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The New Testament Period

Terence Y. Mullins

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If we are to approach the New Testament as part of the action of God in history, then we are committed to studying it by examining the situation at the start of the New Testament period, observing the changes and change agents (including the writing of the New Testament itself) which a historian may identify as operating during the New Testament period, and then describing the situation as it existed at the end of the New Testament period. To do this we need some way of marking off the beginning and the end of the New Testament period.

There are currently in use two main ways of delineating the New Testament period for study. The older way is to take the passages which speak of the earliest New Testament events and use those events as the starting point. Continuing by the same method, the last New Testament event spoken of or alluded to is used as the end of the New Testament period. This approach begins, therefore, with the stories of the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus and goes on through the books to 2 Peter, which mentions the collection of Paul's letters. The writing of a letter which refers to that collection is taken as the terminal point of the New Testament period.

Thus, Rowlingson states, "We shall begin with the Gospels, our attention fastened upon the historical Jesus, and then we shall follow the course of events through the first Christian generation, with *Acts*, Paul's Letters, and the Gospels at the center of attention. Following that, we shall attempt to reconstruct the next one hundred years and observe the ways in which Christianity both reacted to and influenced its environment. Before we are through we shall have dealt with

every one of the twenty-seven New Testament writings, and have got some insight into the activity, experiences, and thoughts of the early Christians."¹ And about the end of the New Testament period he says, "Our major concern here is with that phase of the development which falls within the New Testament period properly speaking, that is, up to the appearance of 2 Peter about the middle of the second century . . ."²

This is fairly typical of the rationale and approach used with this method.

The other fairly popular way of marking off the New Testament period begins with the document which was written first and traces the course of writing the New Testament pretty much on through in sequence to the last book written. This method of defining the New Testament period is that which is usually followed in those New Testament introductions which do not simply begin with Matthew and go book-by-book to the Apocalypse.

Thus Barnett says, "The Books of the New Testament were written between A. D. 49 and 175, Galatians being the earliest and the Epistles to Timothy and Titus the latest of them."³ For him this defines the New Testament period, and he starts in immediately after the introduction with an analysis of Galatians. When, almost 300 pages later, he concludes his dealing with the Pastoral Epistles, he stops. There are no chapters on general background and none on events after the publication of the Pastoral Epistles. Where such matters

¹ Donald T. Rowlingson, *Introduction to New Testament Study*, p. 30.

² *Ibid.*, p. 195.

³ Albert E. Barnett, *The New Testament: Its Making and Meaning*, p. 17.

are relevant to a New Testament book, they are considered in connection with that book.

It should be noted that *both* of these methods of marking off the New Testament period are dominated by a literary scheme. That fact is, perhaps, clearest when the controlling scheme is book-by-book. But even the earliest-event-to-latest-event pattern is limited by the references in the New Testament itself. To some extent this literary conditioning of the boundaries of the New Testament period results from the fact that the period is called *The New Testament Period*. It has been given a literary name! If it were called the Apostolic Period, it would probably be dominated by ecclesiastical considerations rather than literary ones. Yet it is not necessary that the New Testament period as a historical unit should begin and end in a literary context. On the contrary, it is highly desirable that it should have the freedom to begin at a point where we can best see the situation which gave rise to it and to end at a point where we can describe the situation which succeeded it.

The principal objection to marking the beginning of the New Testament period with the first New Testament document written is that the changes which characterize the New Testament period had already begun or the document would not have been written. Paul's letters, for example, are responses to changing situations. If we really want to see the situation out of which the New Testament grew—the beginning of the New Testament period—we have to see the situation before it precipitated the literature.

The principal objection to marking the beginning of the New Testament period by the earliest New Testament event referred to is that the situation of that event is liable to be mistaken for the situation which characterizes the start of the New Testament period. Thus, the agrarian Palestinian setting

which seems to be the background of the birth stories of Jesus and John the Baptist may become accepted as the situation at the beginning of the New Testament period when, in fact, it is but a small part of that situation and not at all characteristic of the general situation.

Once we abandon purely literary considerations, certain things come into focus about the historical events of the period. Clearly the New Testament period begins with the lives of John the Baptist and Jesus. Without feeling constrained to mark the beginning of the period by any literary episodes—such as the birth of Jesus as described in Matthew and Luke, or the Annunciation to Mary or Joseph, or the promise to Zechariah—nevertheless, we can say that the lives of these two men clearly mark the start of the New Testament period. The situation out of which the New Testament period grew was that which obtained while these men lived and before they started their public ministries. Once they began preaching, the changes characteristic of the New Testament period began and the situation out of which the New Testament period grew changes.

Translating this line of reasoning into chronological terms, we can say that it gives us a starting point around the first decade of the first century. This is the situation we must describe, and we must describe it in very general terms—the political, economic, religious, and cultural state of affairs in the Roman Empire first; the political, economic, religious, and cultural state of affairs in that part of the Roman Empire east of the Mediterranean Sea second.

The following descriptions represent a sort of minimal type of analysis which must be achieved in order to show the situation out of which the New Testament period grew. First the political-military, then the economic-cultural, and finally the religious situa-

tion are depicted in broad strokes and their implications for the new historical period are roughly sketched.

1. The political and cultural independence of many small states was subject to the regulations of the Roman Empire, and this condition was enforced by the Roman army. Within many of these smaller states there was tension between groups of internationalists who accepted these conditions and groups of militant conservatives who resisted them. It could be expected that this tension would be resolved either by the triumph of the Empire and the crushing of the local militant conservatives or by the shattering of the Roman Empire and the arising of strong, warring national states.

2. The Roman Empire had established order through most of its realm, had made travel by land and water comparatively safe, had broken down barriers between nations within it, and had set up conditions favorable to trade, peace, culture, and prosperity on an almost Empire-wide scale. We could expect an increase in all of these activities, and we would expect this to favor the cause of the internationalists.

3. The Graeco-Roman religions had definitely broken down. The Homeric Greek tradition had nothing to support it. The Roman tradition maintained itself only by official decree and without more than formal popularity. The healing, magical, and mystery cults were popular and growing. Those which centered about local institutions (shrines, hospitals, temples, etc.) were restricted in their appeal, but those whose common elements were reproducible anywhere showed remarkable ability to spread. Religious eclecticism was common. We would expect that several of these unofficial religions not tied to local supports might become widespread through the Roman Empire. By incorporating the "necessary" elements of the official religion and keeping out of politics, they might

serve a useful purpose in the state and enjoy its support and promotion. They could be especially useful in undermining the position of the militant conservatives locally.

The change agents which affected this situation are known to us partly from New Testament sources (the Gospels, Acts, the Epistles, Revelation) and partly from other historical records (Josephus, Tacitus, archaeological inscriptions and remains, etc.) so far as they are known. The study of this period of history must assess the influence of known change agents and others which are not known. To the extent that we can see how the influences for change actually altered the situation at the beginning of the period into the situation at its end, we may be said to understand the history of the New Testament period.

When it comes to marking the end of the New Testament period, none of the usual methods is satisfactory. Both using the documental event and using the last book written generally results in establishing the end of the New Testament period at the writing of 2 Peter. But in either case, this is a purely literary terminus, not a historical one.

What we want is a line of division between the New Testament period and the next historical period which can show us the situation at the end of the New Testament period (and the beginning of the next) so that we can contrast that situation with the one which existed at the beginning of the New Testament period. The historical evidence establishing this line may be in documentary form. It may even be in the New Testament. But we cannot simply assume that the New Testament period ended with the writing of the last New Testament document. We can, no doubt, see some significant change of emphasis, attitude, and situation if we compare the earliest written New Testament book with the last one written. This is a proper literary,

theological, and historical activity. But it is not one which can give us a complete view of the New Testament period. It shows an episode—the major episode probably—but it remains incomplete. There is, moreover, a specific difficulty and a specific danger in using 2 Peter as our necessary end point for the New Testament period. The difficulty is that this letter was written for a limited concrete purpose, one which had more to do with ideas and thought trends than it had to do with historical events. The danger is that the arguments and allusions in 2 Peter need to be specified by historical references; they are not such that they can specify historical references. Yet it is just this latter process which is used when 2 Peter is analyzed to spell out the environment to which it was addressed. The result is that each commentator finds the situation which he wants to find.

We must accept the New Testament as a body of material produced for a variety of purposes but produced in general for a similar overriding purpose. The variety of purposes was occasioned by immediate needs in different places. The overriding purpose was occasioned by the interactions of the Christian movement with the people, the time, and the overall setting of the Roman Empire.

This means that the purpose for which the New Testament documents were written, the purpose for which they were preserved, is an integral part of the New Testament. We cannot understand the New Testament apart from it. And that overriding purpose was not necessarily terminated by the writing of the last New Testament book.

This is not to say that the New Testament period continues down to this very day because the New Testament is still used, studied, treasured, and preserved. I am speaking of the purpose—and purposes—of the apostolic church and the New Testament writ-

ers. They did not have us in mind. But the writers and the apostolic church did have certain definite aims in view. They had a sense of reaching out to "all nations," a phrase which rings hauntingly throughout the New Testament. (See Matt. 25:32; 28:19; Luke 24:27; Acts 14:16; Rom. 16:26; 2 Tim. 4:17; Rev. 14:8; 15:4.) Those aims and that outreach were largely satisfied by the early part of the second century. The situation described in the letters of Ignatius and Polycarp is the situation at the end of the New Testament period and at the beginning of the period of the early fathers. The church has developed and spread throughout the Roman Empire. It has turned from proclaiming Christ to imitating Christ. Not the missionary but the teacher is the ideal. Not the salvation of others but the holy living of the membership is foremost in Christians' minds.

Yet if we mark the end of the New Testament period as early in the second century, does this leave us with several New Testament books written after the New Testament period? That would be awkward but not catastrophic since we are studying a period of history, not a literary epoch. The books most frequently dated beyond the beginning of the second century are 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and 2 Peter. Barnett dated all of them after the first half of the second century.⁴ He dated 2 Peter at 150 A. D. and the pastorals A. D. 160–175. But he published in 1946, and the scholarship represented was even earlier. Today Barrett, who rejects Paul's authorship, dates the Pastorals c. A. D. 100.⁵ Kelly accepts them as Pauline and gives a date not later than A. D. 66.⁶ In attack-

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵ See C. K. Barrett, *The Pastoral Epistles*, especially p. 33: "So far the Pastorals have been treated as church tracts written at the close of the first century."

⁶ See J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, p. 36.

ing the arguments advanced by those who deny the authenticity of the Pastorals, his most effective arguments are those which strike at the second century date for them. He admits the homogeneity of the Pastorals and the language difference between them and Paul's letters; but he shows that "there is clearly nothing in the vocabulary alone which demands a second-century date for the letters."⁷

All of this accords with my own reading of the Pastorals. There is a completely different historical feel about the Pastorals than there is about the letters of Polycarp and Ignatius. A calm reading of each set in turn will produce this reaction in anyone sensitive to both the New Testament and the Patristic period. Once one recognizes the different atmosphere, he naturally turns to an ideational and linguistic analysis of the two sets to find what causes the difference. There are two big differences (big in basic attitude, not necessarily in word count) which separate the two.

First, the Pastorals have the salvation of all men as an underlying presupposition. It crops up explicitly from time to time, but it is there all the way through. The letters of Ignatius and Polycarp lack this underlying presupposition. Their underlying presupposition is not that Christ died for all men but that Christ died for all who believe, in other words that Christ died for all Christians or for the church or—as the letters say—*for us*. This is a decisive difference. It is a difference between the New Testament period and the beginning of the Patristic period. Much has been made of the emphasis on organizational details in the Pastorals and the fact that church organization is one of the more promi-

nent emphases in Ignatius. But the emphasis is by no means the same; indeed, the organization reflected is not the same. And although in both sets you have emphasis on discipline and internal order, in the Pastorals this is the necessary condition for having a useful organization, while in Ignatius (and Polycarp) it is the necessary condition for having an admirable organization.

Second, and related to the first, there is a strong emphasis on preaching in the Pastorals and none in Ignatius and Polycarp. Preaching is *always* placed before teaching in the Pastorals. Consider: 1 Tim. 2:7: . . . a preacher and apostle . . . a teacher . . . 4:13: . . . to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching, to teaching. 2 Tim. 1:11: I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher. 4:2: Preach the word . . . teaching.

See also 1 Tim. 3:16; 2 Tim. 1:8; 2:8-9; Titus 1:3. This is the atmosphere of the New Testament period, not of the beginning of the Patristic period.

This leaves 2 Peter. Grant dates this at "the beginning of the second century or the end of the first."⁸ This again indicates a shift in scholarly opinion from those who in the 1940s dated it in the middle of the second century. If an end-of-the-first-century date holds, then 2 Peter can be placed within the New Testament period—but only barely. Unlike the Pastorals, which retain significant emphases characteristic of the New Testament period and in contrast to the early-second-century writers, 2 Peter shows little of the change agency which was at work in the New Testament period.

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⁸ Robert M. Grant, *A Historical Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 230.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.