

Title: Write a critical book review in 1000-1200 words on Elwell and Yarbrough's Encountering the New Testament (20%).

Course: Introduction to the New Testament

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DECLARATION

I certify that this ASSIGNMENT is my own work. I have acknowledged all material and sources used in it, and that I have not plagiarised in part or whole the work of others without stating the references.

The title of Elwell and Yarbrough's book, *Encountering the New Testament*, suitably describes their approach – it is an even-handed introduction for those who are attempting a study of the New Testament (perhaps for the first time). Hence, it employs a 'wide, not deep' strategy – briefly covering a slew of different disciplines, data and viewpoints related to the New Testament.

This does not mean that the authors simply leave the readers to flounder, unattended at the shallow end of the scholarly pool. Every chapter closes with a 'Further Reading' section that suggests resources for further study, whereby each entry is summarized with a short but descriptive blurb. 'Objectives' and 'Study Questions' are provided to prompt and gently guide a recap and discussion of each chapter.

One of the authors' stated intentions (*p.vii*) is that the book have a broad appeal that can accommodate diverse theological viewpoints. To that end, and for the sake of teachers perusing this guide, the chapters generally follow the canonical arrangement of New Testament books (*p.x*). Different interpretations and conclusions about important topics are introduced and explained – but with the authors often leaning towards a particular view that they personally find more convincing. For example, competing theories about the 'real' author of each book in the New Testament are presented – with the authors ultimately finding the alternate views unconvincing when compared against traditional authorship attributions.

This also means that they sometimes run with generally accepted deductions – for example, the traditional view that the Crucifixion took place on a Friday in 30 A.D (*p.107*) – without even mentioning alternative theories¹. On certain occasions, a view is outright stated to be unbiblical – e.g. Universalism (*p.364*). I can concur with another reviewer who stated: "Another strong point of this textbook is that the theological contents are essentially ecumenical in their presentation. While there are some occasional indicators of the authors' Protestantism, the contents of this text will benefit students of any background."²

With the current edition reviewed being the 2013 revision, readers from the Millennial generation will find the layout and pacing of the contents quite appealing. Each chapter is broken up into short subsections interspersed with callouts, key terms, photographs, maps, charts and so on – quite helpful if the reader's attention span has been acclimatized to visuals and briefness. As another review of the book puts it: "If indeed today's students, so saturated with a lifetime of viewing television, video, and computer screens, can only learn well when one produces all the 'bells and whistles' that this book plus cd have generated, then Elwell and Yarbrough are a must."³

I personally found the green callouts arranged at the sides of the page helpful when flipping back to look for key items that I vaguely remembered seeing in the general vicinity of a particular chapter. Key terms are also elaborated upon in the 'Glossary' (*pp.377-389*) toward the end of the book. On the other hand, all the superscripted references made throughout the many chapters are also collected at the end of the book (*'Notes', pp391-406*), instead of being listed at the end of each chapter which would have made for quicker checking.

The subtitle of Elwell and Yarbrough's book, *A Historical and Theological Survey*, neatly summarizes the authors' emphasis on the historical developments in New Testament studies and the many theological views that have arisen in Christianity. It was enlightening (and occasionally, humbling) to realize that while certain doctrines are reflected as early as the writings of the church

¹ Andreas J. Köstenberger, Leonard S. Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (TN/USA: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2016), 142.

² Jacob J. Prahlow, "Book Review: Encountering the New Testament (Elwell and Yarbrough)," *Pursuing Veritas* (accessed 29-Jun-2021): <https://pursuingveritas.com/2015/04/06/book-review-encountering-the-new-testament-elwell-and-yarbrough/>

³ Craig L. Blomberg, "Encountering the New Testament Written by Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough," *Themelios* (accessed 29-Jun-2021): <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/review/encountering-the-new-testament/>

fathers in the first few centuries A.D., others are much more recent introductions such as dispensationalism (p.362).

Continuing on the subject of history, the textbook spends much ink exploring the rich geography, history and cultural/religious milieu related to the authors and contents of the New Testament. This context is important for properly understanding the intentions of the First Century writers of Scripture – concepts and references their immediate audience were familiar with can be utterly alien to modern readers, which might skew our interpretative conclusions. I concur with the scholar who said: “We must be committed to the biblical text, read and interpreted in its own ancient context—not a later context—for our theology.”⁴ Indeed, a comprehension of the history surrounding the New Testament is necessary in order to properly perceive the theology it conveys.

The authors devote lengthy chapters (*chs.8-9*) to summarizing the life and teachings of Jesus. This is in addition to the treatment that each individual gospel account (*chs.4-7*) gives for the story of Christ. As the key figure of the New Testament, it is only fitting that a central focus is given to the one whom they call Lord – there would be no gospel or New Testament without Jesus Christ. Revisionist and non-Christian views of who Jesus is are mentioned throughout the textbook, but the authors repeatedly make their stand firmly in the camp of orthodox Trinitarianism (*e.g. p.98*).

On the other hand, their treatment of Revelation (a 22 chapter book) is very brief and cursory at a mere ten pages (*ch24, pp.357-366*). Both reviews I have cited earlier make note of this shortcoming: “... the chapter on Revelation stands out as an area which could be improved.”⁵ and “Revelation seems to be dealt with strikingly briefly.”⁶ For example, although I have praised the attention to geography and history given by Elwell and Yarbrough, they make no mention of Laodicea’s location close to sources of hot and cold water – but having access to only lukewarm and unpalatable ‘hard water’. This key information greatly assists in understanding Revelation 3:15-16, a fact that some other studies do make note of.⁷

Throughout their tome, the authors do not shy away from addressing the many criticisms and controversies surrounding the New Testament – its contents, authorship, authenticity and so on. Several whole chapters (*chs.10-12*) are even spent detailing various critical methods that have been applied to the Bible. This is a mature and pragmatic approach in this modern, interconnected world – a Bible believer can hardly stay secluded in their local church, ‘safe’ from sceptical querying. Isolation from hard questions is not the correct prescription; carefully controlled inoculation is. I personally found these sections interesting, as they give insights into the thought processes behind various forms of Biblical scepticism (misguided though they may be).

In conclusion, I found Elwell and Yarbrough’s survey of the New Testament to provide an adequate summary of the many aspects of its study. As the readers soar over the sweeping vistas of the subject, they highlight some tantalizing landmarks that make up the intricate panorama – and provide directions to a closer zoom-in if it is so desired. No secondary analysis can be a substitute for reading the primary material itself, of course – but reading through Elwell and Yarbrough’s *Encountering the New Testament* will lend new insights (and perhaps, refreshed interest) to reading one’s Bible.

⁴ Michael S. Heiser, *Reversing Hermon: Enoch, the Watchers, and the Forgotten Mission of Jesus Christ* (N.p: Defender, 2018), 38.

⁵ Prahlow, “Book Review: Encountering the New Testament (Elwell and Yarbrough)”:

<https://pursuingveritas.com/2015/04/06/book-review-encountering-the-new-testament-elwell-and-yarbrough/>

⁶ Blomberg, “Encountering the New Testament Written by Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough”:

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/review/encountering-the-new-testament/>

⁷ I. Howard Marshall, Stephen Travis, and Ian Paul, *Exploring the New Testament, Volume 2* (SPCK, 2021) Perlego Edition, Chapter 21, The revelation to John.

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