

Preface

The first three dictionaries in this series are dedicated to the principal components of the New Testament: Jesus and the Gospels, Paul and his letters, and the later New Testament writings. These volumes survey well the contents and theological contributions of the New Testament and its principal figures, along with the various critical methods that have been developed to assist interpreters in their work. The present volume hopes to supplement these earlier works in strategic ways.

This, the fourth reference volume, takes a completely different approach. It attempts to situate the New Testament and early Christianity in its literary, historical, social and religious context. This volume is concerned with archaeology, geography, numismatics, related writings, various historical figures, political institutions, historical events, peoples and culture. It is not tied to specific writings of the New Testament, as is the case with the three previous dictionaries.

There are several related books that could be mentioned. C. K. Barrett's *The New Testament Background* (rev. ed., 1987) provides a key selection of primary texts, along with helpful annotations. C. A. Evans's *Noncanonical Writings and New Testament Interpretation* (1992) offers thumbnail descriptions of much primary literature that has bearing on the writings of the New Testament. S. E. Porter's edited volume, *Handbook to Exegesis of the New Testament* (1997), contains a variety of lengthier essays on select background-related topics as they bear on exegesis. Other works take a commentary approach. S. T. Lachs's *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament* (1987) provides useful commentary,

but is limited to the Synoptic Gospels and is focused primarily on rabbinic parallels. *The Hellenistic Commentary to the New Testament*, edited by M. E. Boring, K. Berger, and C. Colpe (1995), covers the whole New Testament but only offers parallels from the world of Hellenism (though broadly defined). B. J. Malina's and R. L. Rohrbaugh's *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (1992) takes a thematic approach, bringing social, economic and cultural issues to bear, but it is limited to the Synoptic Gospels and discussion is brief. The most comprehensive of these works is C. S. Keener's *The IVP Bible Background Commentary on the New Testament* (1993), which brings relevant data to bear on all of the New Testament writings, passage by passage. However, its treatment—though based on the primary literature—is aimed at a popular audience and so does not include references to the ancient sources.

In contrast to these related and important studies, the present volume limits itself to some 300 topics judged to be relevant to our understanding of the world, or “background,” of the New Testament. It may be admitted that *background* is not necessarily the best word. Some will argue that *context*, *setting*, *world* or some other word would have been better. Perhaps. But “background” will be widely and immediately understood and will have to do, for the other alternatives pose difficulties of their own. The purpose of the present volume is to clarify the world of thought and experience in the light of which the New Testament should be read and the early Christian church understood.

Readers will find discussion of most of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Greek papyri and various inscriptions, the writings that make up the Apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, and the biblical languages. Recent archaeological finds are presented, including regional overviews. Important figures are featured—such as Caiaphas, Hillel, Shammai, Simon ben

Kosibah and the Roman governors of Palestine—as well as exotic ones, such as Apollonius of Tyana, Jesus ben Ananias or Jewish holy men. Articles focus on major Jewish, Greek and Roman institutions, important cities in Israel and the Roman Empire, as well as on cults, commerce, geographical perspectives and much more. Some two hundred scholars who possess expertise in the various topics treated have contributed to this volume. Many of the contributors are well-known veterans, while others have completed their doctorates in recent years in technical fields that are breaking forth in new avenues of discovery.

The length of the respective articles has been determined on the basis of their relevance to New Testament research or the complexity and vastness of the subject. Several articles are only 500 words; most of the others range from 1,000 to 7,500 words, with some exceeding 10,000 words. All include bibliography, guiding readers to additional literature that treats aspects of the topic in greater depth. Each article attempts to bring the reader up to date, to trace briefly the scholarly discussion and then present the very latest research. Some articles discuss texts that were not available only a few years ago. In some cases, such as archaeology, the material that is discussed has come to light only in the year or so prior to publication. The editors and publisher hope that this collective labor will benefit significantly those who wish to interpret the writings of the New Testament and the early church in full context and as accurately and completely as possible.

The editors wish to express their appreciation to the many scholars who contributed articles—in some cases several articles—to this dictionary. Some contributors came to the rescue on short notice, and for this the editors are very grateful. Reference book editor Daniel G. Reid is to be thanked for guiding the work from beginning to end and for

taking an enthusiastic interest in it. A debt of gratitude is also owed to the editorial and production staff of InterVarsity Press for their careful and timely labor. Finally, the editors wish to thank Ginny Evans, who served as project manager, handling the many hundreds of letters, phone calls, e-mail notes and countless other details that such a major and complicated work as this entails. Without her consistent and faithful labor, the project would not have reached completion.

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