

How to Teach
The Writings of the New Testament, 3rd Edition
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As every experienced instructor understands, textbooks can be used in a variety of ways for effective teaching. In this short note directed to those teaching the New Testament or Early Christianity, either at the introductory or more advanced level, I build on my own experience with this book to suggest some possible approaches.

Since it is a sad but all-too-well-confirmed truth that instructors themselves sometimes fail to read the textbooks they have assigned, a good starting point is to review some of the features of *The Writings of the New Testament* that distinguish it from the standard college or seminary textbook called Introduction to the New Testament. The usual textbook is based squarely on the historical-critical model and reports the standard scholarly positions with respect to every critical issue. Thus, the sequence is roughly chronological: the historical Jesus first, then the letters of Paul, then the Gospels, and then “the other stuff,” ending in Revelation. Included in the “other stuff” are the disputed letters of Paul, Hebrews, and the Catholic Epistles,” all of which are grouped together because they are regarded as chronologically later.

The standard treatment --- it can be found in virtually every textbook from every point on the theological spectrum --- appeals to teachers because it conforms to the pattern of their own education and because it enables them to challenge, on the basis of “critical history” the naïve faith views that most students bring to the class. It appeals to many students because it conforms to the human instinct to think in terms of narrative, and however conceptually flawed, this sort of textbook describes a development that unfolds over time: Jesus, then Paul, then the post-Pauline period.

Seldom acknowledged, perhaps seldom even recognized, are the considerable flaws in this presentation.

1. It tends less to invite critical thinking among students than to replace one narrative (that of faith) with another (that of “scholarship”) based, not on the conclusions reached by the students, but on the new authority of the teacher rather than on the authority of the pastor.

2. It covers over the huge problems involved in a depiction of “the historical Jesus” before engaging the nature of the Gospels as witnesses and interpretations.

3. It fails to critically engage the issues of authorship --- as in the Pauline and Petrine letters --- but simply adopts a conventional position that is weaker than often supposed.

4. Its historical framework provides no basis for reading the respective compositions as religious literature.

5. Most seriously, it does not invite students to consider the most important historical question of all, namely, why were these compositions written in the first place; little or no attention is given to the birth of the Christian movement, its distinctive experiences and convictions, and the cognitive problems it presented to believers that required resolution, or at least engagement.

In contrast, *The Writings of the New Testament* employs a polythetic approach to the earliest Christian writings. It recognizes the historical dimension of these texts, to be sure, but it also pays explicit attention to their anthropological, literary, and religious dimensions. It constructs a model for interpreting the NT that is based on the dialectic between powerful human experience, particularly religious experience, and the symbolic world within which such experience occurs. The symbolic world helps shape the experience, and the experience, when powerful enough, can dramatically reshape the symbolic world.

1. This model enables students to engage the critical question of origination and shape of the NT writings: they arise because of a specifically religious movement of the first century Mediterranean world, and they are shaped by the various ways in which religious experiences and convictions interact with the available symbols of Greco-Roman culture and Judaism.
2. The appropriate starting point of inquiry is therefore not the historical Jesus, but the earliest Christian claims to power based in the experience of the resurrection.
3. Each of the literary compositions in the New Testament can be read in terms of the four discrete dimensions, with an emphasis, respectively, on the composition's historical and social context, on the religious experiences and convictions it evinces, on the process of interpretation it exemplifies, or on the rhetorical and literary means by which it makes meaning.
4. As much as possible, the categories under which the compositions are organized are neutrally descriptive. The "Synoptic Tradition" makes no suggestion of worth based on historical placement or theological perspective; it merely designates three narratives with clear family connections.
5. Because *Writings* uses grown-up prose and refuses to reduce difficult issues to over-simplified answers, it makes genuine intellectual demands on its readers. Students need adjust to a level of diction and syntax not usual in college texts; once they make this adjustment, they discover that the style of writing is actually simple and straightforward.
6. Although *Writings* reads less like a text than as a trade-book, it contains full discussion of and critical judgments concerning all the pertinent issues for the

responsible interpretation of the respective compositions; the discussions of some issues, indeed, are much fuller than in comparable introductions.

7. *Writings* has sometimes been characterized as “conservative” in its approach. In some ways, this is fair: judgments concerning synoptic relationships, the Johannine literature, the authorship of Paul’s letters, and the development of the canon do not follow current fashions. But it should be emphasized that these are scholarly rather than religious judgments, based in sound scientific research. The book is not religiously conservative, unless a deep interest in and respect for the religious experiences and convictions of the first Christians must be classified as conservative. This interest and respect also are based in the spirit of intellectual inquiry, for it is difficult to account for the rise and the shape of these compositions if those experiences and convictions are not taken into account.

Pedagogical Strategies

An instructor can use a textbook in at least three distinct ways. She can teach *out of* the book, she can teach *against* the book, and she can teach *tangentially* to the book. In each case, the textbook can serve as a valuable resource in the intellectual growth of students. In this section, I apply each approach to *Writings*, suggesting how this book might be used in a college or seminary classroom.

Teaching Out of the Book

Some instructors teach New Testament as a service course outside the area of their own expertise. Others are called on to teach Introduction when they have only recently entered the teaching profession with a dissertation devoted to a single NT writing, or to an apocryphal composition outside the NT canon. Still others simply have a teaching style that relies heavily on the textbook as the “authority” in the class. Such instructors choose to teach “out of the book.”

A good way for such teachers to use *Writings* is through the extensive lists of study questions. The instructor need not provide a lecture on a specific topic, but can let the book provide the instruction. The class period could profitably be used in responding to the study questions provided by the author, as well as to other questions posed by the instructor. This process of questioning helps turn passive reading into active critical engagement.

Another way to exercise creativity while remaining within the frame set by the book is to focus on one of the four dimensions for special focus. Thus, in an undergraduate course, the anthropological dimension of the first three chapters might be of particular interest: students can engage, not simply the facts about the Greco-Roman and Jewish world, but search out the ways in which the “reinterpretation of symbols” took place in each part of that cultural mix. When I taught introduction for ten years to

undergraduates at Indiana University, I taught Paul from just such an anthropological perspective, as a constructor of intentional communities.

Similarly, in a seminary class, special attention might be given to the religious claims and convictions of the first Christians. In my own classes at the Candler School of Theology, in fact, I often start with chapters 4-5 as a way of engaging students in a dimension of the subject close to their own experience, as a way of enticing them to engage as well dimensions (such as the historical) that appear to them more remote and less pertinent.

A third way of teaching “out of the book” is to examine more closely with students the textual basis for the assertions made by *Writings*. The book can carry the burden of providing the basics about a specific composition, while students and teacher alike gain depth and specificity of knowledge through the close reading of actual NT passages. I always make use of Burton Throckmorton’s *Gospel Parallels*, for example, when teaching the Synoptics. Having students actually discover the ways in which Matthew and Luke edit and amplify their Markan source is a never-failing source of delight to students. Similarly, the book’s broad treatment of Paul’s letters enables a class the luxury of examining a specific passage in great depth.

Many instructors have discovered, in fact, that *Writings* is not a book that serves only for introductory classes. The amount of attention the book gives to the interpretation of each New Testament composition enables it to be employed profitably in upper-level courses as well.

Teaching “Against the Book”

Some instructors teach New Testament from the standpoint of a well-developed sense of the field as a whole. They have their own ideas on a number of critical issues, and want their students to learn how to engage scholarly differences. Such teachers enjoy using textbooks as foils for the exposure and development of their own positions. Because *Writings* presents a single scholar’s interpretation of the entire corpus --- including the circumstances of composition and the process of canonization --- it is loaded with distinctive positions that in some cases conform to but in other cases diverge from scholarly consensus. It therefore presents an ideal text against which an instructor can position herself and lead her students.

One obvious point of attack is this book’s position that “the historical Jesus” is not intrinsically an element in the study of the New Testament writings, but only the witness to Jesus and interpretation of him in the Gospels. A teacher with the opposite conviction here has a book that can be “taught against” on this point.

Another example: since *Writings* takes the position that all of Paul’s letters were “authored” by him in his lifetime, though perhaps not “written” by him, a teacher convinced of the majority position with regard to Pauline authorship can use the text as an opportunity to show the strength of the conventional position.

Similarly, many instructors will find it important to “teach against” the book’s argument concerning canonization, both with respect to the process and with respect to the ecclesial implications of canon. Especially in an undergraduate course, the question of “closed” or “open” canon can give rise to a spirited and useful discussion, especially since it is a question pertinent across the entire range of the humanities.

Teaching Tangentially to the Book

Some teachers generally find textbooks to be of limited usefulness. They use them because students require some sense of security, or because the textbook can provide some useful supplement to the teacher’s own pedagogical interest. In fact, *Writings* came into being precisely because, as a young instructor at Yale Divinity School, I was unable to find a textbook that matched my sense of how the New Testament should be engaged. My lectures were spent entirely on communicating the concepts and contents of the New Testament composition, with little time left for other matters. So I turned my lectures into the book. But then I was presented with the opposite problem: since the book now did at least an adequate job of conveying what my lectures formerly did, how should I now use my class-time? More and more, I teach tangentially to my own text.

I use the text primarily as an essential supplement and backup to what I do in lectures. By no means do I slight the importance of student reading. Quite the contrary: examination questions are drawn from both lectures and the book. Those drawn from the book are explicitly identified as such, to reinforce the necessity of reading the text. But if I am secure in the knowledge that students are reading the text, and can test that, then I can venture in new ways in class. Here are some examples:

1. The chapters on the symbolic world of the New Testament are thick with specific information. I assume the students learn those facts, and they are tested on them, but I spend the lectures in that section of the course emphasizing the broad patterns that are of immediate pertinence to the understanding of the NT compositions themselves.
2. In my treatment of the Gospels, I allow the text to do the heavy exegetical lifting. I use the lectures to isolate four aspects of each narrative: literary shaping, engagement with symbolic world, image of Jesus, portrayal of disciples. This simplified and concentrated reinforcement enables students to compare and contrast the respective Gospels more easily.
3. Because the book carries out a full interpretation of each of Paul’s letters, I am able to spend more time on Paul’s life, ministry, and influence. I devote one lecture, for example, to “Paul and the Problems of the early Christians,” as a way of providing a perspective on the respective letters.

4. The section of the book called “other witnesses” is particularly troublesome. There are more writings to consider than a semester has time to accommodate. Yet my model disallows me to treat them homogeneously --- I am required to respect the individual character of each writing. I emphasize the need for students to master the specifics of each composition. In my lectures, I spend one class comparing and contrasting the historical-critical model, which groups all these compositions under the rubric “early Catholicism,” and my model, which insists that different does not mean later, only different. Then, having to choose wisely, I devote an entire lecture each to Hebrews and to James (sometimes also 1 Peter), to illustrate just that point.

A Sample Syllabus

Including on the companion website (fortresspress.com/johnson) is the syllabus I used in the most recent iteration of the large introductory class in New Testament at Candler School of Theology. It should be noted that this is the first-semester of a two-semester sequence. The goal of the first semester is mastery of contents and concepts. The second semester is devoted entirely to learning skills in interpretation (exegesis). I use *Writings* in the first semester thoroughly, but in the second semester, encourage students to develop their own ability to interpret.