

New Testament Scholarship Today: Its Challenges and Tasks

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Where is New Testament scholarship today, and what are its challenges and tasks? Where are we, and where do we need to go? The launch of a new scholarly journal, devoted to the New Testament and its world, based in South Korea, and linked to Protestantism within World Christianity provides an opportunity to consider these questions. As a European scholar, I am honored by the invitation to be part of this project. This opportunity allows me to share a few general and somewhat programmatic reflections.

Of course, these are my personal perspectives and cannot claim any kind of “objectivity.” I am German by birth and now live in Switzerland. I was raised in secure living conditions and have never experienced precarity. I have been a reader of the Bible since early youth, and I am a Christian and an ordained Lutheran minister working in a Reformed context. I have taught New Testament and early Jewish texts for over thirty years at theological faculties of four European universities. I have supervised more than twenty Ph.D. candidates, as well as an equal number of postdocs and habilitation candidates from different parts of the world. I have also served as the managing editor of a leading monograph series in the field for over twenty years. This is from where I look at our field of scholarship. Others,

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from different intellectual, religious, ethnic, and economic contexts may see different perspectives. These are mine.

New Testament Scholarship in History and Today

Biblical scholarship is said to be a fruit of the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During this time, a historical and critical awareness developed with the demand to “freely” investigate the canonical writings. This movement initially occurred in a Protestant context with an anti-dogmatic and anti-clerical tendency. However, this definition is too narrow. Sophisticated, scholarly readings of the Bible began much earlier, in antiquity, with Heracleon, the first commentator of John’s Gospel, and learned churchmen such as Origen and Jerome. As a service to the church, these authors interpreted texts using established methods of their time with philological rigor, philosophical depth, and often, polemical fervor. From Origen to Thomas Aquinas and Erasmus of Rotterdam, scholars explained the texts within the framework of current philosophy and theology with spiritual interest but also occasionally criticized leading doctrines or views. We should not dismiss these authors too quickly as “pre-critical” simply because we are unfamiliar with them. We can learn a lot from earlier authors, even today.

The Reformation marked a turning point. From then on, biblical texts were considered the decisive criterion for evaluating theological truth, and all theological debates had to be based on the Bible. The range of accepted writings and the precise shape of the canon then became the battlefield, with canon decisions being made in various churches (e.g., at the Council of Trent and in some Reformed confessions). The search for the oldest

available texts developed, as did closer research into the texts' language and history. Protestantism slowly embraced biblical criticism in the nineteenth century, mostly for apologetic reasons. Roman Catholicism followed after the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. Orthodoxy is still hesitant, and some evangelical or Pentecostal groups still resolutely fight against the historical-critical analysis of the Bible and its results. Until the mid-twentieth century, German scholarship was the pioneer and center of biblical scholarship. The Anglo-Saxon world was more hesitant, and most other areas were not actively involved. Many consider Rudolf Bultmann, the most influential scholar of that period, to be a symbol of destructive criticism, though he is often misunderstood. However, Bultmann most clearly phrased the hermeneutical task of bridging the gap between the Bible and modernity, and this task is still relevant for today.

Much has changed during the last five or six decades. New Testament scholarship has become more international and interdenominational, incorporating scholars from other religious contexts, such as Judaism, as well as non-religious scholars. German scholarship lost its leading position to English-language scholarship. In some fields, there has been a notable "continental drift" between European and North American discourses. Earlier exegetical schools have dissolved, giving way to a greater plurality of methods. Structuralism, narratology, social history, rhetorical studies, and cultural studies have been adopted and now complement and enrich historical paradigms. There is significant interdisciplinarity with classical philology, ancient history, Oriental and Jewish studies, religious studies, and social science. Voices from the Global South are increasingly entering the debate and contributing their perspectives on the texts and their relevance. New hermeneutical paradigms have also emerged, including

socio-rhetorical, feminist, deconstruction, and various postcolonial perspectives, which now challenge the formerly dominant historical paradigm. Nevertheless, the historical paradigm has proven capable of integrating new research questions, moving beyond its former, overly one-sided focus on source or redaction criticism and the quest for “historical truth.” New Testament scholarship has become pluralistic and multi-perspectivist. This development is a gain, not a loss, and deserves to be fostered in further discussion.

Contexts and ‘Stakeholders’ of New Testament Scholarship

The multi-perspectivity of biblical studies is also a result of the plurality of social, academic, and ecclesial settings in which this research is conducted. In Middle and Northern European universities, biblical studies are primarily embedded in theological faculties, whose primary function is to educate ministers for mainstream churches, or in departments of education where school teachers are trained. Despite their connection to churches, scholars enjoy full freedom in their research and teaching. However, this privileged position is being challenged in a secularizing society. There is a need to demonstrate that biblical scholarship and theology are academic disciplines and not partisan ideologies. Therefore, exegetes must demonstrate that they use generally accepted methods of philology and history and that their work benefits society by providing cultural and historical awareness, ethical reflection, and by preventing religious radicalism and fundamentalism. This privileged status comes at a price: the danger of abandoning the connection to the reading communities of the churches and becoming fully “secularized.”

In other countries and in a global context, the societal and institutional conditions differ. Biblical studies are either taught at private or church-run seminars, which are subject to denominational creeds or restrictions of doctrine and dependent on trustees or private donors. Alternatively, they are embedded in departments of Classics, History, or Religious Studies in a non-theological setting. The academic setting affects the research questions asked. In a theological context, biblical studies are connected to church history, dogmatics, ethics, and practical disciplines. This strengthens the study of the hermeneutical and practical implications of the texts. In a non-theological context, however, biblical studies are connected to classics, history, sociology, cultural studies, and the study of other religions. There is also dependence on finances and the issue of scholarly freedom. In the context of church-run seminars, biblical scholarship must follow the requirements of the related churches. This can affect the questions, methods, and results, and even call into question the scholarly value and reliability of such research. Conversely, study programs offered in the education marketplace, without a focus on a specific profession or ministry, are only enrolled in by individuals with an intellectual interest and the financial means to undertake such studies. These programs must advertise their services, and in times of economic constraints, they are also endangered. In economically disadvantaged societies, access to education—let alone scholarly literature—is limited due to financial constraints. In some political and religious contexts, biblical studies are marginalized and hidden from society, as are many churches within global Christianity. However, it is important and desirable that all these voices be heard and connected, not only those from well-funded European and American contexts. A new journal with open online access based in an

Asian context can serve that function. It can bring new perspectives to the forefront and also help marginalized scholars and students access knowledge.

Multi-Perspectivity in Pauline and Johannine Scholarship

In what follows, I will briefly sketch aspects of the multi-perspectivity of New Testament studies, focusing on two primary areas: the study of Paul and John.

a) With regard to Paul, the variety of views is evident today, even more so than in the past. However, because Paul and his texts continue to impact societies, scholarly efforts are necessary to determine what is textually appropriate and where ideas and claims related to the apostle have been appropriated for contemporary purposes. In this regard, scholarship has a critical and public function with respect to both churches and society.

Soon after his time, the Apostle Paul became a myth and a paradigm for various claims. His letters became a model for later Christian writers, his calling a model for conversion to Christianity, and his mission to the Gentiles a model for later Christian missionaries. Soon after his death, the process of “enlargement” began. First Clement portrays Paul and Peter as models of patience and good conduct. The author of Acts portrays Paul as a pious Jew accused only for his belief in the resurrection of the dead. Second Timothy depicts him as a martyr who receives the crown of victory. Even the author of Second Peter can only veil his opposition by claiming that his opponents misunderstand the letters of “our dear brother Paul” (2 Pet 3:15). Paul became popular as a missionary in the Acts of Paul, as a

visionary of heaven and the underworld in the Apocalypse of Paul, and as a martyr in the Martyrdom of Paul. However, his Jewish identity was soon forgotten, and his sharp reasoning and theology went largely unnoticed in the early centuries. They were rediscovered later by Ambrose and Augustine and again by Martin Luther, who made decisive discoveries in Paul's letters. Luther even styled himself as a new Paul. Just as Paul defied Peter to his face (Gal 2:14), Luther defied the Pope. Paul became the hero of Protestantism and the paradigmatic testimony of faith "without works" (Gal 2:16, etc.). For a radical Protestant like Ernst Käsemann, the authentic Paul was the only true witness to the Gospel and the theology of the cross, even the "canon within the canon."

Now, the talk of "perspectives" came into play. The "New Perspective on Paul" introduced the rhetoric of the "new" against the "old," effectively portraying the "old" as outdated and illegitimate. However, such a contrast is not always fair, and perspectives can present distorted images. The picture drawn of Lutheran interpretation was often more opposed to Bultmann than informed about Luther. However, the "New Perspective" had merits in criticizing the individualistic and existential limitations of previous scholarship and in correcting the distorted image of Judaism as a religion of merit and reward. James Dunn also rightly argued that historical Paul was more concerned with including the Gentiles than with individual salvation and that patterns of participation are important alongside juridical or "justification" language. However, in my view, many "New Perspectivists" underestimated the eschatological and juridical dimensions of Paul's thought. Especially in N. T. Wright's view, a general worldview of salvation history provides the main framework, while Paul's apocalyptic views are largely neutralized.

The carousel of perspectives continues to turn. “New” was followed by “radical,” and the authors engaged here seemed particularly concerned with social relevance and present-day problems from a non-theological perspective. “Radicalism” is imaginative. John Gager explicitly wanted to “reinvent” Paul by proposing the idea of two different covenants for Jews and Gentiles and the notion that Paul did not consider Jesus to be the Messiah of Israel. While this view may be useful for Jewish-Christian dialogue, it is difficult to reconcile with Pauline texts. More recently, a “school” emerged under the label “Paul within Judaism.” Notably, these scholars are not only concerned with interpreting the apostle in the context of contemporary Judaism. They also try to deny the relevance of Paul’s statements to his fellow Jews in order to exclude any “Christian” criticism of Jewish practices. Thus, they wage battle against all traditional views, including the “Old Perspectivists” and the “New Perspectivists,” who are criticized for being anti-Jewish and overly theological in their interpretation of Paul’s universalism. However, when these recent approaches assume a rather ‘orthodox’ type of Jewish practice for Paul, with strict observance of purity and dietary regulations, this appears anachronistic, as in Paul’s time, there was a wide variety of Jewish practice in Palestine and even more so in the diaspora. In light of Gal 2:14–21 or 1 Cor 9:19–23, it is hard to deny that Paul saw consequences of the new faith in the Messiah Jesus for himself as also for other Jewish believers. But his relativization of circumcision and Torah observance remained within the realm of contemporary Jewish practices. While some of the current debates on Paul are driven by moral claims and the struggle for political correctness, there is a need for sober historical scholarship, which also impacts the theological image of Paul.

Other perspectives developed in view of different topics can be mentioned. For example, Paul's ambiguous view of women and sexuality is critically examined from feminist and deconstructivist standpoints. His stance toward the Roman Empire is analyzed from liberationist perspectives, and his stance on slavery is examined from postcolonial perspectives. Due to problematic appropriations of Pauline arguments in politics and churches, readers may feel the need to reject his views and their validity today. Conversely, Paul's enduring influence is evident not only in Global Christianity, but also in the responses of contemporary philosophers such as Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek. These debates and reactions demonstrate the lasting impact of Paul's writings and the necessity of an interpretation grounded in philological and historical analysis. This interpretation should be conducted by experts who are familiar with the languages, history, and cultures of that time and are also trained in hermeneutics to bridge the gap between the ancient world and the present. Understanding Paul's letters and thought is therefore not only a task for the church and theology but also a wider enterprise within global society that must be approached with reason and open dialogue.

b) In a different manner, the multi-perspectivity of scholarship is evident in Johannine studies. The Fourth Gospel has had the most formative effect on the formulation of the doctrines of the divinity of Jesus and of the Trinity. Throughout the ages, interpreters have considered this gospel to be the most profound, spiritual, and philosophical of the gospels. Its influence on literature, art, music, and other cultural fields cannot be overstated. It is world literature that reaches far beyond the church's boundaries. How, then,

should such a text be read? The perspectives I will outline here are inspired by questions asked by readers in different periods.

First, there is the reading of the text as an account of Jesus' earthly ministry. It is evident that John's objective is to present a factual account rather than a fictional narrative. However, from the earliest stages, readers have discerned discrepancies between the Synoptics and John in chronology, material, and language. Despite the attempts by harmonists to amalgamate the accounts, Origen had already discerned that such an endeavor was ill-advised. As long as John was attributed to an eyewitness, interpreters could assume its priority and historical validity. However, since the nineteenth century, this has been questioned, and today most scholars agree that the language and image of Jesus in the Synoptics is closer to the Jesus of history, whereas John provides a transformation regarding language, history, and theology. However, when John states that even the disciples did not understand initially, but only after Jesus' resurrection (John 2:22; 12:16), it appears that he himself was cognizant of this transformation, openly acknowledging that he was not merely recounting the story of Jesus, as the events transpired before the eyes of his contemporaries. John presents a memory of Jesus in retrospect, in the light of subsequent questions and insights, with the objective of attaining a more profound comprehension and presenting the underlying significance that lies beneath the surface. It is imperative, therefore, to acknowledge the potential for truth to transcend the confines of historical accuracy and to explore its transmission through the medium of fiction.

A second approach to reading John is to search for theological truths. Church fathers and commentators, from Irenaeus and Augustine to Thomas and modern interpreters such as Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, were

interested in this. Using various methods, these interpreters read the text as an exposition of the truth about God and Christ, the incarnation, salvation, and faith. However, the Gospel is a narrative, not a theological tract. Problems arise from incoherencies or propositions foreign to the interpreters' views in their time. Ancient and medieval readers could solve such problems by allegorizing, while others had to make decisions about problematic issues. For example, John Calvin prioritized his view of double predestination over the idea of universal salvation in his reading of John 3:16, and Rudolf Bultmann aimed to demythologize apocalyptic ideas in favor of the present-oriented eschatology he preferred. But what should we make of the problematic anti-Jewish statements attributed to Jesus? Here, at least, we must acknowledge that we cannot simply repeat and adopt John's theological views. This gospel may be the climax of New Testament theology, but if scholarship aims for honesty, its problems cannot be overlooked.

Some exegetical methods used in the twentieth century were employed to address historical and theological issues. This applies to the History of Religions School and the search for John's background in Platonism, Gnosticism, and later, Qumran. The same is true for the search for sources or redactional layers, which dominated German scholarship in the twentieth century. In the nineteenth century, some scholars speculated about an original document containing Jesus's discourses, excluding the objectionable miracle stories. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Julius Wellhausen reconstructed an original document without lengthy discourses that could be considered a source for the historical Jesus alongside Mark. Later, Bultmann reconstructed a Signs Source to help distance the evangelist from the miracles he narrates. In his remarkable

commentary, Bultmann reconstructs the “work of the evangelist” in a textual form that most likely never existed. This type of research was clearly dominated by content criteria and the interpreters’ wishful thinking about Jesus, history, or the evangelist. Thus, in my view, much of the source and redaction criticism in New Testament studies is “science fiction.” Scholarship must be critical but first and foremost also self-critical.

After Bultmann, historical questions were raised in a new way, albeit still hypothetically. Rather than focusing on the history of the earthly Jesus, scholars began to focus on the history of the Johannine community and its theological ideas. Using various criteria, scholars identified literary layers to reconstruct the development of the community from its Jewish-Christian origins until its disappearance within the larger church. However, these constructions were quite daring and depended on the criteria used. They were also based on the presupposition of a secluded, sectarian structure of the communities behind the gospels. The most helpful insight was J. Louis Martyn’s assertion that the debate with the Ioudaioi in John cannot be understood in terms of the historical Jesus, but rather reflects later debates between Johannine Jesus followers and the Synagogue in the post-70 CE period. Despite these general insights about anti-Jewish texts as relics of a tragedy of closeness and the “community approach,” particularly the speculation that the Synagogue liturgically expelled Jesus’s followers through additions to the daily prayer, have been decisively criticized for textual and historical reasons. The gospel is not merely a reflection of the circumstances of its composition. Again, the danger of “science fiction” arises. Will we ever avoid such impasses?

The decisive change in perspective over the last few decades was inspired by linguistics and narratology. There was a shift from source

criticism to viewing the text as a piece of literary art with a unified structure. Scholars now recognize the uncertainties of redaction-critical approaches. The perception of John's literary art in the works of Alan Culpepper, Hartwig Thyen, and Frank Moloney provides new insights into John's narrative design, rhetoric, and didactic subtleties. The text certainly has a history. It adopts sources—in my view, Mark and Luke—in a free and creative manner and draws on decades of earlier narration, preaching, and discussion within the communities of Jesus's followers. However, exploring that prehistory is mere speculation since John's language is impressively coherent. It is easier to see how the text works and how it addresses its readers by drawing on numerous Biblical and Jewish traditions, as well as a wider knowledge of Greco-Roman terms and concepts. John is certainly not a text from a secluded, sectarian context, but rather, it aims at a world of books. At the beginning, the creation story is adopted, but John goes beyond Genesis. In the end (John 21:25), the image of a world full of books about Jesus emerges. Clearly, John is not the internal self-clarification of an early Christian sect, but rather, it is a book that aspires to become literature.

The reading strategies mentioned demonstrate the methodological evolution of Johannine research over the past 200 years. While the debates on method and meaning have primarily occurred within the realm of theological interpretation, they have recently expanded to encompass literary and cultural studies. Reading John has become multi-perspectival. As a commentator, I am challenged to bridge and combine various dimensions, from literary design and intertextual relations to historical and religious contexts, the description and discussion of the text's theological claims and aims, and the varieties of its reception until the present.

New Testament Scholarship, Its Legacy and Tasks

Where has New Testament scholarship arrived? What is its legacy and task? The plurality and multi-perspectivity in these two fields of study are not losses, but gains. As I tried to indicate, things are not arbitrary; however, there is a challenge in deciding what is appropriate and plausible. Such decisions can only be personal and perspective-based. Others may challenge my conclusions, and in matters of interpretation, there is no clear-cut, universal “truth.” This is, of course, uncomfortable and challenging for many pious Christians, but it is an important insight, especially considering the worldwide community of Bible readers. The openness to discussion in biblical scholarship prevents dogmatic ideologizing and has much to offer society and churches. Will they appreciate such a service in critical solidarity?

The texts we read are foundational not only for the church, but also for Western culture and Global Christianity. As we know, these texts are used and misused, appropriated and rejected in society, politics, and popular culture. These texts have had positive and negative effects throughout history and continue to do so today. Therefore, they demand not only devout reading, but also critical reflection on their implications and dangers, as well as their limitations and the liberating force of the gospel.

Since these texts are written in foreign languages and originate from different cultures, they require philological expertise and historical and cultural awareness to be properly understood. Biblical scholarship — of the Old and New Testaments, as well as texts in between and around them — maintains awareness of the distance and otherness of these texts’ terms,

codes, and thoughts. These cannot be appropriated without further ado, at least not in responsible public readings in churches and societies.

On the other hand, many of our texts intentionally claim to have something to say about truth, God, the world, life, and death, not only due to their reception and canonicity, but also because of their content. It would be strange to ignore these claims in the false pursuit of “neutrality.” Instead, we must describe, contextualize, and possibly question the matter and claims of the text. As scholars, we advocate for our texts, ensuring their right to speak for themselves, separate from traditions, prejudices, and present-day interests. This also implies a “theological” dimension imposed not by churches or institutions, but by the texts themselves.

Methodologically, New Testament studies have learned a great deal. While philological and historical approaches form their foundation, other perspectives have been fruitfully integrated, and interdisciplinary exchange has enriched exegetical perceptions.

Biblical studies are fundamentally related to the primary community of readers, the churches, although not all of them welcome their critical inferences. However, they are also related to a wider society because our texts are related to and influential in a broader context. Reading religious texts in an academic context benefits not only the churches, but also society. Reading religious texts in an academic context grants rationality and helps churches stay connected to society. It prevents churches from retreating into sectarian seclusion and helps a secular society deal with matters of religion competently, which prevents religious radicalism and the insanity that can be triggered by Biblical texts. Scholarly freedom and a wide interdisciplinary framework, as provided by public universities, are

important conditions that prevent scholarship from becoming subservient to group interests and losing its critical and societal function.

However, New Testament scholars are also competent in hermeneutics. We are experts in antiquity and are trained to bridge the past and present. We transmit and critically reflect on the claims and problems of our texts. Therefore, we can speak up when biblical texts are misused to create hatred or fear for ideological or business purposes. Biblical scholarship must be critical; otherwise, it is not scholarship.

In our time, expertise in critical reading is more necessary than ever. Within the global context addressed in the new *Journal for Biblical and Ancient Studies*, it is desirable for the exchange and debate to transcend borders, contexts, and continents with mutual respect, a critical mindset, and an appreciation for the great texts entrusted to us.

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