

EXPLORING THE NEW TESTAMENT

Volume 2: The Letters and Revelation

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How to use this book

On 17 July AD 180, seven men and five women stood trial in Carthage, North Africa. Boldly professing their faith in Jesus, they were condemned to die by the sword. During the trial the governor asked, ‘What do you have there in your bag?’ One of the twelve, named Speratus, replied, ‘Books, and letters of Paul, a good man’ (Herbert Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 89).

Here were twelve people ready to die for the faith expressed in those documents. ‘Books’ almost certainly refers to the four Gospels, dealt with in *Exploring the New Testament*, volume 1. Volume 2 takes up the letters of Paul, together with those other writings of early Christian leaders which complete the New Testament. It is designed to form the basis of an introductory course on the Letters and Revelation for first- and second- year students in a university, theological college or seminary. This section aims to help you, whether a teacher or a student, to get the most from our book.

Our aims and objectives

We are particularly concerned to get students reading and engaging with the NT documents for themselves, rather than simply learning at second hand what these books say or merely absorbing a lot of interesting theories about them. So we have provided frequent references to the text of the NT and to other relevant

ancient literature – excerpts from the latter often being quoted for easy access. In order to give ample space to exploration of the context, purpose and theological message of the books, we have limited the amount of space given to issues such as authorship and date – though of course guidance is given about where such questions can be followed up in more detail.

To aid active learning, we have built into each chapter several sorts of further study for students to pursue, many of which we have used ourselves in the classroom. We do not expect students to have time to do all of them. With the teacher’s guidance they will need to select those that are appropriate for the aims of the particular course being taught. And we hope that our suggestions will encourage teachers to add their own ideas.

What do you think? boxes provide questions and issues, which may take 15–30 minutes for a student to work at, and might then be used as the basis of a short class discussion or small group discussion.

Digging deeper boxes suggest a piece of research which may take a rather longer period of private study and could form the basis of a one-hour seminar led by the teacher or by some of the students. Having two or three students lead such a discussion, in our experience, enables the student leaders to engage with the topic at greater length, since they must set the agenda for the seminar, and

also enables students to debate views with each other in a way that facilitates learning.

Focus on theology boxes (in most chapters). These boxes are varied in content and include summaries of key theological emphases of an NT book or section, reflection on the wider theological interpretation of a theme or topic, consideration of implications for faith and life today based on the NT material being studied, or questions to provoke readers to engage in this kind of reflection. These are designed both to model how the NT can be read theologically, and to encourage our readers to do their own theological reading of the NT.

Essay topics at the end of each chapter (except the brief Chapter 2) provide ideas on topics to research in greater depth, which are to be presented in written form. They are intended to be about 2,000–3,000 words long, although some could be rather longer or shorter if the course being taught required that. Some are identified as ‘Introductory’ (intended for first-year students), others as ‘Intermediate’ (for second-year students). Some topics invite students to write for a particular audience or to design material that will relate the biblical text to today’s world, rather than writing a traditional academic essay.

Further reading lists at the end of each chapter provide a basis for the research on the essay topics, as well as for further study in greater depth on particular issues within the chapter. We have chosen books that are widely available in college and university libraries. Within each chapter we have usually referred to books

simply by author, or author and date, and full publication details can be found in the ‘Further reading’ sections.

Some theological books are also available as ebooks. To check whether any particular commentary is available in this form, see the publisher’s website.

Many students studying the NT are Christians, as we ourselves are, and will therefore want to ask about the relevance of their studies to living as Christians today. So we have concluded most chapters with a section in which we make suggestions or ask questions designed to stimulate the making of connections between then and now. We hope they will encourage students to reflect further for themselves along these lines.

Structure of the book

The book falls into four sections. First, we sketch the historical, religious and social context in which the writers and first readers of the NT letters lived. We do not repeat here the material in the first chapter of vol. 1, which concentrates on the experience of Jews in Palestine, though some of that is relevant to some of the letters discussed in this volume. The focus here is on the Greco-Roman world in which the church’s mission to Gentiles developed.

The second section deals with Paul the apostle and his letters. Between a chapter sketching Paul’s life and mission and a chapter summarizing his theology, his letters are studied in their probable chronological order of writing. The section begins with a brief chapter on the nature of ancient letter writing, and ends with a chapter on two questions

that have gradually been brought into focus through the study of the letters. These are, first: What problems and methods are involved in the process of understanding and interpreting NT letters for today? And second: How might we react to the proposal that certain letters were not written by the authors to whom they are attributed? Both the first and final chapter in this section of course relate not merely to Pauline letters but to others also, and might therefore have been placed at other points in the book. But it makes practical sense to include them at these points – though readers are of course free to read these and other chapters in any order that suits them!

The third section is devoted to what have traditionally been called the General or Catholic Epistles (because they do not name a specific church as recipients and hence have been thought to be addressed to Christians in general). The title is misleading since most of them do address specific audiences, though in some cases they were in several churches rather than a single community, and it may remain quite unclear to us where they were located.

Finally, we study the book of Revelation, the single example in the NT of ‘apocalyptic’ literature.

A **glossary** at the end provides definitions of certain technical terms, and references to the main places in the book where they are introduced and explained, particularly in boxes within the chapters.

Who wrote what?

We have planned this book together (and also with David Wenham and Steve Walton,

authors of the companion volume on the Gospels and Acts), and have commented on each other’s drafts of chapters. So while we share responsibility for the whole book, the following chapters/sections were the particular responsibility of each of us:

Howard Marshall: the original material for Chapters 3–14, and the section of Chapter 15 on ‘Interpretation’.

Stephen Travis: Chapters 1–2, 16–20, and the section of Chapter 15 on ‘Authorship and Pseudonymity’.

Ian Paul: revision of Howard Marshall’s material for Chapters 3–14 for the new 2021 edition, including new articles on recent developments on scholarship in different areas, and updated bibliographies; Chapter 21, and the section on ‘Critical methods in the study of the New Testament’ in Chapter 15.

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