

Introducing the
NEW TESTAMENT
Its Literature and Theology

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2. *The World of the New Testament*

The New Testament is in Greek. The ease with which we accept this fact masks two important realities. First, with such an array of modern translations in English, the NT is readily accessible to us — so much so that we perhaps too easily assume that its words, familiar to us in translation, also carry commonplace meaning from our world. Reading the NT today in English, it is easy to imagine that people in the ancient Mediterranean world experienced life much as we do.

Second, when we recall that the NT is written in Greek we are reminded of the impressive gains made by Alexander the Great and the cultural forces he initiated in the fourth century BCE. By the time of Jesus and Paul, Luke and John, the world of the NT had been the setting of almost four hundred years of *cultural influence from the Greeks*. The very language in which the NT was written provides evidence of the reach of the massive cultural transformations that shaped the NT period.

In more recent decades, Rome had come to occupy a significant place on the landscape of the NT world. Rome, with its institutions and agents, infiltrated the larger Mediterranean world, and the NT books were written well after the arrival of *Roman political dominion* in Palestine and far beyond. As a renewal movement within Judaism, moreover, the early Christian movement was drawn out of and itself drank deeply from the well of the *formative traditions and life of Israel*. This is perhaps seen most fully in the use of the Scriptures of Israel as a crucial ingredient in religious and ethical discourse, in the shared belief in Yahweh, the one God, and in the presence and influence of Jewish forms of worship in the pages of the NT. Underlying and pervading the writings of the NT, then, is the convergence of these three great rivers of tradition: Israel, Greece, and Rome.

How those traditions should be understood with respect to their influence on

the life and thought of the early Christian movement is not and cannot be a matter of dispassionate reporting, however. In our study of the book of Revelation, for example, we might encounter two fundamentally opposed perspectives on Rome. On the one hand, one might understand Rome — the city, the empire, and all that came to represent Roman civilization — as an agent of world peace, midwife of economic stability, supplier of jobs, builder of highways and aqueducts, merchant of the seas. One might even refer to Domitian, emperor of Rome during the time when Revelation was written, as “lord and god” (Suetonius, *Domitian* 13). On the other, Rome could be understood as a blasphemous power whose every move was calculated to frustrate the purpose of God and to compromise the faith of God’s people. Not as the savior of the world, but as “a habitation of demons and haunt for every unclean spirit” — this is how Rome is characterized by John’s Revelation (18:2). *Pax Romana* (Roman peace), then, is only one way to characterize the spirit of the NT world. Peace is important to this era, but it is also selective. Peace for whom? At what price? At whose expense?

Among the twenty-seven books that comprise the NT, Revelation is not alone in providing this tale of two cities. Nor is Rome the only prominent fixture on the horizon of the NT world to be viewed in such an ambivalent way. This underscores at once the importance of our understanding the broader world in which the NT books were written. It also highlights the importance of recognizing how those various writers perceived and addressed that world.

In other words, in order to grapple with the message of NT texts, we need an understanding of the world in which that message took shape and found meaning for our ancestors in the faith as they grappled with the concrete implications of the gospel. Because our world is not simply a recapitulation of theirs, we need to achieve as full a description of that world as possible. After all, all language is embedded in culture. In order to gain a hearing in their first-century world, NT writers had to work with the pre-understandings, values, thought patterns, and language of their world. This is not to say, however, that the NT writers were so trapped in their worlds that they could not point beyond them. In order to proclaim and define their message as *good news*, those writers had to move beyond what was already normal in their world in order to challenge it and, indeed, to portray an alternative world, the world purposed by God and manifest in Christ.

The invitation to read the NT is in part a summons to enter into its sometimes familiar, sometimes strange world. Learning to listen to its message from within that world is a lifelong process of becoming sensitive to the everyday realities largely taken for granted by people of those first-century communities of faith. We can begin this process by adopting an interpretive framework that highlights, first, *environmental conditions* (the big picture of the general cultural, political, and economic contours of the period) and, second, *institutional contexts* (fundamental patterns of behavior supported in that world, together with the or-

ganizations that propagate those patterns).¹ First, however, it will be helpful to draw a crucial distinction regarding the several ways we may understand the phrase, “the world of the New Testament.”

2.1. THE MANY WORLDS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Every description of a “world” is from a particular perspective. It is true that we might all count the same number of trees in a given area, but their significance depends on who is doing the counting. If a farmer, those trees may be looked upon with disdain, an obstacle to enhanced productivity. Children may have visions of ropes and tires draped from those limbs as makeshift swings. Zoologists, lumber companies, and environmentalists will each have their own competing viewpoints. As a matter of course, we render the world in relation to ourselves.

What is more, we tend to assume that our rendering of the world is “the way the world is” in itself, or even the way God made the world. Not surprisingly, then, we also tend to assume that others — local and far removed, past and present — share (or should share!) our understanding of reality. For this reason, our efforts at locating the NT in its own world require that we suspend some of our judgments about the nature of the world. We must do so in order to listen to sometimes alien voices and perspectives. This is a world where Jesus can be said to walk on water and raise the dead, where speaking in tongues can serve missionary ends, where the institution of slavery was largely taken for granted, where the measure of one’s wealth was not as important as the measure of one’s status, where the extended family was the basic social and economic unit, and where all of life was lived in varying degrees under the shadow of the empire. An important prerequisite for those of us who want to understand the writings of the NT will be to place our judgments regarding the values and institutions of its world in abeyance. Increasing our awareness of the taken-for-granted realities of those who inhabited the world of the NT will help us to understand better the message of the NT. Reading the NT is, in part, an exercise in intercultural communication.

What do we mean by the “world of the NT”? This phrase can have several nuances. First, we may refer to *the social-historical realities of the first-century Mediterranean world* in which the events to which the NT refers took place and in which the writings themselves took shape.

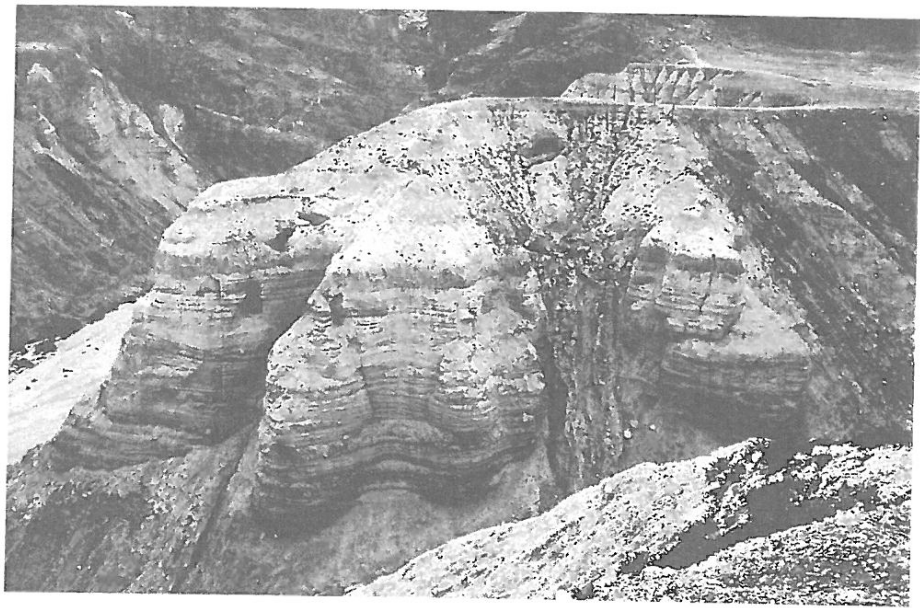
This initial focus on the “real world” brings to the surface an immediate problem. The NT writings derive from the first-century Mediterranean world, but

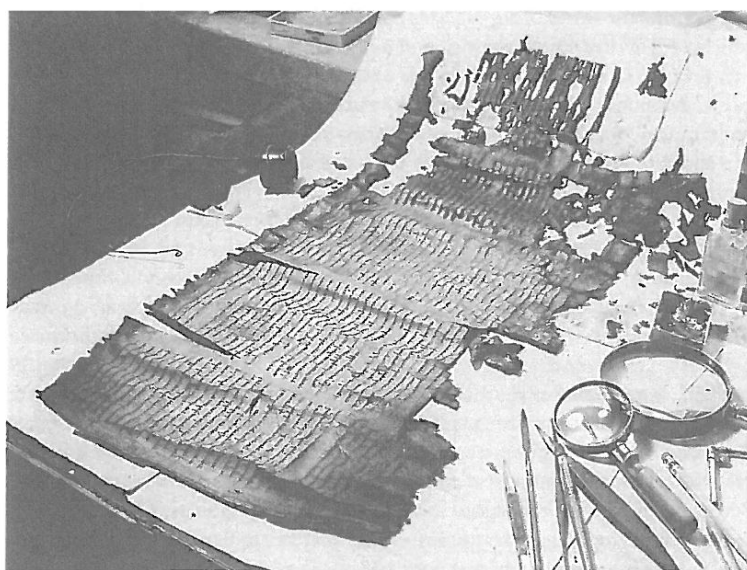
1. The method employed here is adapted from Robert Wuthnow, *Communities of Discourse: Ideology and Social Structure in the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and European Socialism* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1989) esp. 1-12.

even this was no monolithic society. When one speaks of the world of the NT, then, one must differentiate between, say, the world of Palestine and the world of Achaia (the southern portion of Greece). Each had its own history, its own ethnic mix, its own view of everyday life, and, among the followers of Jesus, its own distractions and temptations. And even within Palestine such distinctions must be drawn: the whole land of Israel versus the holy city of Jerusalem, rural Palestine versus urban, Galilee versus Samaria, and so on. Although from a sociological vantage point some generalizations are not only possible but also necessary, our readings of the NT will benefit from our sensitivity to the varieties experienced by people in this real world.

We have access to this world not only via the writings of the NT, but also through other sources. One thinks of the Jewish historian Josephus (37–ca. 100 CE). Born in the years immediately following Jesus' death, Josephus wrote in part to represent Jewish culture and religion to a Roman audience. Portions of his multivolume *Jewish Antiquities* and most of his account of *The Jewish War* help to fill in the sociohistorical picture of first-century Palestine. Of course, like any historian, ancient or modern, Josephus worked with his own biases — for example, his concern to portray to his fellow Jews Roman conduct *vis-à-vis* the Jewish people in the best light. Apart from Josephus other writings are of significance: the books of

The Qumran
caves





A Qumran
scroll — the
Genesis
Apocryphon
from Cave 4
(Israel Museum)

the Alexandrian Jew Philo, a contemporary of Paul, for example; the Dead Sea Scrolls along with other writings of Palestinian Judaism, which provide valuable insight into the diversity of the Jewish people; papyri and inscriptions, together with other evidence of an archaeological nature; and, of course, the historical, biographical, entertaining, and philosophical writings of the larger Greco-Roman world.

None of these source materials is complete or objective. Nor can we expect the various writings of the NT to represent exhaustively the many and diverse ingredients of the real world of the first-century Roman Empire. These materials are partial, both in the sense of being incomplete and in the sense of arising out of particular commitments. Hence, there is, second, *the world as the NT materials actualize it* — that is, the world as portrayed by each writer. Given limited space, with what ingredients of the real world did each writer choose to interact? The world as represented by a NT writer will overlap with but is not identical to the real world, since authors shape their messages by emphasizing what they regard as having particular importance. Luke and John emphasize the presence and significance of Samaria and Samaritans, but Matthew and Mark are silent on these. In literary terms, this second sense of world is sometimes referred to as the “narrative world” of the author; it is the world at the level of the discourse as this is represented by the author.

Third, "the world of the NT" signifies *the world of hope*. This is the world to which a NT writer points, the vision of a new era, the new world that is breaking into the old. An Evangelist like Mark is not content to present the world "as it really is," but purposefully shapes his writing in such a way that some of its facets are undermined, others legitimated. So, although it is helpful to know as much as we can about the world of Mark (in the first sense), it is just as critical if not even more so to see how that world fares in his hands.

If we are concerned with the world of Mark, then, we must attend to how his narrative represents and challenges the world of the first-century Mediterranean. Consequently, we will be interested above all in reading the Second Gospel on its own terms, albeit against the backdrop of what we otherwise know about the first-century world. The text is thus given a chance, as it were, to speak back to, as well as within, its own world.

A further dilemma must be faced. Given that all portraits of the world are partial, with what commitments do we proceed in this presentation? In the last century of NT study, this question has focused repeatedly on whether it is best to read the early Christian movement against a Hellenistic or Jewish backdrop. It has become increasingly clear, at least in studies of Jesus and the early Christian movement, that this is a false dichotomy. Long before the time of Jesus, the threads of the Judaism into which Jesus was born and out of which the Christian movement grew had been woven together with the threads of Hellenism. Although this growing realization highlights the problem of proceeding with too narrow an emphasis on one tradition or the other, still our dilemma remains in a revised form. To what degree had Hellenism and Judaism been intertwined in this or that location? To what degree does a particular NT document draw on and perpetuate Hellenistic (and not Jewish) concerns? Do we read the NT materials through the lens provided by Judaism; and if so, how strong a Hellenistic filter can be assumed? As it is, this question can be worked out only on a case-by-case basis, since the answer for the Letter to the Hebrews will not be the same as that for the Acts of the Apostles.

Hence, background issues will surface throughout the chapters that follow. Nevertheless, we should acknowledge that in what follows we will examine the world of the NT from a perspective within Jewish history. Among the several reasons for this decision the most important include, first, the birth of the Jesus movement preeminently as a Jewish renewal movement that only later came to separate from Judaism; second, the pervasiveness throughout the NT writings of the struggle with the place of Gentiles within the people of God — a concern that would arise only from an insider's (i.e., Jewish) point of view; and, third, the unparalleled importance of the OT in its use as a both explicit and implicit subtext for theological and ethical discourse in the NT.