

An Introduction to the New Testament and the Origins of Christianity

First published in 2002, this book offers an authoritative and accessible introduction to the New Testament and early Christian literature for all students of the Bible and the origins of Christianity. Delbert Burkett focuses on the New Testament, but also looks at a number of non-biblical texts to examine the history, religion, and literature of Christianity in the years from 30 CE to 150 CE. The book is organized systematically with questions for in-class discussion and written assignments, step-by-step reading guides on individual works, special box features, charts, maps, and numerous illustrations designed to facilitate student use. An appendix containing translations of primary texts allows instant access to the writings outside the canon.

For this new edition, Burkett has reorganized and rewritten many chapters, and has also incorporated revisions throughout the text, bringing it up to date with current scholarship. This volume is designed for use as the primary textbook for one- and two-semester courses on the New Testament and early Christianity.

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Delbert Burkett

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Louisiana State University



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Preface to the Second Edition

The second edition of this textbook takes into account new publications that have appeared since the first edition. I have revised the bibliographies at the end of each chapter, incorporating some of the newer works and keeping older ones that have retained their significance. In addition, my own understanding of the subject matter has grown since the first edition, enabling me to see that parts of the text could be improved. I have revised a few chapters extensively, while others have undergone minor changes. The original structure of the work remains the same.

Preface to the First Edition

This book introduces the history, literature, and religion of early Christianity in the years from about 30 to 150 CE. In this book, I have two aims:

- to provide a textbook for a one-semester course in the New Testament and the origins of Christianity;
- to provide a selection of primary sources from outside the New Testament that are relevant for the origins of Christianity.

With this textbook and a Bible, the student should have the basic texts necessary for an introductory study of Christian origins.

This book has developed as I have taught undergraduate courses in the New Testament at several state universities. The students for whom I write are therefore undergraduate students in a liberal arts or humanities program. The book presupposes no prior knowledge of the New Testament or early Christianity.

Significant features of this textbook include the following.

1. As an introduction to Christian origins, the book takes a primarily historical approach to the literature. Chapter 1 explains more fully than most comparable textbooks the differences between the historical-critical method and the confessional method of studying the New Testament. At the same time, the book introduces students to various other current methods of interpretation and gives specific examples of each. The bibliographies also suggest books that employ these methods or explain them further. Some of the discussion questions allow the students to consider the contemporary relevance of the material.

2. In keeping with a recent trend, this textbook discusses not only the New Testament but other early Christian literature as well. To study the history and religion of early Christianity, we must examine all the literature relevant for that purpose, whether canonized or not. At the same time, we must impose some limit on the material to accommodate it within a single semester. I have discussed all the books of the New Testament, as well as most other Christian literature written before 150. Instructors may need to limit the material further by selecting what they wish to emphasize.

3. No comparable textbook on this subject includes a selection of primary texts in the same volume. In a series of appendixes, I include three types of primary texts: selections relevant to the cultural and religious context; selections from the Apostolic Fathers; and several apocryphal or Gnostic Gospels. Some available sourcebooks contain one or two of these types of texts, but no sourcebook that I am aware of contains all three.

4. Chapters in this book that focus on a particular text usually include two main parts: (1) an introductory section that discusses critical issues, themes, and other features of the literature; (2) a reading guide designed to be read concurrently with the primary text. Previous students have found the reading guides particularly valuable in directing them step by step through the primary text with explanatory comments. Chapters also include discussion questions that the instructor can use for written assignments or in-class discussions, review questions that focus the student's attention on the central ideas of the chapter, and suggestions for further study.

5. Discussion questions in each chapter suggest how to integrate primary sources with that chapter. For example, in Chapter 4 (Varieties of Second-Temple Judaism), the discussion question suggests reading Josephus' discussion of Essenes (Appendix 2) along with controversy stories from the New Testament. Whereas some textbooks do not relate the introductory section to the primary sources, this approach correlates the "background" material with relevant selections from the New Testament and other literature. Following this approach, students will start reading from the New Testament beginning with Chapter 2. They will become

familiar with controversy stories, miracle stories, birth narratives, parables, and example stories before they read a whole gospel.

6. A basic consideration in presenting the New Testament is whether to start with the earliest literature (Paul) or the literature relating to the earliest period (the gospels). It is difficult to understand Paul without knowing the gospels, yet it is difficult to understand the gospels without knowing Paul. To resolve this problem, I have provided an initial overview of early Christian history (Chapter 7). This chapter provides a framework for the study of literature that follows. It gives students the basic information about early Christianity that they need for an informed reading of the gospels, after which they read Paul.

7. After sections on the gospels and Acts, I classify the remaining literature according to the type of Christianity that it represents: Pauline, Judaic, Gnostic, or Proto-Orthodox. Each type of Christianity receives treatment in a separate section, with an initial chapter that describes its distinctive features. Subsequent chapters in each section discuss particular texts representative of that type. This approach allows the student to see the literature not merely as a series of documents but as illustrations of particular perspectives within early Christianity.

8. In discussing each type of Christianity, I pay attention not only to its history and literature, but also to the distinctive features of its religion. By religion I mean not merely theology, but the various dimensions that the phenomenology of religion has used to describe religion, particularly the conceptual, social, ritual, and ethical dimensions.

9. In discussing Proto-Orthodox Christianity, I focus on three central concerns that appear in the literature: conflict within the church, the relation of Christianity to Judaism, and conflict with the Roman world.

Thanks go to Kevin Taylor, my editor at Cambridge University Press, for his keen interest in this project; to Jenny Landor for soliciting reviews; to Laura Hemming for assisting with the illustrations; to Lucy Carolan for copyediting; to the numerous scholars who read the manuscript and offered suggestions for improvement; and to all my former students, who taught me how to teach.