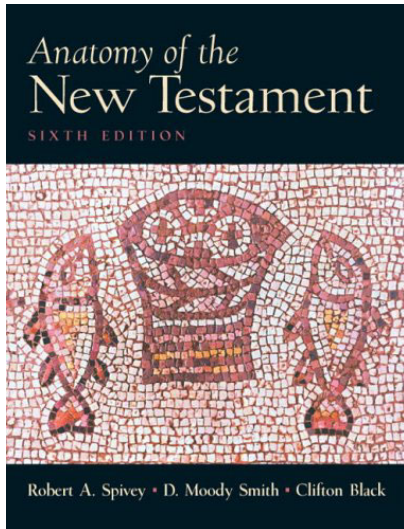


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Spivey, Robert A., D. Moody Smith, and C. Clifton Black

Anatomy of the New Testament: A Guide to Its Structure and Meaning

Sixth edition

Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006.
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Anatomy of the New Testament was first published in 1969 and has recently been released to the public in its sixth thoroughly revised edition. For this edition, C. Clifton Black, Professor of Biblical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, has joined Robert A. Spivey and D. Moody Smith, the two distinguished authors of earlier versions. In the preface they explain that some structural changes have been made: 1 Corinthians is treated in a chapter of its own, 2 Peter and Hebrews are dealt with in the context of Revelation; additionally, they strived to “deal more extensively with historical issues” than in previous editions (xxii).

After an overview of the Jewish and the Greco-Roman worlds, the book follows the arrangement of the major parts of the New Testament: Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Revelation. But within these blocks sometimes a chronological sequence is preferred: Mark is treated before the other Gospels, and the discussion of Paul’s letters starts out with 1 Thessalonians. However, when 2 Corinthians is treated before 1 Corinthians, following Galatians and preceding Philippians, which is discussed together with Philemon, the authors abandon both canonical and chronological considerations. First Corinthians and Romans are treated in chapters of their own, followed by a chapter called “Deutero-Pauline Letters: The Emerging Church,” which covers Colossians, Ephesians, and the Pastorals. Ironically, the book presents only five of the seven Catholic Epistles (James,

1 Peter, and the three letters of John) as it discusses “The Catholic Epistles: Faith and Order”; 2 Peter and Jude are introduced with Hebrews and the Revelation of John.

Every chapter follows the same pattern. Background information and a brief outline are presented before providing a narrative commentary. This commentary, supported by explanatory boxes and sidebars, pictures, and tables, constitutes the greater part of the book. Following the proposed outline, the biblical text is broken down into sections, and each section is introduced by a leading question intended “to provoke the student’s thought” (xxii, cf. 9). The chapters conclude with a carefully selected and briefly annotated bibliography covering relevant primary sources and modern studies.

The authors suggest that students first read the background information and the outline and then try to read the individual New Testament writing in one sitting. After this they will be prepared to study the authors’ narrative commentary (9).

The recurring references to the Iraq War, Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, the movie *The Passion of Christ*, or the *Left Behind* novels probably should not have passed the editors’ desk; they make the book feel dated. The tables, on the other hand, are professionally produced and a welcome addition to the narrative. The quotes from primary sources are well chosen; the black and white photographs of artwork and geographical locations, unfortunately, came out very dark in my copy and with poor contrast, but nevertheless make an immense contribution.

The style is refreshing and very readable; the narrative flows well. The authors refrain from insider talk, especially from polemic against positions they do not share. End- or footnotes are not used; instead, quotes from primary sources outside of the canon are often written out. The overall layout of the pages is pleasing to the eye, with enough white space. Key words are printed in bold and listed in the glossary at the back of the book, a helpful feature for the uninitiated student of the New Testament.

I was educated in Germany, so reading a widely used American text book for the very first time is entertaining on several different levels. Better than any other genre, introductions to the New Testament document the consensus of the discipline and help the individual scholar position himself or herself within the community of researchers. They show what scholars read and process in their specific cultural setting, and they show what we they do not talk about in the classroom. References to international authors whose works are not published in English are painfully missed in *Anatomy of the New Testament*.

So, how useful would this book be in my classroom? I am not sure. One of my main goals is to draw students away from a naïve understanding of the Bible that looks for the one

and only correct interpretation and to help them develop a critical distance and understand that there are often two or three very acceptable ways to solve a specific problem in the text. For my German heart, the narrative in this treatment of the New Testament seems too uncritical. Minority positions are usually not mentioned, and after a while the authorial voice becomes too authoritative for my taste. I would much prefer to leave questions unanswered more often. For example, with many scholars I believe that we simply do not know who wrote the Gospel according to Matthew—when and where and why it was written. The surviving sources inside and outside the Christian Bible do not provide conclusive information. So sentences such as “The provenance of Matthew’s Gospel is generally thought to be Syria, probably the city of Antioch” (90) certainly has enough qualitative disclaimers to satisfy a scholarly conscience, but because this is the only theory presented, the student will walk away with the impression that Matthew was written in Antioch. We do not know that. Students should be introduced to evidence first and to theory second.

The authors begin the discussion of almost every letter of Paul by placing it within the narrative setting given in the book of Acts. For example, the third paragraph introducing 1 Thessalonians reads: “According to Acts (17:1), Paul and his companions arrive in Thessalonica after they had preached and been arrested in Philippi (16:12–40).” By using Acts to set up the historical background of Paul’s letter, the authors confuse the narrative world of Acts with historical fact. Why not let the book of Acts and the Pauline letter collection each tell its own story? Paul in his letters does not say that he is a Roman citizen or that he is a tentmaker or that he is from Tarsus, and he does not perform any healing miracles. We should use the letters of Paul to reconstruct the historical background against which the book of Acts can be interpreted, not the other way around. In any case, in my eyes the book would have gained significantly as an introduction to the letters of Paul if the authors had resisted more strongly the temptation to harmonize the letters with Acts.

Maybe this is a result of having grown up with other textbooks. Then again, introductions to the New Testament convey the consensus of the discipline in a specific cultural setting, and *Anatomy of the New Testament* does this very well for North America. It is an excellent resource, very accessible, and a great guide to provide first orientation in a vast field of knowledge.