

Studying the New Testament

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The goal of theological education is to know God, the true God of the world, whom we must worship and serve. Indeed, this is the ultimate aim of all of life (John 17:3; Jer 9:23–24). Constant attention to this goal by both educators and learners can prevent the deadening of theological education. We’ve all seen the student, once passionate about Jesus and evangelism, engaging in a type of theological study that dampens his zeal to an extent that he is only interested in the finer points of theology. However, there is a course of study that, if properly imbibed, will lead to a flowering of the student’s love for God. The centerpiece of this curriculum must be the fullest revelation of God, God’s disclosure of himself that comes in the New Testament (NT).

Systematic theology contemplates the character and perfection of the God we love, and *ethics* explores the way he calls us to live. *Church history* tells us the story of our brothers and sisters as they have sought to follow God and God’s gracious interaction with them. The *Old Testament* shows God creating for himself a people through whom he will reveal his majesty and glory as well as his gracious covenant-keeping love. Finally, in the NT, we see the ultimate unveiling of God in the person of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God. This is the crescendo of revelation, the climax of God’s gracious manifestation. The love of God, wondrously displayed in the OT, reaches its zenith at the crucifixion of Jesus, such that the apostle John can say, “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent

his one and only Son into the world so that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9).

The NT displays this Jesus whom we love, the One for whom we first decided to pursue theological education. The NT is not merely the record of human experiences of God or the best of humanity’s ideas about how to relate to God. It is the culmination of the self-revelation of God, eyewitness testimony to the life and work of Christ, and the deposit of the apostles’ teaching. Through the NT, we see how the OT pointed to Christ and how we must now live in light of Christ. As such, it deserves our devotion and careful study. The NT is central to theological education, and no effort would be too great, no cost too high, to gain understanding of such a book. As A. T. Robertson flatly stated, NT study is of the highest importance because “the NT is the fountainhead, the sourcebook of Christianity.”¹

This is not to say that the NT is all that is important or necessary. As will be discussed below, we cannot separate the NT from the OT. They are integrally related, and each is needed to understand the other as together they form one coherent message as Christian Scripture. However, there is an element of discontinuity as well. As the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us, in the past God spoke to us by the prophets, but “in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son” (1:2). While the OT law possessed only a shadow of the good things that were to come, the NT reveals their true form (10:1).

In the study of the NT, we investigate ancient history, ancient literature, and Christian theology. We devote attention to ancient Near Eastern culture. Political history and geography provide the context for two-thousand-year-old Gospels and Letters. Meanwhile, the documents themselves are some of the most important sources for understanding the NT period. The NT has been justifiably reckoned the most significant literary corpus in the history of Western civilization, if not the world. Though this may sound like hyperbole, it is not. The Bible, the OT and the NT, is the founding document of Christianity and the most decisive shaper of Western civilization and the world. Even from a merely historical perspective, we are studying some of the most significant literature ever produced.

1. *New Testament Interpretation, Notes on Lectures of Dr. A. T. Robertson*, taken and neostyled by W. E. Davidson, 2nd ed. (New York: Revell, 1916), 19.

What Is the NT?

The Continuation of the OT

The NT presents itself as the continuation and fulfillment of the OT. It is impossible to understand the NT properly without reading it in conjunction with the OT. The NT writings quote the OT and allude to it extensively. In the four Gospels, Jesus expounds the OT, showing he is the One to whom the OT pointed. The apostles followed this example. The NT assumes a number of key concepts from the OT such as the identity of God, the Messiah, sin, and atonement. As Donald Hagner has stated, “Of all that could be mentioned as important for the understanding of the NT . . . nothing supersedes the Scriptures of the OT.”² Thus, the theological and interpretive exercise fails from the outset if we ignore or isolate the OT. Theological education must always be rooted in a biblical exposition, which keeps both testaments together. Any methodology that claims to produce understanding of the NT but does not focus on knowing the OT intimately is false and misguided from its beginning. As Dennis Kinlaw says, “One of the reasons the New Testament does not live for us is because we do not really know the Old Testament the way we should.”³

In theological education we have separate classes for OT and NT simply to allow us to focus on details, but this curricular separation must not translate into a partition in our thinking, theologizing, or preaching. Teachers of each testament should be integrating their subject matter with the entire enterprise of theological and spiritual formation (since theological education is a means to spiritual formation).

The Word of God

The NT, like the OT, presents itself as the Word of God. We pursue theological education because we believe this claim to be true. We must keep this truth clearly in focus as we pursue our studies. It is possible to get lost in the details. The copious amount of available (and still compiling) information can be dizzying, such that NT studies can become drudgery. Or we can become intoxicated with our new knowledge and thus become puffed

2. Donald Hagner, *The New Testament: A Historical and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 26.

3. Dennis Kinlaw and John Oswalt, *Lectures in Old Testament Theology* (Anderson, IN: Francis Asbury Press, 2010), 17.

up. Either response shows that we have lost sight of what we are dealing with in the NT. We can maintain a proper vision in two ways. First, if we continually remind ourselves that we are digging deeply into God's self-revelation of his gracious purposes in redeeming sinful people like us, then it will not be drudgery. Second, if we truly comprehend and meditate on the message of the NT (God's holiness, our sin, and his gracious work to rescue us despite ourselves), we will find that pride can hardly thrive in that context. As a dear, aged professor once said to me, "Now, sir, you show me a man who is proud, and I will show you a man who has yet to understand the cross!"

As we approach the NT, whether as a student or a professor, we must come eagerly anticipating an encounter with God. We must think hard about all the data—attend to the Greek syntax, historical background, genre, and literary context—to the end of hearing more clearly the voice of the God who has loved us with an everlasting love. Biblical interpretation can only be done well as a lover's pursuit. In this way the rigor and toil of theological education will seem light, as did the seven years to Jacob as he worked for Rachel (Gen 29:20). Only those who seek God in faith study the NT aright. Those who hunger and thirst for God in this pursuit will be filled.

A Word for the Church

Any serious historical and literary interpretation of a text must take into account its intended audience. Even a casual examination of the NT reveals that it was written to and for the church. This is not to deny its evangelistic purpose, but by and large the NT is addressed to the church. This should shape our study in various ways. First, if we are not deeply involved in the life of a local church, we will not be able to grasp fully the burden and concern of the NT. This is true for everyone, but it is particularly true for one involved in theological education and preparation for ministry. I tell my students that if they are not involved in the community life and gospel work of a local congregation, they are wasting their time in theological study and fooling themselves as to what they are about. The famous dictum of Hillary of Poitiers, the fourth century bishop, rings true: "Those who are situated outside the church are not able to acquire any understanding of the divine discourse."⁴

4. Cited in Mark Gignilliat, *A Brief History of Old Testament Criticism: From Benedict Spinoza to Brevard Childs* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 26.

Second, if we interpret the NT correctly, we must always be asking what the text means not just for an individual but also for the church. Of course we will pursue many technical details which will not themselves be suitable for a prominent point in a sermon or lesson, but all of these details should help us understand what God is saying to the church.⁵ Howard Marshall, who was described as the “dean of New Testament evangelical interpretation,” provides us an example. While initiating and editing a leading series of commentaries on the Greek text and producing a bevy of standard technical works, he was rooted in the life of his small, local Methodist congregation where many of the members did not know he was a world-renowned scholar. They simply knew him as “Howard,” who taught the young boys’ class, played the church organ, and helped train lay preachers. His advice to theological students is pertinent: “I think it is important to be in a good Christian fellowship to have support from it and to be occupied in Christian work of one kind or another, and if possible to try and relate your studies to your practical Christian work.”⁶

Lastly, Paul makes clear that we need the help of the Holy Spirit to understand spiritual things, including the message of the Scriptures (1 Cor 2:14). Therefore, we must be converted and indwelt by the Holy Spirit before we can fully understand the NT. As Alistair Wilson has stated, “The fundamental character of the NT as the breathed-out (2 Tim 3:16) utterance of the only God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ demands that true interpretation of the NT can be achieved only by those who have been brought into a restored relationship with the Father and are equipped by the Holy Spirit of God (1 Cor 2:6–16; Rom 8:5–9).”⁷ This is crucial as we seek to read sympathetically, entering the situation of the writers. J. I. Packer affirms this, writing, “The supreme requirement for understanding a biblical book—or indeed any other human document—is sympathy with its subject matter, and a mind and heart that can spontaneously enter into the author’s outlook. But the capacity to put oneself in the shoes of Isaiah,

5. In my own experience, the best biblical scholars I have known have been devoted churchmen.

6. Carl Trueman, “Interview with Professor Howard Marshall,” *Them* 26, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): 49.

7. A. Wilson, “Beginning to Study the New Testament,” in *Encountering God’s Word* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 71. Note also Donald Hagner’s comment: “Believers are the implied readers of the NT texts, and therefore believers are in the best place to make sense of the NT texts” (Hagner, *The New Testament: A Historical and Theological Introduction*, 10).

or Paul or John and see with his eyes and feel with his heart is the gift, not of academic training, but of the Holy Ghost through the new birth.”⁸

Therefore, in all our efforts to understand Scripture, we ought to start with prayer to the Author of those Scriptures, asking for his illumination and guidance. And, since God will not answer requests to exalt ourselves (Jas 4:3,6–7), we must not pray and study to lift ourselves up but rather that God might be glorified as we grow in our knowledge of him, serving him and his church.

Unified Reading

In light of what we have just said about the nature of the NT, we should expect to interpret the NT, and the entire Bible, as a unified, coherent whole. However, modern studies have tended toward reading biblical texts in isolation from one another with an increasing assumption of discrepancy between texts. Such divergence seems to be a presupposition for many today. Thus we have Paul’s ideas, which may be significantly different from John’s, which may contradict Peter’s or James’s. This was not the way the church read the Bible through the first seventeen or so centuries of its history. The Bible was seen as a unified whole, so its interpretation required the coordination and theological integration of its various books.⁹ The difference is rooted in what one thinks of the character of Scripture. If it is merely a human book written across centuries, then one would likely assume there will be large differences. If it is a divinely inspired book for God’s people, one is likely to assume a high level of consistency and coherence as did most of the patristic, medieval, and Reformation era interpreters.

Evangelical convictions should lead us to studying the Bible, including the NT, in a unified way, expecting the Bible to help us interpret the Bible as we read each individual text in light of the whole of Scripture. This does not mean we flatten out the distinctive characteristics of each book. Gospel writers have distinct emphases, and Paul uses different language than John. It is valuable for us to notice this. In the end, however, they are testifying to the same truth of God in Christ reconciling the world to himself. We have the benefit of a variegated witness to a central reality.

8. J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 73–74.

9. Borrowing language from Christopher Seitz, *Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2014), 24.

Major Aspects of the Study of the New Testament

The various aspects of NT study can be grouped into five main categories: (1) textual criticism; (2) archaeological, historical, and cultural background; (3) study of the composition of the text; (4) exegesis; and (5) NT theology.¹⁰ These are listed in terms of their logical progression in the actual practice of NT study, but one typically moves back and forth among these realms.

The Establishment of the Text: Textual Criticism

Before we can study the NT, we must establish the text itself. The NT was not handed down to us in a complete, single volume containing the original documents written by the apostles. Indeed, we do not have the originals of any of the NT documents (referred to as *autographs*). What we have is a multitude of manuscript copies from a wide range of locations and times. Some manuscripts are fragments, some have entire letters or books, and some have more than one letter. We also have early translations and quotations in the writings of early church fathers. Bruce Metzger has stated that the NT quotations in the writings of the church fathers are so extensive that we could reconstruct “practically the entire New Testament” from them!¹¹

We have an amazing wealth of manuscript copies of the NT. These include papyri (the earliest and rarest because they are more fragile), majuscules (so-called because they are written in all capital letters), minuscules (written in lower case), and lectionaries (collections of passages for assigned readings for certain days). From these categories we have well over 5,700 manuscripts.¹² No other ancient writing comes close to this level of textual evidence.

Among all these manuscripts, however, there are discrepancies in certain readings—some more and some less significant. In order to discern what the original document said, these differences need to be analyzed.

10. A later chapter treats NT theology, so that will not be discussed in this chapter.

11. Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 86.

12. Daniel Wallace, “Laying a Foundation: New Testament Textual Criticism,” in *Interpreting the New Testament Text: Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis*, ed. Darrell Bock and Buist Fanning (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 39, mentions 5,745 manuscripts. More have been discovered since.

This analysis is called *textual criticism* because scholars critically examine these manuscripts in order to discern which readings are original.¹³

There are a large number of discrepancies among the thousands of manuscripts we have. Most, however, are insignificant for the meaning of the text. One example of this sort is variations in spelling. One manuscript might have the name John spelled *Iōannēs* and another with the spelling *Iōanēs*. This is a discrepancy, a variant reading, but it in no way affects the meaning of the text. There are also instances where the order of words is slightly different. While the word order may provide some nuance of meaning, the basic meaning is still clear. In a smaller percentage of cases, the variant reading does have an impact on the meaning of the text. Here the importance of textual criticism is seen (e.g., “we have” or “let us have” in Romans 1). The difference is between an omicron and an omega, which were probably pronounced the same in the first century as they are in later Greek.¹⁴

The work of textual criticism is, therefore, important, and any serious interpreter of the NT must be aware of this work. However, we must also note that the reality of variant readings in the manuscripts need not undermine our confidence in the Scripture. The large number of manuscripts provides a large sample for comparison, allowing us to make good decisions between the variants. Furthermore, we have old copies as well, dating back close to the time of the writing. As noted previously, no other ancient writing compares with the NT in terms of the number of manuscript copies available and their early date. For example, we have only 643 copies of Homer’s *Illiad*, ten copies of Julius Caesar’s *Gallic War*, seven copies of Plato’s writings, and one copy of *Beowulf*.¹⁵ For many of the other ancient works, the oldest copies we have date from thousands of years after the original. Scholars consider these other ancient works reliable, yet the NT has significantly more textual attestation. The stability of the NT text

13. There is an ongoing debate among scholars about terminology at this point, whether we should refer to “original” or “earliest” readings. While it is a significant topic, this is not the place to pursue it further. For a recent brief summary of the discussion, see Charles Hill and Michael Kruger, “Introduction: In Search of the Earliest Text of the New Testament,” in *The Earliest Text of the New Testament*, ed. Charles Hill and Michael Kruger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3–5.

14. Examples drawn from Daniel Wallace, “Laying a Foundation: New Testament Textual Criticism,” in *Interpreting the New Testament Text: Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis*, ed. Darrell Bock and Buist Fanning (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 37.

15. Andreas Köstenberger, Scott Kellum, and Charles Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 34.

can be seen in the fact that while numerous more manuscripts have been discovered over the last several decades, the decisions on variant readings have changed little.¹⁶

*The World Around the Text: Historical and Cultural Background*¹⁷

The NT was written in a specific historical and cultural setting, which is different from our own. This shapes the authors' styles and governs the sorts of things to which they allude or use for illustration. NT authors write in terms that were common and widely recognized by their readers but which at times are not so common today. They can assume their readers are well aware of the political, economic, and social realities they shared but which are alien to us. The better we understand the historical and cultural setting of the NT, the better we will understand its message; and we will be protected from numerous errors.

I often illustrate this to students by arguing from lesser to greater. Since I live and teach in the United States, I ask students what other culture is the most similar to ours. Certainly that is British culture with our shared language and significant shared history. Yet, as any American who has lived in Britain (and presumably the reverse) knows, the potential for misunderstanding between these two cultures is significant. Early in my family's time living in Scotland, we had to take one of our small children to the doctor. When we told family and friends we had taken him to the surgery, they were alarmed since to American ears that suggested the need for an operation. In Scotland it simply meant we went to the doctor's office. Humorous examples just from my family's experience abound. If there is this much potential for confusion between two cultures, which share so much in common, how much more potential for confusion is there between our setting and that of the NT, which is distant from us in time, language, and other cultural features?

This is not to say that we cannot understand the Bible at all unless we have advanced degrees in the history and culture of the first century.

16. Charles Hill and Michael Kruger, "Introduction: In Search of the Earliest Text of the New Testament," in *The Earliest Text of the New Testament*, ed. Charles Hill and Michael Kruger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5–6.

17. The most extensive recent coverage of this sort of material in one volume is Joel B. Green and Lee M. McDonald, *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

Rather, our understanding will be enhanced and enriched, and we will be guarded against misunderstandings of various sorts.

The information we have on the historical and cultural background of the NT comes either from material that was intentionally preserved or from what has been discovered by archaeologists. Archaeology has been of great service to NT studies by uncovering all sorts of useful information ranging from biblical manuscripts (previously discussed), other texts, inscriptions, coins, and artifacts of daily life. Many of the items discussed below are available to us because of the work of archaeologists. The primary value of archaeology has been illuminating daily life in biblical times, helping us “see” the world of the NT and better understand what was going on in that time. Due to the work of archaeology, we have examples of homes, rich and poor, from Palestine and elsewhere around the Mediterranean and can reconstruct many activities of daily life.

In addition, archaeology has also given strong evidence of the historical reliability of the NT. “Finds [of archaeology] inevitably keep returning biblical studies to the realm of history and historical geography.”¹⁸ For example, John’s Gospel has been shown to demonstrate an accurate awareness of the geography of Palestine, and discovered inscriptions have shown that Luke, in Acts, used the accurate terms for the various governmental leaders he mentioned.

Historical Events

Any specific time in history is shaped by the forces and events that preceded it, and the era of the NT is no different. Therefore, awareness of this historical background will be helpful in interpreting the NT. Much happened between the close of the OT and the opening of the NT, and these events and their effects are assumed by NT writers. For example, someone who has just completed reading the OT will find new concepts in the NT, which are introduced without explanation. Jesus and Paul visit synagogues, local Jewish assemblies, but these were not mentioned in the OT. Who are these groups called Pharisees and Sadducees? All of these can be explained by the history that preceded the NT era. During the exile from Judea, with the temple destroyed, the Jews had no place to gather for worship. They could not perform the prescribed sacrifices, but they gathered in their

18. John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 18.

communities to study the law. These gatherings became synagogues, and the practice of establishing synagogues continued after they returned from exile so that by the time of the NT there were synagogues throughout the Mediterranean world. The movements that became known as Pharisees and Sadducees began during the time in which the Jews were ruled by the remnants of Alexander the Great's empire. Antiochus IV forced Greek culture on the Jews with the threat of torture and death. Some groups were more willing to compromise (forerunners of the Sadducees) and some resisted compromise and called for purity (forerunners of the Pharisees). Furthermore, this persecution led to a revolt led by the Hasmonean family, who were referred to as the Maccabees, which eventually led to Jewish independence. The fact that the Jews had defeated a superior power to achieve independence in 164 BC and then lost that independence after defeat by the Romans in 63 BC no doubt helped fuel desires among many Jews to throw off the Romans during the NT era.

A basic awareness of the geography of the NT world is also quite helpful. The accounts of both Jesus and Paul are filled with travel, and it is helpful to know where they are going and the different terrains and political boundaries which are being crossed. Weather patterns also affect travel. In Acts Paul regularly stops traveling and spends the winter in a specific location. This is because sea travel largely shut down in the winter due to hazardous conditions. With this in mind, Paul's urging Timothy to "come before winter" (2 Tim 4:21) makes even more sense.

Texts

A wealth of texts have been preserved or discovered that illuminate various aspects of NT study. Large numbers of papyri letters have been discovered that illuminate daily life significantly. These are not texts intended for publication but everyday letters, notices, and inventories. As such they give us a glimpse into the lives of ordinary people. These documents also have furthered our knowledge of the Greek language as common people used it.

The wide range of Greco-Roman literature that has been preserved bears on NT study by giving us access to ideas and practices that were common in the era. Cicero died about four decades before the birth of Christ, but his discussions about letter writing help us understand Paul's letter writing. Ancient letters, treatises, speeches, and books give us insight

into the life of slaves, popular religious ideas, and ideas about marriage for example. Sometimes specific cities or regions are described. For example, Polybius (second century BC) wrote that it was almost “impossible to find . . . personal conduct more treacherous or public policy more unjust than in Crete” (*Histories* 6.47 [Paton, LCL]). Cicero also stated, “Moral principles are so divergent that the Cretans . . . consider highway robbery honorable” (*De Republica* 3.9.15 [Keyes, LCL]). This reputation over a couple of centuries helps us understand the situation of the letter to Titus, who was ministering on Crete when Paul wrote him warning of the people’s beastly behavior and urging him to teach the people the ethical implications of the gospel.

Even closer to the thought world of most of the NT writers is the Jewish literature that has survived.¹⁹ Josephus, a Jewish historian, tells us much about the everyday life of first-century Jews and gives accounts of many key events including the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Philo was a Jewish philosopher well acquainted with Greek thought. His expositions of the OT give us an example of how at least some Jews thought in the first century. We can see how Philo’s handling of the OT compares with that of Paul, for example, or the author of Hebrews. The Dead Sea Scrolls and rabbinic literature (including Midrash, Targums, and Talmudim) give us examples of different religious expectations and approaches to the OT that come from at least close to the time of the writing of the NT.²⁰ All of this helps us understand some of the ideas that were in the air when Jesus came teaching or when the apostles preached Jesus as the promised Messiah. They help us situate the story of the NT.

The History of the Text: Higher Criticism

Formal study of the NT also addresses the question of how the texts we hold in our hands came to be in the form in which we have them. This is an issue students often do not consider before entering formal theological study, but it is an important topic. For example, how did we end up

19. Martin Hengel says it is certain “without qualification that Christianity grew *entirely* out of Jewish soil.” (“Early Christianity as a Jewish-Messianic, Universalistic Movement,” in *Conflicts and Challenges in Early Christianity*, ed. D. Hagner [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999], 1).

20. For a helpful statement on the usefulness of rabbinic literature in NT interpretation and caution about dating of that literature, see J. Neusner, “Rabbinic Literature: Mishnah and Tosefta,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Craig Evans and Stanley Porter (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 896–97.

with four Gospels, and how do we account for their striking similarities in certain places and dissimilarities in others? Who wrote the NT documents which do not have a stated author, and can we trust the claims of authorship that are present? Are certain books actually edited together from several different sources?

Some of these questions have been important from the early days of the church when its leaders examined writings to discern whether they were written by apostles and should thus be accepted as authoritative. The Enlightenment of the nineteenth century, however, elevated skepticism to a virtue and shaped the discussion of authorship in a new way. Until the nineteenth century the church basically accepted the stated authorship of NT books (the Epistle to the Hebrews, which does not claim an author, is a separate case). J. E. C. Schmidt and Friedrich Schleiermacher were the first to dispute the authorship of a NT letter, disputing Pauline authorship of 1 Timothy.²¹ Early critics of Schleiermacher warned that this skepticism would spread to other NT books and thus erode the entire theological project concerning the Bible. The skeptics derided this as fear mongering, but this prophecy has been fulfilled. In modern NT studies the authorship of six of the thirteen letters attributed to Paul is widely disputed, and the apostolic authorship of the Gospels and several other epistles is called into question. This is significant for NT study since, as Donald Guthrie stated, “It is noticeable that challenges to traditional ascriptions of scholarship went hand in hand with rejection of authority.”²²

F. C. Baur furthered this skeptical viewpoint in the nineteenth century when he argued the NT itself was made up of books that were written against one another. Though Baur’s basic thesis has largely been discredited, his acidic influence is still evident in the methodology of NT scholars who assume conflicts and contradictions between biblical books and even within books. This approach to scholarship brings to mind a scientist who

21. Apparently J. E. C. Schmidt was first in challenging 1 Tim in his *Historical-Critical Introduction to the New Testament* in 1804/5. But it was Schleiermacher’s *Über den sogenannten ersten Brief des Paulus an den Timotheus. Ein kritisches Sendschreibung an J. C. Gass* (reprinted in Schleiermacher’s *Sämmtliche Werke*, vol. 1–2, pp. 221–320) which really stirred up the conversation in 1807.

22. Donald Guthrie, “Questions of Introduction,” in *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I. H. Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 108. For further reflection on the tendency of such approaches to erode biblical authority, see Ray Van Neste, “Coherence and Authorship in 1 Timothy,” *Global Journal of Classic Theology* 12, no. 3 (December 2015), accessed January 14, 2017, <http://www.globaljournalct.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Van-Neste-Vol-12-No-3-Coherence-and-Authorship-of-1-Timothy.pdf>.

kills an animal, dissects its parts for a detailed study, and then declares he finds no life there. Or the scientist rebuilds the dissected animal in a way he sees fit, diverging from the condition in which he found it, and then declares that his completed reconstruction is the original condition of the animal. It is not putting too fine a point on it to say that this brand of scholarship remakes the NT in its own image. Too often biblical texts are criticized for not saying what we, as enlightened moderns, would have said.²³ Earle Ellis's assessment is worth quoting: "In Tübingen today there is properly a 'Ferdinand Christian Baur Street' to commemorate a great figure of the city's past. As is appropriate, it is a branch off 'Philosophers Way.' Equally appropriate, I believe, it is a *Sackgasse*, a blind alley. Baur produced a construct of early Christianity that was too artificial and exegetically too poorly grounded to serve as a viable historical representation."²⁴

Other questions about the history of the text have been more useful. For example, redaction criticism focuses on differences between the Gospels, looking for evidence of the Gospel writers' interests and emphases. The value of such study varies, but it has usefully made the point that the Gospel writers were not mere recorders of events but were actually theologians. Canonical interpretation has pushed back against much of the concern with the history of the text, arguing instead that our focus should be on the text as we have it.

The Message in the Text: Exegesis

After the preparatory work we have just described, and in light of it, we must then interpret the text. We want to discern what the original intention of the text is so that we might believe it and obey it. Because we want to believe and obey what God has said, and not just whatever we can read into the text (eisegesis), exegesis must be done carefully.

23. Perhaps an anecdote would be helpful here. I once listened to a paper given by a systematic theologian who argued that Paul intended to say one thing in Ephesians 5 but that his theological reasoning got away from him, leading to a text which has left most of us over the ages thinking Paul was arguing something totally different. After the paper Howard Marshall spoke up declaring that he now had a new question for examinations: "Tell us how Paul should have written Ephesians in order to say what we know he meant to have said."

24. E. Earle Ellis, *The Making of the New Testament Documents* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 445. For a fascinating critique of the skeptical approach from a literary perspective, see Anthony Esolen, "Pauline Scholar, Meet Homeric Scholar: How Textual Analysis Misses Authorial Genius and Literary Inspiration," *Touchstone* 26, no. 4 (July/August 2013): 22–26.

Historical-grammatical exegesis is the term often used for the approach that seeks to allow the biblical text to speak on its own terms. *Historical* refers to the effort to understand the author's meaning in his historical and literary context. We must understand what the text originally meant, and then we can ask how that meaning applies to various situations today. This approach is also *grammatical* in that we seek to understand the text according to the natural, linguistic sense of the words. We are not seeking to uncover secret or hidden meanings. Additionally, our approach can be described as *theological* since, as was argued above, we approach the text as the Word of God and anticipate a coherent message within the Bible.

The first step in any interpretation is to read the text carefully and closely. It is of immense help to the interpreter of the NT to be able to read the NT in the language in which it was originally written, Greek (see chapter 9). The author's specific word choices and broader structural elements that mark the flow of thought can be seen more readily in Greek. While we are blessed with many good English translations, the ability to read the NT in Greek is a serious advantage and is thus well worth pursuing in a theological education.

Also, to read a text properly, we must be aware of what sort of text it is. Different kinds of texts (genres) follow different patterns or rules. We know this intuitively in everyday life so that we don't puzzle over a train schedule or team roster looking for the plot or criticize it for lacking character development. We know to expect disparate topics and varying styles in science textbooks and mystery novels. When we turn to the NT, then, we need to be aware that there are several literary genres within it, and we must be mindful of them as we read. Basically in the NT we have three main genres: historical writing (Gospels and Acts), letters (Paul and the General Epistles), and apocalyptic (Revelation). The first two of these are generally familiar to us today. The Gospels and Acts narrate key events in a way broadly similar to historical writing we might encounter today, with some dissimilarities like the absence of a reference system for noting sources. We might note that the Gospels, as well as Acts, relate their stories in order to make a certain point, but this is usually true of any historical writing today as well.

Paul's letters begin with his name rather than the name of the recipient, but broadly speaking we understand that he is communicating his ideas to

a person or group at a distance. He will typically use a health wish near the beginning of his letters that is common today as well (“I hope you’re doing well!”). We know that letters (or even e-mails) can vary in length and can vary in style from casual to more instructive, and this was true of ancient letters as well. Paul’s letters are more along the lines of instructing.

The NT genre least familiar to us is *apocalyptic*. This was a common genre in the ancient world, but it disappeared over time such that we do not expect to find an “apocalyptic” section in our local bookstores today. Since we have some other apocalyptic writings from the ancient world, we can discern some of the common features, such as an extensive use of symbolism and a focus on God’s powerful intervention into the world. While the book of Revelation continues to present many challenges for the interpreter, an awareness of the apocalyptic genre helps clarify many things.

Within the genres are other aspects of study that can help us understand the structure and flow of thought in NT writings. For example, rhetorical and literary analysis help illuminate the ways ancient authors ordered their writings. Since these writings would be heard rather than read by most people, the use of certain words and the order or repetition of words could be helpful in comprehending the flow of thought and points of emphasis. For example, ancient writers would sometimes open and close a paragraph with the same ideas or words to mark the unit of thought.

A close reading of a text will necessitate placing that specific text within its broader literary context. A paragraph in a letter of Paul needs to be seen in light of what precedes and what follows it. Where does this specific paragraph fit in the overall argument of his letter? We must consider how a Gospel account is impacted by the stories around it. For example, if you are studying the text where Jesus is accused of breaking the Sabbath (Mark 2:23–28), it is helpful to note that this is the second of three narratives where Jesus disputed the way the Pharisees were interpreting the OT. An obvious theme in these texts is Jesus’s demonstration of a proper understanding of OT law.

Thus, by close reading of the texts and their nuances within the literary, historical, and cultural context, we will be helped to accurately interpret the meaning of each text. Once understood, however, the text must be applied. No biblical study is completed with the acquisition of new information. Once again we must keep in mind the purpose of the Scriptures. God has

not given them to us for mere historical inquiry but that we might know and obey him. Thus, we must apply the biblical truths and believe and obey what we have discovered.

Conclusion

NT studies done well is a rigorous, thrilling enterprise in pursuit of the knowledge of God and the service of his people. We cannot achieve theological education or hope for a healthy church without a deep awareness of the NT, so this task is vital. We must think clearly and diligently, making use of all the available tools and being aware of the current issues. We must approach the text with the right spirit as well if we want to encounter God since we know God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (1 Pet 5:5). The prophet Isaiah also tells us that God will attend to the one who is humble, submissive in spirit, and trembles at his word (Isa 66:1–2). Let us be such people.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. How should the goal of knowing God shape your approach to biblical study? Is your approach to theological education currently shaped by this goal?
2. Are you involved significantly in the life of a specific local church? Do you believe this will have an impact on your study of the NT? How can you grow in your investment in the life of fellow believers and integrating this into your biblical studies?
3. How important is an awareness of the OT for the study of the NT?
4. How valuable are background studies for the interpretation of the NT? What can you do to increase your awareness of the history and culture of the Greco-Roman world?
5. Do you think it is important to approach the NT with the expectation that its various books agree with and help interpret one another?

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