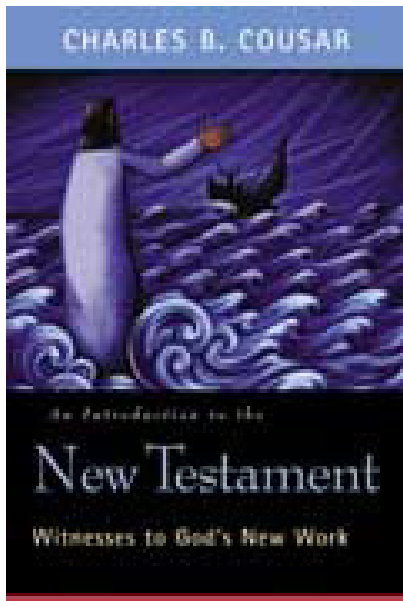


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Cousar, Charles B.

An Introduction to the New Testament: Witnesses to God's New Work

Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006. Pp. xv + 202.
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Charles Cousar has gifted us with the first avowedly postcritical introduction to the New Testament. Although he does not provide a concise statement of what “postcritical” means, Cousar’s basic approach seems clear enough: informed, but not determined, by historical and literary criticism; confessionally theological but not narrowly doctrinal. Above all else, Cousar provides insightful and concise discussions of the New Testament books, complemented by admirable literary and theological sensitivity to the texts themselves. The book addresses a theological audience, and this review will address it on those terms.

Cousar’s approach leads to a layout that stands apart from other introductory texts. Most chapters provide a brief introduction, followed by running commentary on the New Testament books. While Cousar omits the standard introductory chapters on ancient Mediterranean culture and Judaism in antiquity, he does provide full chapter introductions to Paul, the “Pauline tradition,” the Synoptics, and the General Epistles. His chapter on the historical Jesus is primarily a reflection on the relationship between historical research and faith.

Sparkling interpretive insights fill the pages, particularly with respect to the Pauline tradition. Cousar effectively articulates the tension between universalism and particularism in Rom 5 and 6 (19–21). He observes that perhaps the Philippian “dogs” (3:2) did not pose an immediate threat to the church, yet he notes that Paul weighs his “pedigree” against theirs (63–64). He characterizes Ephesians as “lyrical from beginning to end,” better prayed or sung rather than studied (81). And he suggests that the rending of the curtain not only plays into Mark’s antitemple program but also symbolizes “the end of the protection one had from dangerous encounters with God” (113). In every case Cousar demonstrates profound erudition. Without explaining the contours of contemporary debates, interaction with other interpreters greatly enriches the book.

The chapter sequence is not merely distinctive; it is odd. Cousar begins with Paul presumably for historical reasons, as Paul’s letters comprise the earliest extant Christian literature. Yet Cousar chooses to begin his introduction to Paul with Romans, following the canonical order rather than the conventional chronological approach. One could easily defend beginning the book with Paul, of course, and one could just as easily imagine a canonical presentation. (How, though, would Cousar reconcile this choice with his treatment of Mark before Matthew, which presumably values Markan priority above canonical order?) But Cousar does both—and neither. Apart from the obvious irony, that Cousar never discusses, this approach has the effect of foregrounding Paul’s most theologically influential text. The format also results in oddities such as a longer discussion of Ephesians than of Luke. Less “doctrinally” influential epistles such as 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians, then, are read in the light of Romans—or rather, in the Reformation tradition.

This observation leads to a more substantive concern. Cousar’s postcritical approach welcomes theological engagement. The book is at its best when it articulates the theological stakes in a given text. For example, James does not contrast faith and the law but “the empty profession of religion and its lively expression” (166). However, theological interpretation must embrace not only doctrine but also the ongoing life of the church. And here the book falls short. One could read this book and never guess how people use the New Testament in the churches’ raging sexuality debates. Although Cousar does voice disappointment and puzzlement concerning why Paul does not address slavery categorically (69), one looks in vain for an acknowledgment of gender issues or slavery in 1 Corinthians. Insufficient attention to the household codes simply recognize unresolved “problems of interpretation for the contemporary reader” (86). Theologically inclined readers in this century will be keen for a discussion of mission and cultural difference, major issues in the New Testament, yet they will go away disappointed.

Although many instructors will find this volume too concise to serve as a textbook, its fresh approach and interpretive wisdom invite a close inspection. I admire Cousar's initiative in writing for a confessional audience and the rare level of theological engagement this textbook attains. At the same time, I believe the book would be much stronger with a reconsideration of its organizational logic and with a richer understanding of what constitutes theological interpretation. If a future edition of the book took those steps, I would strongly consider adopting it for classroom use.