

## BOOK REVIEW

Hagner, Donald Alfred, *The New Testament: A Historical and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012). xxiv + 872 pp. Hbk. \$35.98 USD.

In a sea of introductory works Donald Hagner offers an evangelical introduction to the New Testament that accomplishes far more than keeping publishers in business. His wide breadth of engagement will appeal to professors for implementation in their classes, and students will appreciate its approachability and readability.

After spending the last few decades in the biblical studies guild and classroom, Hagner understands what teachers want in a textbook and what students need. He keeps these things in mind while offering exposure to the world of contemporary New Testament studies. He maintains a conservative yet balanced approach free from any one-camp prejudice. The diversity of citations, footnotes and bibliographic material will definitely please a wide range of professors. With a pedagogical mindset, Hagner overall accomplishes a fine introductory work for students at the advanced undergrad or early seminary level in broadly evangelical settings.

This review will focus on the six disproportionately sized sections: Introduction, Gospels, Paul and Epistles, Hebrews and Catholic Epistles, Apocalypse and Canonical Adoption. Each section displays a common layout. The book, letter or topic is first related to its New Testament category, and once a student has a brief orientation, the conventional introductory topics are covered: authorship, date, location, addressee and occasion for writing. Hagner then explains the unique contributions of the topic or text to the New Testament and its theological significance. For instance, with the book of John, Hagner addresses the questions of its of historical value in relation to the Synoptics. While Hagner notes the challenges modern higher critical methods have brought forward, he also grounds students in the history of interpretation. He indicates that before the nineteenth century, John

was viewed as a more historically reliable eye-witness account than Mark and Luke. Such interpretive background information offers the student an introduction to major contemporary positions and questions, but also shows biblical exploration has a longer history of opinions and stances than just the last few centuries. It is commendable that Hagner seeks to provide his readers with such historical and theological insights rather than simple formulaic data.

Another example demonstrating insights that go beyond the normal introduction is his material on the letter to the Philippians. There Hagner draws out the complexity of the topics of literary integrity and the christological hymn of Phil. 2.6-11. Such sections helpfully provide students with information for further study and topics for research papers.

One shortcoming is that there is almost no presentation to substantiate the use of particular methodologies. In his treatment of Galatians, Hagner offers no justification for adopting Greco-Roman rhetorical categories proposed by Hans Dieter Betz. However, the examination of various hermeneutical and interpretive frameworks does serve to expose students to methods actually being used in the guild today.

The first section of the book covers background introduction. Hagner offers some cursory comments on the historical setting, hermeneutical methods, critical methodologies and textual criticism of the Bible generally and the New Testament specifically. Those familiar with introductory works will find this section to be a catchall for material that could not fit elsewhere. Though I appreciate the brief discussion concerning the historical reliability of the biblical documents, as well as the candid presentation of topics like Q, and theoretical distinctions between the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith, there are some weaknesses.

For instance, Hagner wisely starts with a presentation of Old Testament structuring before digging into the New Testament; unfortunately this could have been better implemented throughout the book. After he contends that the Old Testament is the promise and preparation for the New Testament, the data is not drawn upon in any meaningful way thereafter. Furthermore, it would have been beneficial to incorporate material concerning Second Temple Judaism and religious diversity at the time of Jesus more generally. Unfortunately there is not even a mention of groups such as the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes or the schools of Hillel and Shammai.

The second section is about the Gospels. Hagner begins with a presentation of the Synoptic problem and Q theories before turning to the Gospel documents directly. Offering a rich discussion on the challenges and history behind the Historical Jesus quests, Hagner highlights some of the challenges within Synoptic studies. Though he consistently concludes with conservative evangelical positions, Hagner does not present a fundamentalist position. Rather, he exposes students to the seriousness and significant challenges posed by Synoptic verbal parallels, then works to offer suggestions for possible resolutions.

One noticeable shortcoming of the Gospel section is the disproportionate attention given to the book of Acts. While many would agree with reading Luke–Acts as one work rather than two, it does a bit of injustice to the individual voice of the Gospel of Luke. This actually highlights the challenge faced in introductory works. Is the goal a New Testament canonical overview, or an introduction to distinct texts?

The third section covers Paul and his Epistles. Before engaging directly with the Pauline corpus, divided between accepted-Pauline and Deutero-Pauline, Hagner offers a lengthy introduction to Paul, Pauline studies and the early missionary stages of the church. This is the longest section and probably the strongest. Anyone engaged in Pauline studies understands that the breadth of the field can be intimidating to the uninitiated. However, Hagner does a very fine job of introducing Paul as a person with his Jewish background and his significant role in the early church. It is here Hagner offers a summary of contemporary debates such as the New Perspective on Paul. Often debates can be polarizing and a hindrance to students in introductory works, but Hagner avoids such rhetorical flare and offers balanced insights for students to engage in further studies.

Approaching the so-called Deutero-Pauline letters, Hagner presents the label as a scholarly consensus. Whether one agrees with the label or not, he does helpfully lay out the evidence for students to be exposed to the issues. The one thing lacking, however, is an explanation of the ramifications of labeling the letters pseudonymous or the issue of pseudonymity in general. Readers are not given encouragement to regard the letters as deutero-canonical, but students will be left curious as to what the significance of such labels is.

The fourth section is devoted to Hebrews and the Catholic Epistles. For the book of Hebrews, Hagner gives more attention to the history of analysis than he does with the other documents. He presents the student

with a historical survey concerning authorship, addressee, diaspora setting and other relevant features, and points to the diverse history of interpretation to substantiate his conclusion that the evidence is inconclusive regarding many aspects of the document. Despite recognizing some limitations, Hagner still offers a number of helpful theological insights into the book.

The Apocalypse is the topic of the fifth section. Hagner acknowledges the significant challenges faced in approaching Revelation and surveys many different interpretive approaches. While working through Revelation quite well, Hagner also uses the opportunity to discuss New Testament teaching on salvation history and the end goal of the church for the present and future.

The sixth and final section is Canonical Formation. Although Hagner is commended for attempting to offer an encompassing one-volume work, this section is a bit too cursory. Although individual canonical status is discussed in various sections where relevant, contemporary issues concerning canonical formation and final ratification have recently become so heated that a bit more explanation would be prudent.

Overall there are a number of substantial strengths. One of the most beneficial aspects is the attention to pedagogical ease without being reductionistic. To that end, Hagner implements some very helpful features every reader will appreciate. For example, concerning the Gospel of Matthew, Hagner offers a text box summarizing the data of Author, Date, Addressees, Purpose, Message/Argument and Significance. Such boxes are in every canonical section and helpfully summarize in bullet format information that can be utilized for examinations.

Also, the interspersion of short subsections presenting an overarching view of a new topic is a great aspect to the book. It helpfully orients the student to the topic in order to give them a framework to determine the significance of issues that will be covered. These sections could also serve well as smaller assigned portions for review prior to examination.

The most significant benefit to having a textbook written by such a seasoned professor is the depth of scholarship Hagner is able to draw upon. This comes across most recognizably at the end of each section. There he offers extensive bibliographies of relevant monographs, articles and commentaries. In some ways these alone can justify encouraging students to buy this larger and newer textbook, as the bibliographies will serve students past their introductory courses.

Despite the many quality features of the book, it is impossible to write on so many diverse topics without some shortcomings. One noticeable feature is that some material is outdated. A number of the methodologies and some supportive reasoning needs updating. For instance, in the section attempting to defend the verbal accuracy of the Synoptics amidst recognizable differences, Hagner still draws upon the methods of C.F. Burney. Back in 1925 Burney explained that when he translated the Greek sayings of Jesus back into a hypothetical Aramaic original, his translation matched his own definition of Hebrew poetry. Unfortunately, Hagner offers no discussion of whether Jesus taught in Greek, Aramaic, Hebrew or perhaps all of them, nor does Hagner indicate the extremely subjective nature of Burney's work. For a book introducing students to the field, it would be beneficial to also teach how to evaluate the strengths and weakness of the methods being used.

Furthermore, some bibliographic information needs to be included in a 2012 publication. For instance, when examining the debates concerning the phrase *πίστις Χριστοῦ*, Hagner of course draws attention to the interpretive options of objective versus subjective genitive. This is a very important topic with ramifications for a number of verses and theological frameworks. Unfortunately, he does not draw upon nor draw attention to an entire book on the topic containing an important linguistic article on the issue (cf. Michael F. Bird and Preston M. Sprinkle [eds.], *The Faith of Jesus Christ: Exegetical, Biblical, and Theological Studies* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010]).

Despite a few points for improvement, this book will serve as a quality introductory work for the next generation of biblical studies students. None of the weaknesses are insurmountable and they can easily be addressed by instructors in the classroom. Also, the non-confrontational tone makes incorporating the particulars of an institution and the instructor easy to do. On account of its strengths and the fair and balanced presentation, while maintaining a solid pedagogical structure, it is an excellent choice for evangelical school settings. Hagner has laid out a significant foundation of information that will be a welcome addition for students and professors at a number of institutions.

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