

NEW TESTAMENT LIFE and TIMES

Leander Church of Christ

Adult Bible Class

Begins 11/8/2020

Primary Sources

1. The New Testament in its World, by N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, “An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians”
2. Multiple Seminars, Sermons, and Classes, by Ray Vander Laan

Authors

1. Who is N. T. Wright?
 - a. Christianity Today magazine: People who are asked to write about N. T. Wright may find they quickly run out of superlatives. He is the most prolific biblical scholar in a generation. Some say he is the most important apologist for the Christian faith since C. S. Lewis. He has written the most extensive series of popular commentaries on the New Testament since William Barclay. And, in case three careers sound like too few, he is also a church leader, having served as Bishop of Durham, England, before his current teaching post at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. But perhaps the most significant praise of all: When Wright speaks, preaches, or writes, folks say they see Jesus, and lives are transformed. A pastor friend of mine describes a church member walking into his office, hands trembling as he held a copy of Wright's Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church. "If this book is true," he said, "then my whole life has to change."
 - b. The Atlantic: N. T. Wright is one of those thinkers who fall into a binary: Either people have never heard of him, or they believe him to be one of the most influential figures of our time. The magazine Christianity Today has called him “the most prolific biblical scholar in a generation” and “the most important apologist for the Christian faith since C. S. Lewis.” The British theologian is credited with writing more than six dozen books, many about the apostle Paul, and has reached the stage of fame where publishers are repackaging his work into new volumes, akin to a pop star’s greatest-hits album. He’s spent a large portion of his career in academia, but his work has also reached far beyond the Ivy Tower: He served as the Anglican bishop in Durham, England, in the early 2000s, and on the 2004 Lambeth Commission, a body set up to provide guidance on contentious divisions within the Anglican Communion over same-sex marriage and homosexuality.

From the Preface to NTiiW (The New Testament in its World) –

The eminent British New Testament scholar C. H. Dodd (1884–1973) was once asked if, supposing all written copies of the Greek New Testament were either lost or destroyed, he could reproduce the whole thing from memory. Dodd replied that, having lived with the Greek New Testament for so long, he was confident that he could indeed remember it all. In one account of the same story, the questioner responded with utter amazement: how could someone possibly claim to be able to recall the whole thing, in Greek no less? 'Well,' Dodd is said to have replied, with a comical mixture of humility and coyness, 'it's only a little book.'

The New Testament might only be small, but it is a strange and powerful book. At one level, it tells the history of Jesus and the early church; at another level (and these two go closely together, as we shall see) it is regarded by churches around the world as inspired scripture, normative for the life of faith. For this to become a reality, for the New Testament to come alive, each generation of readers, and especially teachers and preachers, needs help, particularly in the form of thorough, user-friendly, and creative introductions to Jesus, his first followers, and the literature that emerged from that movement. That is what this book is hoping to provide.

NtiiW -- KEEPING HISTORY, LITERATURE, AND THEOLOGY TOGETHER

It is better, though riskier, to see history, literature, and theology as belonging together. To continue our whimsical biblical parallels, we might liken this to the three friends in Daniel 3 who testified together to God's kingdom in the face of a megalomaniac monarch. The New Testament *is* history *and* literature *and* theology, all at once, and we should not try to reduce it to any one of these at the expense of the others. A close reading and thick description of the New Testament will necessarily involve the messy business of history, the hard work of literary criticism, and the arduous task of theological reflection.

As such, an informed reading of the New Testament, especially for a believing audience, will involve pursuing three main questions. First, the historical one: how did Christianity begin, and why did it take the shape that it did? Second, the literary one: why did the early Jesus-followers write the way they did, and what does this tell us about their worldview? Third, the theological question: what did the early Christians believe about God and the world, and about humans in general and Jesus in particular within that, and what kind of sense might their beliefs make? This volume will not answer all those questions in full. But, as we survey the New Testament writings, the present book offers a first guiding step on how to think about them.

NtiiW – 1 Beginning Study of the New Testament ... WHY THE NEW TESTAMENT?

The New Testament, in other words, isn't there to tell us simply 'how to get to heaven'. Indeed, to the surprise of many people, that isn't what it's saying at all. That's why some theories about the New Testament and its authority don't work as well as they should. If you try to read it as a 'how-to' book, which sadly is how some people approach it, you may end up frustrated, thinking it would be better if the spirit had

given us something more like a car manual or a railway timetable. No: the New Testament is designed to draw us into the story of God's plan, to rescue the world from chaos and idolatry and to launch his new transformative creation. This rescue, and this launch, have happened in Jesus; now, by the spirit, they are to be put into operation through people who are shaped by the biblical vision itself, by the stories of Jesus and his first followers, with ourselves joining in the movement those first followers began.

John Eldredge - EPIC - The Story (selected video clips)

- EPIC_02...0000 What Sort of Tale? (1.5 minutes) *Hobbits, Something Larger*
- EPIC_02...0135 Life Is a Story (1.5 minutes) Not like math problem, not like an IRS form. Tragedy, Comedy, Soap Opera. Daughter totaled the car.
- EPIC_02_0312 (0.5 minutes) *Grandfather, Okinawa*
- EPIC_02...0444 (1.5 minutes) We run into a problem, enter a movie 45 minutes late, what is the plot, earthquakes/divorce/heartache... need to know the rest of the story
- EPIC_02_0612 (1.2 minutes) Mall map "You Are Here," This Is The Big Picture, You Can Discover The Larger STORY! (It would be gold!)
- EPIC_02...1037 (0.5 minutes) Christianity is MORE... find yourself in the EPIC, your crucial role
- EPIC_02...1157 (2.5 minutes)

NTiiW - 2 The New Testament as History ... Reading the New Testament as a Historical Document

Sadly some will object to this historical enterprise, like a teenager complaining about being made to catalogue the boxes of parental memorabilia in the basement. For many grumblers the historical task seems irrelevant to their own situation: historical events might have provided the foundations for the church, they think, but no-one invests much time inspecting the foundations when there are prayers to pray, sermons to write, the elderly to visit, and services to prepare. Others will complain, not so much about the time-consuming nature of the task, but about the contents they have to pick through. How can Iron Age texts possibly be relevant in the Internet Age? Whatever people think the texts once 'meant', it is mostly irrelevant to the 'meanings' that we ascribe to them now—or the fresh insights we believe we possess in our own day.

Yet in counter-point to such recalcitrance, the reason why we engage in a study of the history of the New Testament is because of the conviction that Jesus and the apostles constitute the basis for normative Christianity.

NTiiW - 2 The New Testament as History ... Reading the New Testament as a Historical Document (2)

To give an analogy, consider three windows. Modernity liked to think of itself as looking through a transparent window that allowed one to see perfectly through to the other side as long as it was sunny (that is, truth is easily found if you have good sources and good methods). Postmodernity is basically saying that the window is really a mirror and all you see is little more than your own reflection, though you may get lucky if you unconsciously peer through one of the cracks and catch a glimpse of something behind the mirror (that is, truth may be out there, but you'll have a hard time telling it apart from your own reflection). Critical realism says that the mirror has a dark tint caused by the gaps in our knowledge and the shading of our own location, and that part of our own reflection does indeed appear on the window, but we really can see something through it that is not ourselves, nor part of our own making (that is, truth can be seen, but never crisply or perfectly). Modernity exalted itself in claims of incorrigible certainty (and claimed that what you couldn't have certainty about either didn't matter or didn't exist). Postmodernity basked in ambiguity and irony, exposing power-games real and imaginary. **Critical realism aims to provide clarity and sobriety to the historical task.**

(mcm - Which era did Alexander Campbell live in? Was he a proponent of it?)

NTiiW - 2 The New Testament as History ... Reading the New Testament as a Historical Document (3)

The relevance of this for our historical enquiry into the New Testament is that we find ourselves describing a certain group of first-century Jews, namely the 'early Christians', who held one particular variant of the first-century Jewish worldview. This strange group was saying in effect, 'The hope which characterizes our worldview has been fulfilled in these events.' And they chose to say this in the most natural and most obviously Jewish way they knew, by telling a *story*—from gospel to apocalypse—encoding in a narrative the sum of their worldview and beliefs. Therefore, a chief task of New Testament study is to construct a hypothesis which explains the story of the first Christians within the storied world of Jews, Greeks, and Romans. This critical-realist theory of story and hypothesis accordingly acknowledges the essentially 'storied' nature of human knowing, thinking, and living, within the larger framework of worldviews. It affirms, in fact, that all knowledge of realities external to oneself takes place within a worldview-framework, within which stories form an essential part. In the end, our task is to construct a hypothesis, a story encompassing the beliefs, aims, identity, praxes, and hopes that constituted the early church's own story, and to show that this hypothesis makes good sense of the evidence and does so in a clear and coherent way, with such simplicity as is appropriate for the dense subject-matter of actual human life.

What does all this mean for the student who wants to wrestle with the New Testament? Several things. (1) Remember that the study of the New Testament as history is not an optional extra. It is a crucial part of any course in 'biblical studies'. (2) You need to be aware of the complexities of what it means to 'do history' (it isn't simply about 'looking up facts in a book'), and critical realism is a way of attempting to acknowledge the possibility of historical retrieval while fully recognizing the limitations of the historical enterprise. (3) The past is a very different place. You cannot just jump from Atlanta to Antioch or leap from Rochester to Rome without doing some serious historical, hermeneutical, cultural, and social studies along the way. You will need to roll up your sleeves and **be prepared to get your hands dirty**.

Moore -- Author's Intended Meaning -

- 1.5 minute video

NTiiW - 3 The New Testament as Literature

EPIC_02 Comments: Story is the nature of the world in which we live... this Story is the Most True thing in the world.

- *** 11:57 - 14:28

RVL - Granbury, East vs West, how read the Bible

- Students, come see our frogs, go to lab, frogs pinned down
 - I ask its name, i.e., Boy or Girl. If boy, "Which frog was its girlfriend?"
 - When did it become impossible to know? When removed from pond.
 - But some things are impossible to know while still in pond, e.g., number of chambers in heart, its last meal, etc.
 - There is TRUTH in both methods, i.e., observational vs propositional.
- BIBLE: Take a passage out of its book, out of its chapter and, verse - take it out of its story - and some things become impossible to know. What you do learn is true, but at the moment you take it out of its cultural context, there are some things you will never know or understand.
- The WEST prefers a Rational Concept, propositional Truth, and Definitions. The EAST refers story, metaphor, word pictures, etc., to describe Truth.
- EXERCISE
 - Finish this sentence: GOD IS _____.

- In Israel may see a Christian or Muslim classroom, or a Jewish hiking group. Stop and ask them. GOD IS ??????
 - Bread of Life
 - Has Eagle's Wings
 - My Shepherd
 - A Shade in the Desert
 - A Rock
 - A Fortress
 - Living Water
- The Bible was written in particular times, in particular cultural settings, to people who thought in a certain way. They prefer a Story over Definitions or Systematic Explanations. If you ignore all that and read the Bible with only Western eyes, there will be Truth in it which you never see.

APPENDIX I

Video Notes

0. NTiiW v00 - EXCELLENT OVERVIEW OF BOOK. 13 Minutes. Here are some nuggets:

- a. 2:20 - Why should anyone be interested in the New Testament?
 - i. An explosive book
 - ii. 3:15 - Jesus the place where Heaven and Earth came together.
 - iii. 4:16 - Matters because Jesus matters.
- b. 5:00 - We have to know what was going on as the NT was being written.
 - i. 5:29 - Danger! We assume NT people are the same as us.
 - ii. 6:00 - Armies in and out of Jerusalem
 - iii. 6:20 - Unless you know that story, you're not in a position to
 - iv. 6:40 - Something NEW is happening →6:49
- c. 7:15 - Must understand the Greco-Roman world
 - i. First century Judaism. Anachronistic assumptions.
 - ii. 7:45 - What did Jesus teach about himself. Kingdom at hand?
- d. 8:15 - Resurrection. Did not mean the same to them as to most today.
 - i. Not just "life after death." -- 9:05

1. NTiiW v01 - 24 minutes "Beginning Study of the New Testament"

- a. 00:19 - Own many sorts of books.
 - i. History, short stories, plays, poetry, biographies
 - ii. Also atlases, dictionaries, how to play golf, car maintenance, gardening
 - iii. 2:05 - How does the NT fit? For some people, like car maintenance, or an atlas. ("Ultimate Authority")
- b. 2:50 - NT doesn't look like that kind of book
 - i. 3:30 - Live under authority of NT
 - ii. 4:00 - Part of a play, the whole bible, creation, covenant, spoiled and restored, comes in to land in the NT COME UP ON STAGE Your story, my story. -4:55
- c. 5:40 - The larger whole should be our consideration
 - i. 6:06 - How do we find out own parts to play them?
 - ii. 6:40 - Must learn to study for all we're with - Hearts, minds, strength
- d. 7:30 - Early Christians taught people to read. NT for Everyone.
 - i. Seen as educational institution instead of a "religion."
 - ii. 8:30 - Christians developed a new kind of codex.

- e. 9:00 - The reason there is a NT is because of Jesus Himself.
- f. 10:00 - Most early Christians not from Jewish world. Messianic references had to be explained to them. Four gospels. Letters. Vision.
 - i. WELCOME TO THE NT
- g. 11:00 - Two things happening when read NT
 - i. Drawn into a life of WORSHIP and prayer. Jesus is central.
 - 1. What really counts? THE WHOLE STORY. GOD'S STORY.
 - 2. 13:50 - Study is VITAL
 - a. Especially the PLAY? What part are we called to play in it. → 14:15
 - ii. 15:42 - NT equips us for MISSION
- h. 15:53 - NT not there SIMPLY to tell us "how to get to heaven." Not at all
 - i. Not a railway timetable.
 - ii. But a story for how to launch transformation → 16:50
- i. 17:16 - As we get to know the first Christians, we find ourselves called and equipped. Manual of Worship and Mission.
- j. 18:50 - God's Purposes for the world can be misunderstood. It happened in First Century, and it has happened over and over again. STUDY IS VITAL. Every generation. Every part of the church needs to understand its part in the story.
- k. 19:27 - ERIC BIRD. Dodd, could you reproduce NT Greek if all NT was lost. "It's only a little book." It's a strange and powerful little book. It has shaped Western civilization more than any other book in the world.
- l. 21:20 - What IS the NT? Religion, theology, myth, divine revelation, etc., etc. History/Literature/Theology
- m. Three questions:
 - i. How did Christianity begin, and take the shape it did?
 - ii. What is the world view in the text?
 - iii. What does Christianity begin, and... does it make sense?

2. NTiW v02 - New Testament as History (18 minutes)

- a. We claim that God has revealed Himself in the life and death of Jesus Christ. God has acted within what we call "History." To know God, we need to understand history.
- b. 1:07 - Some object to spending huge amounts of time inspecting foundations when there is work to be done. Some turn their noses up. Some think the original meanings are not relevant. Some think "They were primitive." If you can make the text mean anything you want now, then chaos has come.

- i. *** Share the A.I.M. of Bible study, by Mark Moore.
- c. 2:03 - Some object that historical knowledge is partial.
- d. 2:33 - The reason we study the history of the NT is that Jesus and disciples constitute normality.
- e. 3:16 - From early times, Christians have believed their lives need to be in conformity with the NT.
- f. 3:40 - Sola Scriptura, Protestant Reformation, toss out traditions.
 - i. Reading the NT is where the Christian must start.
- g. 4:37 - Critical Realism, approach to reading the NT as history.
- h. 5:58 - Affected by the cultural moves of our own world
 - i. Modernity - Transparent window
 - ii. Post-Modernity - Window is a mirror; see your own reflection.
 - iii. Critical Realism - Windows has a dark tint caused by gaps in knowledge and we see part of our own reflection, but insists there is something that we can see THROUGH the window..
 - iv. Critical Realist says there is something to be found.
 - v. Jerusalem destroyed in AD 70.
 - vi. Jesus died on a Roman cross.
 - vii. We can believe in history, without having full possession of it.
- i. 9:08 - Need interpretative framework, an hypothesis
 - i. New scroll, new coin, etc., can force us to reconsider what we have understood.
 - ii. What counts as justified hypothesis in history?
 - iii. History is not a matter of psychology.
- j. 10:30 - Why Roman needed stable Middle east - not psychology, but history - needed to protect the grain shipments from Egypt.
- k. 10:40 - Why Herod was rebuilding the temple - not psychology, but history - an attempt to legitimate himself as the true king of the Jews.
- l. 11:30 - Several more examples
- m. 11:48 - This is then how history works... Historians attune to the issues of the day.
- n. 12:30 - Story is key.
 - i. Passover - "My father was a wondering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people..."
 - ii. The Jews thought of themselves in Jesus's day as Exodous people.
- o. 13:50 - Historians are story tellers
- p. 14:00 - How does this relate to our study of NT?

- i. This group of Jews and non-Jews lived in a certain time, believed hope had been fulfilled, chose to tell this in a story. See this in the four gospels, the letters, and in the revelation of John.
- q. 15:24 - We are called to know the historical Jesus. Not derail into self-deception.
- r. 15:59 - People in every age act based on their world view. Story, symbols, praxis, etc. Be aware of OUR OWN WORLD VIEW also.
- s. 16:35 - Three implications
 - i. Study of first century history is not an optional extra, but CRUCIAL.
 - ii. There are complexities in "doing" history. Reflect on critical realism capabilities and limitations.
 - iii. The past is a VERY DIFFERENT PLACE. Can't just from Rochester to ancient Rome.
 - iv. History means thinking into the minds of people who thought quite differently from ourselves.
- t. 18:12 - If that's were God revealed Himself, that's where we need to go.

3. NTiiW v03 - New Testament as Literature (19 minutes)

- a. Bird
- b. 0:48 - What do we mean by "meaning," as in, "what is the meaning of that verse?"
- c. 1:01 - Meaning in Author, Text, or the Reader?
- d. 1:15 - Authorial Intent
 - i. Different language, different culture, understood universe differently
 - ii. 2:30 -- Text can carry surplus meaning beyond the author's thoughts.
 - iii. 3:45 - One way to get around this seeming disparity between Isaiah's intention and a Christian's theological interpretation is to differentiate between what a text 'meant' (that is, the empirical and descriptive analysis of a text) and what it 'means' (the creative and responsive appropriations of a text).
 - iv. 5:20 - Early Christian readers did not assume authorial intent, but read based on knowing Jesus Christ.
 - v. 6:35 - Meaning not restricted by Authorial Intent
- e. 7:00 - Does the meaning then reside in the literary text. Task of interpretation is to adopt the proper reading strategies. Treat text as self-enclosed entity.
 - i. Narrative Criticism - Some say "read as story and not history." This is a problem.

1. 11:34 - Text is historically referential.
- ii. 12:28 - Role of the Reader Meaning not in AIM or literature but the reader.
 1. Meaning is not retrieved from the text, but created by readers using the text. Determined by socialized context of the reader.
 2. 13:57 - One must play with the text for oneself. No "right" or "wrong" reading - only your reading and my reading.
 3. 14:42 - Multiple issues with this approach.
 4. 15:25 - If texts have not meaning, they are only a mirror of the reader.
- iii. 16:11 -- Fusing the Horizons of Author, Text, and Reader
 1. All three components are involved. It appears that authors *intend*, texts *signify*, and readers *understand*; and that 'meaning' occurs in the fusion of all three.
 2. 17:00 - Hermeneutic of Love

4. NTiiW v04 - New Testament as Theology (14 minutes)

- a. Wright
- b. 00:35 - Focus on what the first Christians believed? Is the historical Jesus part of New Testament Theology? Corpus by corpus? Deal with books in order written? Find a "Canon within the Canon?" Elevate one theme and marginalize others?
- c. 1:45 - If NT is authoritative, its authority lies in theology. But the ULTIMATE authority is God, who revealed Himself in Jesus, who holds all authority - not in the books His disciples wrote.
- d. 2:51 - The church's perceived task is to offer the world the message of God. Its job is to know it and live by it and make it known.
- e. 3:54 - God promised to put the world to rights. Disciples thought they were responsible for following through, until Jesus returned to finish it.
- f. 4:40 - NT is both history and theology. Challenge is to do justice to both.
 - i. If ignore history, you can insert other themes.
 - ii. 5:17 - NT was written for us, but not to us.
 - iii. 5:32 - Galatians 2:11, Paul confronted Peter as to whom to eat with. If approach without realizing the context of food taboos, Jewish debates, etc. To discern theological claims, you must understand history. Theology needs history.
- g. 7:15 - NT study is two-pronged: theology and historical.
- h. 8:17 - Christian reader of NT is committed to these two tasks.

- i. 10:00 - To the Christian reader... NT carries prescriptive force for mission and life of church.
- j. 11:28 - The NT can be seen as the first scene of the final act of God's great narrative. Early Christians saw themselves within a much longer story.
 - i. 12:09 - Fifth Act: New Creation
 - ii. 12:30 - The actors have to understand the "story so far." We, the actors, must understand the story we are in.
- k. 13:32 - Rooted in history, we are shaped by theology... as our lives effect real transformation, in real history.

APPENDIX II

RVL-Recommended Reading Material

- Reading the Bible Contextually: Introductory Sources
- Lois Tverbert
 - Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus
 - Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus
 - Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus
- Sandra Richter
 - Epic of Edin
- Marvin Wilson
 - Exploring Our Hebraic Heritage
 - Our Father Abraham