CHAPTER THREE
THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The collection we call ‘the New Testament’ is something of a mixed bag. The New Testament today comprises 27 different texts that vary considerably in terms of their length, their scope, their aims, and their genre. It contains four ‘gospels’, giving narrative accounts of parts of the life and ministry of Jesus; there is one book (Acts) that presents a (somewhat selective!) account of the history of the early Christian church in its first 30 or so years. There are then a number of letters, many purporting to be by the apostle Paul, as well as others written under the name of other leading figures (e.g. Peter, James) or anonymously (e.g. Hebrews); and within the group of letters in the New Testament there is considerable variation in that some are genuine letters written to specific communities in specific situations (virtually all of Paul’s own letters), whereas others are more like general treatises where the letter form seems to be more peripheral (e.g. James). The last book of the New Testament, Revelation, has the form of an ‘apocalypse’ comprising for the most part a great series of visions of the heavenly realm. The one thing all these writings have in common is that they all stem from a very early period in the history of the Christian movement. Indeed they do (by and large) represent the earliest Christian writings we possess, and they provide our prime sources for seeking to gain information about the start of the Christian movement and its ‘founder’, Jesus of Nazareth. Nevertheless (like almost every assertion in biblical studies today!) such a claim may need some qualification. How early is the ‘early period’ from which they come? And how broad is the period?

DATES

Almost all the New Testament documents can be confidently dated to the first century CE, with only the occasional exception such as 2 Peter, which may come from the second. However, it is also clear that they do not date from the very earliest period in the history of early Christianity.

The earliest New Testament writings are probably the letters of Paul. These were probably written during a period from 0.48/49 until the mid-50s. The precise dating of each letter is of course debated. But clearly, the letters of Paul do not come from his earliest time as a Christian: Paul had been ‘converted’ to the Christian movement some 15 years or so before the time of the earliest letter we have from him (probably 1 Thessalonians). Thus Paul’s letters let us see something of himself only as a Christian of some years’ standing.

The dates of the other letters in the New Testament are much less certain. A number of letters purportedly written by Paul were probably written in his name by a later writer and
hence stem from a later period after Paul’s death (see below). Some of the more general letters (e.g. James, Hebrews), simply by virtue of the fact that they are so general, are notoriously difficult to date. In part, too, assigning a date to them is dependent on other decisions about their authorship. It is though very unlikely that any of these other letters are to be dated any earlier than Paul’s letters, and they all come from a time no earlier than the second half of the first century.

The same probably applies in the case of the more overtly ‘historical’ books of the New Testament, that is, the gospels and Acts, which purport to give accounts of earlier historical events in the life of Jesus or in the life of the earliest Christian community. The earliest gospel is almost certainly the gospel of Mark, probably to be dated to around 70 CE. (There is dispute about whether Mark was written before or after the fall of the city of Jerusalem in 70 CE.) Further, Mark’s gospel was probably one of the sources used by the writers of the gospels of Matthew and Luke: hence these two gospels must have been written after Mark, probably in the 80s (or perhaps 90s). John’s gospel presents many peculiar difficulties of interpretation, not least of which is the fact that it is so different at almost every level from the other three (so-called ‘synoptic’) gospels. Again, most scholars today would date the gospel well into the last quarter of the first century, since it appears to presuppose some kind of formal, institutionalized split between the Christian community and the Jewish synagogues (cf. John 9.22; 16.2), which, as far as we can tell, did not take place until the mid-80s (or perhaps even later). Acts was written by Luke as a ‘sequel’ to his gospel, and hence probably also stems from the 80s at the earliest.

Thus all the ‘historical’ books of the New Testament are describing events that lie some 40 years or more in the past from the point of view of their authors at the time of writing. Some may be written 60–70 years after the events concerned. These texts, as mentioned earlier, are probably the earliest sources for the history concerned that we have available. But we must not lose sight of the fact that they are themselves not documents coming from the very earliest period itself. They are from a generation, or two generations, later. And this will inevitably at times colour our assessment of their value as historical sources for the events they describe.

AUTHORSHIP

Who wrote these books? Just as the documents themselves represent something of a mixed bag, so too their authors comprise a somewhat miscellaneous group. Indeed, we should probably go further and say that in a large number of instances we simply do not know who wrote these texts. For example, a striking feature of all four gospels is that they are anonymous. Unlike a large number of similar writings in the Graeco-Roman world, the Christian gospel writers never reveal their identity. (The sole exception may be John’s gospel, where, in a note clearly added by someone other than the writer of the bulk of the gospel, it is said that the so-called ‘beloved disciple’ was the author of the gospel: see John 21.24. But this does not help very much since, notoriously, the ‘beloved disciple’ in John remains a tantalizingly unclear figure who is never explicitly named. In any case, most scholars today would regard with some scepticism the claim that a companion of Jesus wrote the whole of the fourth gospel, if only because it is so unlike the other gospels and seems to show no knowledge of key events in Jesus’ life.)
We call the gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke and John by tradition, and these names are today always used to refer to these gospels. However, the traditional identification of them seems implausible. The author of the gospel of Mark is unlikely to have been the John Mark of Acts (as is probably implied by the naming of him as ‘Mark’ in the tradition) if only because he seems at times blissfully unaware of details of Palestinian geography and customs (see Mark 5.1, where Gerasa seems to be assumed to be near the Sea of Galilee, whereas it is in fact some 30 miles away; or Mark 10.11–12, where it seems to be assumed that Jewish women could divorce their husbands, whereas in fact they could not). The author of Matthew’s gospel seems to have to rely on Mark for information and is thus unlikely to have been the Matthew who was one of Jesus’ own closest companions. The author of Luke’s gospel is almost certainly also the author of Acts; he may have been a companion of Paul (as the tradition claims), though there are formidable difficulties with such a view due to the great differences between the portrait of Paul that emerges from Acts and the picture of Paul we get from his own letters. The author of John’s gospel is, as we have noted already, unlikely to have been an immediate disciple of Jesus, if only because so much of the material in the synoptic gospels is missing from John.

The likelihood is therefore that all the historical books of the New Testament are not eyewitness accounts of the events described. They are all written by people some time after the events, a fact that must affect one’s assessment of the books concerned.

The authorship of the letters is also disputed. Several are written in the name of the apostle Paul. However, it seems clear that not all the letters attributed to Paul are by Paul himself. Significant differences of style, language and at times important ideas make this extremely likely. The so-called ‘Pastoral epistles’ (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus) form a group of three letters, very similar to each other but in turn very different in style, tone and at times theology from Paul’s own. They are thus the work of a later writer, writing in Paul’s name, claiming Paul’s authority (perhaps even writing to rehabilitate Paul at a time when Paul’s authority was being questioned), but not written by Paul himself. The exact extent of the corpus of such letters in the New Testament, purportedly by Paul but in fact written by someone else, is disputed. (The technical word for such letters is ‘pseudonymous’.) Most would include Ephesians in this category of pseudonymous Pauline letters; many would also include Colossians and 2 Thessalonians. The unquestionably genuine Pauline corpus thus comprises only seven letters (Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon).

The authorship of other letters in the New Testament is also disputed. The letter to the Hebrews (traditionally ascribed to Paul) is anonymous. Its ideas, especially its highly distinctive presentation of the person of Jesus in the category of a high priest, are very different from Paul’s, and hence the author is almost certainly not Paul, though some link with a Pauline circle is not impossible. (At the end of the text, ‘Timothy’ is mentioned [Heb 13.23], and Timothy was evidently a well-known member of the Pauline circle.) The letters ascribed to Peter may also be pseudonymous. (In any case, 1 Peter and 2 Peter are not by the same author, as is fairly clear on grounds of style.) The Johannine letters (1–3 John) are stylistically and thematically very close to the fourth gospel, and hence may stem from the same ‘circle’. The so-called ‘letter of James’ may come from James the brother of Jesus: the author probably intended that to be understood in using the name, but whether it is accurate or not is unclear. (There is, for example, virtually no
reference to Jesus at all in the letter of James.) The book of Revelation claims to be by a ‘John’ (Rev 1.4), but further identification of who is meant by this (very common!) name is not clear from the book.

All in all, large parts of the New Testament are not written by people directly connected with Jesus or the very earliest period of the Christian church. (This could apply even to Paul: Paul was ‘converted’ after the death of Jesus.) Rather, many New Testament books stem from second- or third-generation Christians, writing a little time after the foundational events of the Christian church and reflecting on them. Some of the authors would clearly like to be seen as earlier authoritative figures in that they write in the name of such figures. But the fact remains that large parts of the New Testament were written by Christians after the initial period.

Despite all these caveats, it remains the case that the New Testament texts are the earliest Christian writings we have, at least for the most part. They are not uniformly early, as we have seen. Moreover, there are one or two writings from early Christians that are not now part of the New Testament but are probably earlier in date than the latest New Testament writings. There is a small manual of church order known as the Didache, the full text of which was only discovered in the nineteenth century and which many today would regard as a very early, first-century document. So too the letter known as 1 Clement, a document written by the bishop of Rome in the 90s to the Christian church at Corinth, is to be dated at the end of the first century. Both texts probably pre-date a New Testament text such as 2 Peter. Nevertheless, the New Testament texts by and large constitute the earliest Christian texts we have.

GAPS IN OUR KNOWLEDGE

It is however also clear that the New Testament texts do not give us anything like a comprehensive picture of the earliest days of the Christian movement. The New Testament is dominated, directly or indirectly, by the figure of Paul. As we have seen, there are seven undisputed genuine letters of Paul in the New Testament; in addition, there are several letters written in his name; further, the story in the book of Acts is dominated for the second half (and more) of its compass by the figure of Paul as Luke focuses almost exclusively on Paul’s exploits in telling his story.

All this may have its own ‘justification’ at one level in that Paul was clearly an important figure within the new Christian movement. On the other hand, we should not lose sight of the fact that Paul’s real influence in the first century may not have been quite so all-powerful. We can see very clearly from his letters (much less easily from Acts!) that Paul was frequently engaged in fierce arguments with other Christians, and the likelihood is that he did not always win such arguments. Paul’s own theology was clearly controversial in the first century, and not accepted by all Christians. A lot of evidence suggests that within early Christianity Paul may have been something of an isolated figure whose influence may have been somewhat peripheral. Certainly we know that, at a later period, Paul was regarded by some Christians with intense suspicion, and it may have been in such a situation that the Pastoral letters were written in Paul’s name, seeking to show that Paul really was ‘safe’ and ‘sound’. The picture we get from the New
Testament texts alone may thus give us a potentially slightly misleading picture of earliest Christianity.

We should also note that the New Testament does not give us anything like a comprehensive coverage of the writings of early Christians. As already noted, there may well be a few texts from the first century that are not in the New Testament. But we also know of the existence of other texts now lost. It seems that Paul wrote a letter to the Laodiceans (see Col 4.16): if this letter really did exist, it has not survived. We know from Paul’s letters to the Corinthians that he must have written other letters to them, apart from the ones we have in the New Testament (see 1 Cor 5.9; 2 Cor 2.3); it is clear too that the Corinthians wrote to him (see 1 Cor 7.1). Clearly then we do not have all the letters Paul wrote (and none he received). Similarly, Luke mentions in the preface to his gospel that he knew of ‘many’ who had already undertaken an enterprise similar to the one he himself was starting in beginning his account of Jesus’ life (Luke 1.1); and presumably the ‘many’ cannot have been just Mark! It would seem that there may have been a number of such texts in circulation at the time. So, too, many scholars have suggested that both Matthew and Luke had access to another source apart from Mark: this source is usually known as ‘Q’, but if (as seems likely) it existed in written form, no copy of it has survived. In addition, we know of the existence of a number of other texts, for example the ‘Gospel of the Hebrews’, from the fact that various church fathers quote them, even though no manuscript of the texts survives today. It is then clear that the texts that have survived represent only a part of the literature produced by the earliest Christians.

Further, we know of great gaps in our knowledge of early Christianity that are shown, but not filled, by the New Testament. The origins of Egyptian Christianity, or Roman Christianity, remain totally obscure to us. The New Testament documents indicate that Christianity reached Egypt, and Rome, very early. (For Egypt, see Acts 18.24ff. where Apollos suddenly appears in the story as a Christian from Alexandria; for Rome, one has the evidence of Paul’s letter to Rome for the existence of a church there in the mid-50s.) Yet on the questions how or when these communities were founded, we are entirely in the dark.

The New Testament writings then give us a somewhat haphazard collection of first-century Christian texts. They provide us with (mostly) our only sources for discovering information about the early days of the new Christian movement; but as sources they are at times tantalizingly incomplete.

THE NEW TESTAMENT AS A CHRISTIAN COLLECTION

One element however that binds all the New Testament texts together is the fact that they are all Christian texts. They are all written by people who were adherents of the new Christian movement. In one way this is of course trite and obvious. But it does have further implications, for example, if one wishes to use these texts to discover aspects of the history of the period. All the accounts of Jesus’ life in the gospels are ‘biased’ in that they are written by Christians. Sadly perhaps, we have virtually nothing written about Jesus by contemporary non-Christian writers. So too the earliest history of the church evidently made almost no impact on other authors in the Hellenistic or Jewish
environment. (The Jewish historian Josephus never mentions the Christian movement, except in one paragraph about Jesus, though the authenticity of this is heavily disputed, and in a brief note about the execution of James. Hellenistic authors of the period do not mention the new Christian movement prior to the references to Christians being blamed for the fire at Rome during the reign of Nero in the mid-60s.)

In the case of the gospels, in particular, this does have a potentially enormous effect on the nature of these texts. The one common element in the (at times very great) variety shown by early Christians was the claim made by them all in relation to the ‘resurrection’ of Jesus. Christians believed that the Jesus who had lived and preached in Palestine and been crucified on a Roman cross had been ‘raised’ to a new kind of life by God. As such, he was alive and still speaking to his followers in the present. For the gospel writers, therefore, any distinction some might make as historians between past and present, between what Jesus might have said in the past and what could be said today, would have appeared rather unreal. For the evangelists, it was the same Jesus who had worked in Palestine prior to his death who was now alive and still speaking to his followers. As a result, the evangelists evidently felt free to change their traditions to reflect their beliefs about the aliveness of Jesus with a freedom that many people find on first encounter a little disconcerting.

Perhaps this is clearest in the case of the gospel of John, where it seems that the original Jesus tradition has been transposed and transformed into a completely new setting, with the language and categories changed to reflect that setting. Thus Jesus now talks in long discourses, rather than in short parables or aphorisms; and he ceases to talk of a future ‘Kingdom of God’, but rather of ‘eternal life’ available in the present, and of himself as the direct object of faith and commitment. All this is quite different from the picture in the synoptic gospels, so much so that the two pictures can scarcely be reconciled at the level of the pre-Easter Jesus. Nevertheless, the picture in John reflects one way in which the fundamental conviction of the aliveness of Jesus after Easter, and the basic belief that Jesus was still speaking to his church, enabled at least one Christian writer to refashion and re-present the gospel story in a radically different way. Rewriting on a less radical, but no less real, scale can also be seen in the other gospels; for example, Matthew and Luke rewrite Mark’s account, at times with considerable freedom. All this means that, as source books for the past, the Christian gospels may tell us as much, if not more, about their authors and their situations as they do about the events they are purportedly describing, namely the life and ministry of Jesus prior to the resurrection.

The other thing to bear in mind is that the New Testament is not only a collection of Christian texts; it is also a collection made by Christians. The process of separating off these books and forming them into a ‘New Testament’ was one undertaken in the church by Christians for Christians. The details of that process are often not very clear. It seems likely that the process was not always very self-conscious. Often the process, like the New Testament itself, may have been more than a little haphazard. Some books may simply have been lost in the course of time. Others were simply accepted, almost without any self-conscious evaluation at all. Why in the end some books ‘made it’ into the New Testament canon and others did not is unclear. Perhaps whether or not a book was written by an ‘apostle’ was significant, though this is by no means certain. (For example, the gospels of Mark and Luke were never claimed to have been written by apostles, yet no one really worried too much!) Antiquity was certainly important for some: the New
Testament books were valued because they were the oldest documents available. Also their historical reliability was important (even though today one might assess that ‘reliability’ rather differently!). So too their theological ‘orthodoxy’ was relevant, though it is notoriously difficult to define what is meant by orthodoxy, especially in the earliest period of Christian history. Nevertheless, at least one book, the Gospel of Peter, was, according to a story in Eusebius’s Church History (a fourth-century account of the history of the church), barred from use in public worship by a bishop Serapion in the second century because it was felt to be doctrinally suspect. (It implies the idea that Jesus had not really died on the cross.) Above all though what seemed to count was whether a document was used everywhere and universally in the church.

The main bulk of the New Testament canon was implicitly agreed very early and with a remarkable lack of controversy. For example, the fourfold gospel canon was accepted by the end of the second century and no one thereafter appears to question it (even though it is clear that there were a number of other texts claiming to be ‘gospels’ current at the time). Discussions about the precise limits of the canon, at the ‘edges’ so to speak, continued on for a very long time. The book of Revelation, for example, remained a matter of dispute for several centuries. Nevertheless, the main outline of the New Testament canon was agreed by the middle of the fourth century and has remained fixed ever since.

That said, it should not be forgotten that the process of forming the books of the New Testament into a single ‘canonical’ collection only starts some time after the writing of the New Testament texts themselves. The New Testament writers themselves were scarcely conscious of the fact that they were writing texts that would become part of sacred scripture for the whole Christian church. For first-century Christians, ‘scripture’ meant primarily the Jewish scriptures. Paul no doubt intended his letters to be read, and to be taken, very seriously. Yet he does not appear to think that he is supplementing and expanding Jewish scriptures with his letters. So too the freedom with which, say, Matthew and Luke use Mark as a source in writing their gospels shows clearly that they at least did not regard Mark as any very sacred text. The freedom they exercise implies precisely the opposite. Perhaps the only New Testament book that shows any self-awareness of claiming some kind of ‘scriptural’ authority for itself is the book of Revelation: see Revelation 22.18–19 and the warning about adding anything to, or subtracting anything from, what has been written, a claim similar to others made elsewhere about Jewish scripture (cf. Deut 4–2).

IDEAS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament texts show at times a bewildering diversity in their ‘theologies’ and ideas. The very nature of the Christian movement as something new within Judaism meant that the early Christians were inevitably struggling from the start to determine what was normative for their beliefs and what was debatable, what was acceptable and what was ‘out of bounds’, how one could determine what was right and what was wrong. Christianity grew out of Judaism, and so Christians could—and did—draw on Judaism for ideas and norms in this respect. Indeed, many of those norms and ideas were accepted in toto without any questioning at all. Christians adopted the Jewish ideas of God (i.e.
‘theo-logy’ strictly speaking) without ever questioning it in any way: ideas such as monotheism (God as Creator) were simply assumed as axiomatic. The same is the case in relation to a Jewish eschatological framework of thought: Christians such as Paul simply assumed this as self-evidently true and never stopped to discuss or defend it, even when writing to non-Jews. So too much of Jewish ethical teaching was assumed.

Yet soon a major issue forced Christians to ask awkward questions about their Jewish roots. This was the influx of non-Jews (i.e. Gentiles) into the Christian movement, leading to the question being raised: should Gentiles become Jews before/when they became Christians? This of course had very practical consequences for males because it involved the question of circumcision: should Gentiles have to be circumcised if they wished to join the Christian movement? The answer ultimately was no. But this inevitably led to an awareness of some difference between Christians and Jews. At a very visible level (e.g. in public baths), not all Christian men looked like Jewish men any longer.

As Christians struggled to resolve such issues, they were inevitably forced to reassess different parts of their traditions, Jewish and non-Jewish, to see what could/should be maintained, what jettisoned, what arguments were justified, what were not, how one could/should argue, and so on. And it is this state of what is at times quite a turbulent situation that one sees reflected in the New Testament, especially in the Pauline letters.

It is perhaps not in the least surprising to find a lack of uniformity in the New Testament. At times there is even what seems like outright contradiction. For example, Paul argues passionately for the priority of what he calls ‘faith’ over what he terms ‘works’, or ‘works of the law’, as the basis for salvation (see Rom 4). The author of the letter of James on the other hand claims that ‘works’ are all important and that faith without works is dead (James 2.20). The disagreement is in one way rather formal and artificial: James and Paul do not necessarily mean precisely the same thing by the same words ‘faith’/‘works’. Nevertheless, there is an element of tension here, which in James is quite explicit (and James is probably in part responding to Pauline Christianity). As already noted, we see Paul himself in his letters frequently having heated debates with other Christians about what are regarded as key issues of the day, not the least of which is very often the question of how far some of the Jewish practices are still to be regarded as obligatory in the Christian church.

We also see Christians in the New Testament coming out with ‘answers’ to ‘questions’ that are at best tentative and certainly at times tangential to each other. For example, early Christians were convinced that in some way or other, Jesus’ death on the cross was to be seen not just a judicial execution, nor even as only a miscarriage of justice perpetrated on an innocent man. Rather, it came to be seen as somehow having positive significance in itself, effecting a real change in the human situation and in the relationship between God and human beings. But precisely what had been achieved, and how Jesus’ death on the cross had achieved it, was not so clear. Different writers use different images. Even a single writer like Paul used a riot of different images and ‘language games’ to describe it. Thus Jesus’ death is referred to as a sacrifice, similar to the sin offerings of the Jewish cult (Rom 3.25), or as a Passover sacrifice implying a new act of liberation by God similar to the rescue of the Israelites from Egypt (1 Cor 5.7); it was also a new covenant sacrifice, inaugurating a new covenant relationship, similar to that which brought the Jewish people into existence as the people of God (1 Cor 11.24); it was also a ‘price
'paid' (th it is never said to whom!), leading to the transfer of ownership of Christians who then, like slaves bought in the market place for a price, are now the property of a new master, Christ (1 Cor 6.20; 7.23). All these used images and ideas current at the time to try to express aspects of the new life Christians believed they experienced as a result of Jesus’ life and death. There is little if any attempt in the New Testament itself to synthesize all these ideas. And it was the task of later Christians in the early church to try to bring some kind of synthesis in the later creeds and doctrinal statements of the church.

Further, we should remember in reading the New Testament that, when the later process of synthesizing and systematizing took place, it was often undertaken in a thought world and with presuppositions very different from those of the New Testament writers. At the very least, key words and phrases were used in ways, and with meanings, rather different from their usage in the New Testament. For example, language of Jesus as Son of God, used later by Christians to express their conviction that Jesus was fully divine, one in being with the Father, also occurs in the New Testament but arguably with no such clear overtones of divinity attached to the phrase. Talk about individuals as a ‘son of God’ is thoroughly at home in Judaism, referring variously to a royal figure (see 2 Sam 7.14) or perhaps a righteous person who remains obedient to God through suffering (see Wisd 2–5). No doubt the same language when applied to Jesus was in a state of flux, and may have taken on some significantly new overtones of meaning. But we should always be aware of the dangers of anachronistically reading back the meanings that key phrases came to have in later Christianity into the earlier documents of the New Testament itself.

IMPORTANCE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the course of time, the New Testament books were gradually accorded the position and status of holy scripture alongside, and in addition to, the books of Jewish scripture. They came to form a ‘New Testament’ alongside what came then to be called the ‘Old Testament’ (though it should be noted that the existence of a New Testament never led to the displacement of Jewish scripture from the Christian Bible: however much Christians wished to stress their differences from Judaism, Christians have never given up their claim to the Jewish scriptures as an integral part of their own Bibles). The status of these books as holy scripture meant that they profoundly affected the whole subsequent history of the Christian church. Any religious tradition in its history constantly relates back to its past to establish elements of continuity, to define itself and to regulate developments. The documents of the New Testament inevitably occupy a key role in these respects in the Christian religion. They are the earliest documents of Christianity that we possess; the ‘scriptural’ status accorded them reinforces their significance. For all those interested in the Christian religion, these texts will therefore be of foundational significance. Further, for all those interested in the historical roots of the Christian religion, in the historical events, supremely the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, that provided the initial impetus inaugurating the new Christian movement, the New Testament texts will provide us with our primary historical sources (even if, as I have tried to indicate, they must be used with some care).
But equally, in an age that has become suspicious and critical of some old authorities or dogmatic claims, it can be just as important to return to the roots of the Christian tradition, in one way to see how the earliest Christians struggled with the problems and issues facing them at a time when old authorities were being called into question and new structures had to be developed, and in another way to be able to view critically later developments in Christian history. As we look at the earliest Christians once again, we may for example find that some of the more dogmatic claims alleged to be based on their ideas and beliefs are perhaps not as securely founded as others have claimed. It is as part of this constant search for truth, as well as the perennial fascination of the earliest days of the new Christian movement, that the New Testament texts need to be read and studied afresh in every generation.