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This third edition is a subtle update and revision of the second edition. Most of the “dramatic” changes occurred in the second edition; there are no fireworks here. In this edition, Perkins demonstrates that she is a master teacher as she introduces the New Testament in a warm, intelligent, and thoughtful manner that will be well received by her student readers. This introduction nicely balances scholarly insight with language that beginning students can easily read.

Essentially, the revisions and updates to this book make it more accessible for the contemporary classroom. References to outdated materials (like Monarch’s Notes) and events are removed, and possibly offensive language is replaced with a more politically correct revision. For example, the days of “xerox machines and desktop publishing” have become days of “web-based blogs and music and video clips” (p. 169). Perkins now muses what the life of Jesus would be like if it were captured on video (p. 51). References to time are updated: “several weeks ago” is now “some time ago” (p. 106). As such, the changes are mostly cosmetic, but they were needed if the book were to remain useful in the classroom. Some of us would be embarrassed that we would have to explain a cultural reference from the mid-1980s instead of focusing on the New Testament.

The great majority of the changes are quite subtle and obviously intended for clarity and not in recognition of scholarly milestones since the second edition. This edition does not intend to be a quantum leap forward. In the first edition, Perkins navigated through New Testament scholarship in a way that was coherent and understandable to a student or non-professional. The second edition was an intensive rewrite that focused on improving the text’s readability and use in the classroom. In contrast, almost every paragraph in the third edition begins and ends with the same sentence as the second edition, perhaps only slightly modified to accommodate the contemporary reader.

The questions for students in the third edition (2012) have not been changed from the second edition (1988), while the second edition introduced almost entirely new questions from the first edition (1978). This indicates that the content of the book has not dramatically changed; at least it hasn’t changed enough to motivate the author to add new questions or revise the old ones. If the content of the book were substantially changed, it would logically follow that the questions on that content would change as well. Furthermore, and more importantly, re-used questions would lose their authenticity and relevance for the student. The content has not been changed significantly enough to warrant an update of the questions — after all, an historical fact is an historical fact (wink, wink) — but the students in their many contexts are in constant change, and somehow they can sense staleness. In the highly competitive marketplace, if younger academics were to continually re-use material like this in their teaching (say a department chair discovered that they had been using thirty-year old material for a few years), they could receive lower marks in their professional reviews. The lack of new questions presents a significant challenge to the book’s reason for being — it could be irrelevant to students and harmful for younger instructors.

There are illustrations in the book. With few exceptions, the illustrations from the second edition are used, and appear in the same position in the text. There are improvements: a map of Qumran receives a legend and a picture of Robinson’s Arch has been removed. A picture of Herod’s Temple has been added (p. 35), as well as a map illustrating Paul’s journeys (p. 134).

A word of caution: Perkins includes instructions for Christians regarding how they can apply her teachings to their life of faith (Perkins also chooses BC and AD rather than BCE and CE). Unfortunately, statements like these are useless or even offensive to non-Christians. This practice is pervasive, usually appearing at the end of sections and in the study questions. Many of us teach in a faith-oriented institution...
where this kind of thing is celebrated, but there are enough of us out there who would prefer students to explore their faith without the direction of the instructor or the classroom materials.

Far from softening this approach, Perkins adds a few lessons for the Christian in the third edition. Perkins adds an exhortation for Christians to hand down their theological tradition (p. 22). The author renews her conviction that “the end” will occur soon (p. 42). A paragraph is added at the end of the chapter on Luke, explaining that Jesus was not subversive and concludes, “Christians are the ones who are following along the way that Jesus set out for them” (p. 232). Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians concerning the body of Christ is presented as a source of encouragement to contemporary Christians (p. 187). These moments of Christian application are no surprise to those of us who have read the previous editions. Obviously, these instructions are important to Perkins (and/or her publisher?) and are useful in a faith-based context.

The overwhelming majority of the revisions in the third edition are innocuous (in this comparison, only the page numbers for the third edition are given): “groups of Christians” becomes “types of Christians” (p. 15); an example of clarification is that “the church” becomes “the Catholic church” (p. 19). In the second edition, a section ends with the assertion that the Bible plays an important role in the spiritual lives of Catholics, and the third edition adds a paragraph with examples (study groups, focal point of prayer, etc., p. 21). Perhaps we can read some slight significance into “Jesus’s disciples did not sit there writing down what Jesus said and did,” which was previously “Jesus’s disciples did not use writing to help memorize what Jesus said and did.” Jesus’s “preaching” in the second edition is “teaching” in the third (p. 82). Essenes become “Covenanters” in the third edition, which may or may not be due to developments in recent scholarship, because the argument was already popular before the first edition was written. Unlike previous editions, no abbreviations for books of the bible appear in the text, so there are no awkward sentences beginning with Mt or Mk, which contributes to its readability.

Some of the changes that appear in the third edition are obviously made in the light of recent scholarship. The population of Nazareth is reduced from ca. 1200 in the second edition to ca. 500 in the third (p. 28). The assertion that the Jewish high priest was corrupt has disappeared (p. 33). A reference to rubbish heaps from aristocratic houses confirms that Jews destroyed impure vessels as instructed in Lev. 11:33 (p. 36). When Perkins addresses the ancient synagogue in the third edition, she has removed the preceding sentences on the archisynagogos (p. 45). Some material about later synagogues has been added instead (p. 46). The example of Yehohanan is removed in the third edition (missing from p. 72). Perkins has always associated the problem of idol food in Corinth with the rich and poor; she adds in the third edition that only the wealthy minority owned houses (p. 121). The comparison between the role of women and freedmen in the early church is removed (missing from p 123).

Two new sections appear in the third edition. A section on the Qu’ran appears — only one page — and highlights the contact that Muhammad had with Jewish and Christian writings (p. 12). Near the end of the book, another one page section is added, this one on the usage of the book of Revelation in modern liturgy.

In conclusion, the third edition is not a thorough update of the second in regards to its substance. This edition is valuable because it is a smoother read than the previous editions. Perkins makes many little revisions, producing a relevant and readable whole for a beginning New Testament undergraduate course. Unfortunately in this regard, the third edition has not updated its primary teaching tool: the study questions at the end of each chapter. It will also reach a limited audience because of its Christian exhortations and possibly even the use of BC and AD.