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Ben Witherington has written a superb book about New Testament history. New Testament documents emerged in the first century C.E. and are part of history, and without the exploration and understanding of their historical background there is no correct interpretation of their meaning. This is a general axiom that is further acknowledged in modern scholarship. The author begins by putting his narrative in an appropriate cultural context, and to do this takes the reader back beyond the time of Christ to the days of Alexander the Great and his immense hellenizing influence over the Middle East. Witherington covers the period from Alexander the Great through the Hasmoneans to the time of Christ and the end of the first century C.E. The textbook format is informative, augmented by sidebars, maps, illustrations, chronological charts, and photographs of ancient sites and scrolls. This is very informative, not only for students and scholars of the New Testament, but for a broad readership, because Witherington uses a variety of scholarly techniques and methods, offering a fresh picture of the historical background of the New Testament. The book is a profitable introduction and guide to the history of Christianity and a valuable general resource book.

The author divides his work into sixteen chapters, with a prolegomenon before his first chapter devoted to history, historians, and biographers. It is a brief but useful section for
understanding history and the aims of ancient writers such as Josephus, Tacitus, and Luke, pointing out the differences with modern historiography. The first two chapters present the Jewish history before Jesus’ birth, covering the era from 356 to 4 B.C. Here there are two useful charts with the dates of the events in Palestine first before Roman occupation and then, in the second chapter, during the period of Roman occupation. The reader can find anything about Roman rulers and the Herodian clan. I think that the reference to the calendars in antiquity and mainly the discussion about the date of Jesus’ birth according to the sources is very informative and well surveyed.

The next four chapters (3–6) present the historical period from Jesus’ birth up to his resurrection and the first steps of the church after its birth (4 B.C.–33 C.E.). Here the focus falls upon Jesus and his ministry from a historical point of view. Witherington also deals with the Jewish movements of Zealots and Essenes, comparing the witnesses about them from any document of the first century. In the fifth chapter the main subject is crucifixion. The author presents all the data about the time when Jesus was crucified from the sources and adopts as the most appropriate the Johannine chronology. Concerning the appearances of Jesus after his resurrection to some women, Witherington believes that this is an evidence for the historicity of the event. The earliest Christians were living in a patriarchal world, and it is hardly credible according to his view that they would have made up a story about Jesus appearing first to women. Cultural anthropologists surely will agree with him in this point. The rest of the chapter deals with the book of Acts. There is a chart with a chronological comparison of the events between Paul’s Letters and Acts that will be extremely interesting for any scholar.

Chapters 7–13 cover the period from the persecution of Jerusalem Christians and the start of the evangelization of others to the death of emperor Nero (33–68 C.E.). Here Witherington takes the reader through Paul’s missionary journeys to the world outside Palestine. These pages provide historical and cultural information about all the cities of the ancient world that Christians visited and in which they organized local churches. There is also a chronological chart of Pauline activity (196–99) that probably will raise scholarly debate. In chapter 8 the author returns to Palestine and informs us about the political changes in the Holy Land. Concerning the captivity epistles the author suggests 60–62 C.E. as a date of composition. He suggests the following chronological order: the first to be written was Colossians, which was sent out with Philemon and perhaps also with Ephesians. The last of the four was Philippians. This period is ended with Nero’s execution of Christians, and seven pages of chapter 13 are devoted to the apostles Paul, Peter, and their co-workers. Witherington’s view is that the period 63–68 C.E. was one of the most turbulent in early Christian history.
The last three chapters of the book (14–16), which cover the period 68–96 C.E., explore the origins of the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Matthew. Also found here is a review about Luke as historian. Witherington reads Luke-Acts and Josephus as reliable though hardly neutral historical sources and supplements them with an impressive array of witnesses from inscriptions and other documents from the same era. The Johannine literature and 2 Peter are dated in the last period of the first century under the reign of Domitian. Interesting is the view about the Beloved Disciple. Witherington does not regard him as one of the Twelve but rather as a Judean disciple with close connections to the high priest who hosted Jesus and the others during Jesus’ final Passover (398). The author finally leaves the church in the dominion of Domitian and makes a brief reference to some material from the end of the first century that comes from the Roman Christian community (1 Clement and the Shepherd of Hermas). Here we read that the Epistle to the Hebrews was sent to a community in Rome.

Witherington spices up the text and story with theories and other research. The book is not boring, and through its reading is revealed Witherington’s writing ability. His presentation of the spread of Christianity presents a substantial amount of great material on the social, cultural, and political context into which Christianity spread. Although one can disagree with his dates and theories or with the shape of the map and where some of the texts are placed in relation to others, it is extraordinarily useful as a place to start. The historical framework of the New Testament era presented in this book is well researched.

The only criticism that someone could raise is that the quality of illustrations does not match the quality of the author’s writing and that there is no bibliography at the end of the book but only three indexes. The last harms the general outlook of the book. My last word is that while Witherington’s book is an excellent scholarly work that treats its complex subject with depth and insight, it is accessible to the general reader as well.