This book represents the culmination of reflection over many years. Some of the ideas in it go back to the time of my doctoral studies in Oxford in the early 1980s—especially my conviction that the historical investigation of what messages the New Testament authors conveyed to their original audiences must have theological significance when the texts are read in a Christian context today. Yet this work has reached its present form as a result of research I have conducted in the last few years. I was able to expose the germ of my thesis in the form of the Manson Memorial Lecture I delivered in the University of Manchester on 25 October 2001. The warm reception and helpful feedback I received on that occasion encouraged me to press on and I am most grateful for the invitation to present the lecture. The bulk of the manuscript was written during a full year’s research leave in 2002–3 that was made possible by a generous grant from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Board.

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The circumstances of the dedication of this book to the memory of my nephew, Anthony Stephen Esler (15 November 1985–12 March 2002), appear in chapter 10. The Greek is based on 2 Cor 5:8: “He is at home with the Lord.”

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