
The New Testament by Luke Timothy Johnson is part of Oxford University Press’ series Very Short Introductions, which seeks to condense complex academic topics into accessible treatments for non-specialist audiences. The quality of the introductions in this series tend to be hit-and-miss, depending on the author and the scope of the subject matter, but Johnson’s contribution is overall a reasonable introduction to this subject, a few theological preoccupations notwithstanding.

The presentation of this introduction is predictable; like most New Testament introductions, it largely follows the canonical order, although many books are grouped together in the interest of space, and it is prefaced by important contextual information. For instance, Johnson describes such concepts as honor and shame, as well as the dynamics of patriarchal households and patronage relationships. Roman rule and Hellenistic culture are both acknowledged as important factors in studying the New Testament, but justifiably, these topics are only treated concisely. However, also as is the case with most introductions to the New Testament, Judaism is considered separately for its influence on Christian origins, encouraging the problematic traditional assumption that there was something fundamentally incompatible about Judaism and Greek culture.

Johnson explains the diversity of texts in the New Testament by reasoning that Jesus’ death demanded numerous literary forms to come to terms with it. The Synoptic gospels are treated together in one chapter, in which Johnson also briefly, yet accessibly, introduces such academic concepts as the Synoptic Problem and the Sayings Source Q. In the next chapter, instead of covering all of Paul’s letters, he chooses to focus on 1 Corinthians and Romans in order to “get some flavor of the range—as well as the consistency—in Paul's manner of expression” (66). He considers the letter to the Hebrews and the letter of James to be “two hidden treasures” (84) and so groups them together in another chapter. Finally, the Gospel of John, the Johannine letters, and Revelation all are considered together under the conceptual framework of Johannine
literature. The Pastoral Letters are given no attention, which is odd considering Johnson’s position elsewhere that they are authentic writings of Paul.

The book wraps up appropriately with some consideration in how these particular writings actually ended up together in the canon, as well as some comments on why the New Testament continues to be culturally relevant for many people, even non-Christians. Here Johnson takes the opportunity to defend the New Testament against those who would object to its continuing importance in contemporary times.

There are a few troubling aspects to this short book. Initially, Johnson starts off on an ostensibly hostile foot by imagining three kinds of readers for this book: Christians, those who know nothing about the New Testament, and “despisers of Christianity” (2). Thus, readers who do not fit neatly into any of these categories are potentially alienated at the outset. He goes on to assure this diverse readership that although an objective New Testament introduction is impossible, this one will include the anthropological, historical, literary, and religious dimensions of the subject—a definition of the latter dimension is offered only superficially. In fact, Johnson insists that if the reader is unable to appreciate the religious dimension of the New Testament—“the experience of ultimate power” (7)—s/he has missed the point of the literature altogether. Perhaps most problematic part is chapter 3, “The Resurrection Experience,” in which Johnson concludes that the resurrection of Jesus is the only sufficient cause able to account for the emergence of Christianity. The perspective no doubt also lies behind his late dating of the Gospel of Thomas in the discussion of canonization. In the same vein, he later suggests that the earliest Christian groups doubtlessly experienced “the energy field of the Holy Spirit” (21). These are odd comments in an otherwise historical description of the New Testament.

Overall, this is short book is well organized and synthesizes much important information relevant to studying the New Testament. Admittedly, the bibliography does not reflect the full range of scholarship on this topic and is populated unsurprisingly by several of Johnson's own works. Save, however, for the aforementioned odd polemic against “despisers of Christianity” in the introduction and the problematic chapter on the resurrection as the sole factor that accounts for
the emergence of Christianity, this is one of the better books in the *Very Short Introductions* series.

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