



Studying the New Testament



4 U V E Z J O H N T •

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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 inner 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 aptly stated, NT study is of the highest importance because “the NT is the fountainhead, the sourcebook of Christianity.”

It 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 conjunc-

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

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. 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.”

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).”⁵ It 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,” *em* 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).

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

can be seen in the fact that while numerous more manuscripts have been

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.”⁴⁸ 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 ec

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. 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. 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 *Contexts 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

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 of '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."

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, *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

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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. It 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. us, 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

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