until the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, to the competing philosophical systems of Platonism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Cynicism. He also spends some time outlining and summarizing the various mystery religions of the day, such as the Mithraic cult, the Eleusinian cult, Isiac cult, the Dionysiac cult, and the cult of Cybele (which I have admittedly never heard of). In between he spends a good amount of time discussing the literature of the intertestamental period, as well as the different sects within Judaism and their customs. Overall, this section gave a hefty amount of background material which will certainly spark further study.

In the second section we're given more than sufficient historical information to erase any doubt that the man Jesus ever existed. Metzger begins by listing the non-Christian sources that speak of Jesus (e.g. Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, etc.) as well as the Canonical (i.e., Gospels, Paul's epistles, etc.) and Apocryphal (e.g., Thomas, Infancy Gospel of Thomas, etc.) materials that speak of Jesus. When discussing the Gospels, Metzger briefly touches on literary criticism and form criticism, affirming Markan priority, and perpetuating the myth of this fantasy document/oral source called 'Q', which in turn results in a succinct treatment of the Two Source hypothesis.

He then summarizes Jesus' life, (i.e., childhood, baptism, ministry, etc.) There's a short appendix on the miracles in the Gospels (155-59) wherein Metzger notes just how integral miracles were to the messianic work of Jesus. He also gives the reader eight

practical principles for evaluating the stories of Jesus' miracles that I will not reproduce in this review. He closes this section by examining Jesus' teaching. Everything from the style of his teaching, (things like word pictures, puns, poetry, parables, proverbs, etc.) to Jesus' teaching itself (e.g., concerning the Kingdom, or himself, or the Father) is covered in this last section, and Metzger is quite right to point out that Jesus was not an abstract thinker. He thought and taught like all Jews of his day, in concrete terms. His focus was on God's action in the world, over and against, abstract notions of God's *being*.

The final section spans from Acts through Revelation. Metzger gives a chronology of Acts that I found very helpful, before moving on to the early evangelistic efforts of the Church. He spends a good amount of space dealing with the Church's conflict with Judaism and the subsequent martyrdom of Stephen. Next he deals with Paul's three missionary trips and his imprisonment. Brief summaries are then given of all the Pauline epistles, covering of course, issues of authorship, destination, etc. An appendix follows concerning the leading ideas in Paul's theology. Metzger notes them as:

1. God as Father
2. Humankind as sinners
3. God's grace
4. Redemption
5. Justification through faith
6. Sanctification and the new life in Christ
7. The Church
8. The Kingdom of God

Brief summaries of the general epistles and the book of Revelation follow. He closes the book with a short chapter on the canonization of the NT and an appendix on the transmission of the NT. One would think that given Metzger's specialty as a textual critic that these would be where he shined most, but I'll be honest in saying that he maintained the same level of consistency throughout this book. He's just as clear and informative when discussing the NT's background as he is when discussing its transmission. Overall, this book was incredibly easy to read and understand, and would serve well as a introductory textbook in any class on the NT. I would recommend this to teacher and student alike; and after reading this, I would like to adopt it as a text for an adult Bible study in my own church. I believe that it will genuinely benefit anyone who reads it. Even if the material covered is not new to you, it will help you to organize it in such a way as to be able to pass it along to others easily. This is truly the best NT introduction I've read to date.