

The
NEW
TESTAMENT

A HISTORICAL *and*
THEOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION

DONALD *A.* HAGNER

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Preface

The questions of NT introduction are both numerous and complicated. Furthermore, the literature on these questions is voluminous, including not only a long history of the study of the NT but also an ever-increasing flood of contemporary scholarship. No other documents of human history have been subjected to as much study over as long a period as has the Bible as a whole and the NT in particular.

Those unfamiliar with the field may be excused for wondering what more could possibly be said after nearly two thousand years of study of these documents. In fact, progress in the understanding of the NT has been made and continues to be made. This is the result not merely of new discoveries, most famously the Dead Sea Scrolls, but also of the refinement of methods long known, invention of new methods, and in recent decades the application of other academic disciplines to the study of the NT, such as literary criticism, linguistics, sociology, and anthropology.

Occasionally I have been asked why I have written *another* introduction to the NT, and I owe an explanation to you who are reading these lines. What is the purpose and what are the characteristics of the book you hold in your hands?

New introductions to the NT are needed every decade or so in order to reflect the current state of the discussion for new, upcoming students. The present book is meant to be a bread-and-butter introduction to the basic questions of the origins of the NT and the nature of its contents. It is written by a believing Christian primarily for believing Christians—from faith to faith, as Paul would say—for seminary students, for those who would serve God and the church, for disciples who happen to be scholars, not vice versa. In this book, therefore, the material studied—the biblical text—is regarded with a certain reverence as the inspired word of God. But this stance does not prohibit asking the difficult questions with all possible honesty. The book tries to embody the conviction that biblical criticism, sans inimical presuppositions,

is consonant with faith and commitment. Holy Scripture, the canon of Old and New Testaments, comes to us as the word of God, but it is given through the words of humans. As such, it demands critical study.

For many or most of the questions that this book explores we do not know the answers. Morna Hooker, Lady Margaret's Professor of Divinity Emerita at the University of Cambridge, suggests, "Perhaps every New Testament scholar should have before him on his desk, as he writes, as a constant reminder of the dangers of dogmatism, the words of R. H. Lightfoot: 'We do not know.'"¹ The truth is that we simply do not know nearly as much we would like to know. "Proof" and "certainty" are words we can rarely use in assessing historical questions.² Although we can and do know a lot, it is no good pretending to know more than we *can* know. The great Roman Catholic NT scholar Raymond Brown wisely quipped, "Biblical studies are not helped by being certain about the uncertain."³

For a good part of the time, therefore, probable knowledge will have to serve us in the study of the NT. The probabilistic nature of many conclusions in this book should not distress the Christian student. Probable knowledge serves us quite well for most areas of our lives. With the Apostle Paul, here as elsewhere we must be finally content to say, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood" (1 Cor. 13:12).

The problem with probabilities, of course, is that "arguments from probability are weighed differently by different judges."⁴ One person's probability is another person's mere possibility, and vice versa. There is no way around this. One finally has to decide on the basis of one's sense of the force and plausibility of the arguments. Disagreements will remain, but this need not hurt anyone.⁵

This book is written not to provide the sure answers to the questions of introduction, although I am not shy about providing answers that I think are the most persuasive. Although I often indicate alternatives, I have felt no obligation to do so consistently or thoroughly. As much as anything, this book attempts to introduce students to the *status quaestionis* on the subjects

1. Hooker, "On Using the Wrong Tool," 581. Hans Dieter Betz calls attention to "what has ever been the surest position of the historical critic, the *ars nesciendi*, 'the art of not knowing'" (2 *Corinthians* 8 and 9, 30).

2. Martin Hengel writes, "*As we know, we cannot solve equations with several unknowns.*" He adds, "We New Testament scholars constantly attempt this" (*The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 181 and n702, italics in original).

3. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 596.

4. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 41.

5. In another connection, the Apostle Paul notes the appropriateness of humility over against knowledge that puffs up. He writes, "If any one imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know" (1 Cor. 8:2). His point is universally relevant: love should trump our partial knowledge every time. And uncertain, partial knowledge excludes dogmatism.

discussed. I see no need to mention every far-fetched theory and hypothesis, let alone respond to or attempt to counter them. Simplification is essential to a student's introduction. Undoubtedly some will regard my approach in general as reflecting a naive, rosy optimism or an unbelievable chutzpah. If it reflects a naïveté, it is a "second naïveté." I agree with the statement attributed to Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes: "I do not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my right arm for the simplicity on the far side of complexity."

If some readers of this book find it a little thin on newer, avant-garde approaches to the NT writings, this is not because I am unaware of them, nor is it because I see no value in them. I regard them as useful and valuable supplements, but supplements nonetheless.⁶ One can do only so much in one book, and in an introductory book first things must come first. The present book is already large and pressed by considerations of space. Practically every chapter cries out to be a small (or large!) monograph.

However, it is too easy in this discipline that so quickly spawns new approaches, new theories, and new hypotheses to forget or quickly dismiss scholarship of the past. There can be few subjects that have such a rich history of study as the NT. In this book I argue that some no-longer fashionable views deserve to be considered again, especially the best of them. Some old conclusions are still the best conclusions!⁷ Although usually there are good reasons for the emergence of consensus on questions of NT introduction, a consensus should never be allowed to paralyze NT scholarship from its work of examining and reexamining its conclusions.

A distinguishing mark of the present book is its understanding of the NT within the framework of the history of salvation. This refers not to some "special" history or metanarrative above or distinct from ordinary history. Rather, it refers to the grand story of God's work in history, in time and space, to accomplish the redemption of the fallen creation. This orientation accounts for the attention given to the OT in chapter 2 and for the analysis of the main divisions of the book in terms of the kingdom of God (the Gospels as the proclamation of the kingdom; Acts as the earliest preaching of the kingdom; the Epistles as the interpretation of the kingdom; the Apocalypse as the consummation of the kingdom). I have found this a most helpful way to understand the NT and a good way to introduce students to what undergirds the entire NT and what makes it what it is.⁸

This book provides no outlines of the NT books. I have never found other people's outlines very useful. It is far better to do one's own outlines because their real value is in the learning that comes in actually doing them. Nor do

6. See Hagner and Young, "The Historical-Critical Method and the Gospel of Matthew."

7. See Gundry, *The Old Is Better*. Gundry presents these essays not to defend traditional interpretations, but because in his opinion they are the interpretations that are the most truthful.

8. Along the same lines, see Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*.

I necessarily provide seriatim summaries of the contents of the NT books, although in various ways I do cover much of the content of each book. My focus is more often on the argument of the book. Again, it is far better for students to read the documents for themselves. And thus, like every author of a book such as this, I must beg the reader to keep a copy of the NT open beside this book. Nothing can take the place of the direct encounter with the content of the Bible itself. Unless otherwise noted, Bible quotations in this book are from the RSV,⁹ which often follows the Greek text more closely than does the NRSV.

As a service to students wanting to go deeper than this book can take them, I have provided rather full bibliographies, although they are far from exhaustive. I have not included articles and books in languages other than English, despite, for example, the rich resources available in German and French in particular.

An online resource is available providing “questions for review” for students who wish to check up on their comprehension and retention of the important points in each chapter. For professors interested in ideas for exam questions or paper topics, the online resource offers “questions for research and discussion.” Thanks go to J. Matthew Barnes for writing this material. These questions are linked under the “resources” heading at www.bakeracademic.com/HagnerNT.

There are many to thank for making the writing of this book possible. First, as always, thanks are due to my dear wife, Beverly, for her unflagging love, support, and encouragement. This book has been written in a variety of academic locations. I especially thank Professor Emerita Morna Hooker and the hospitality of Robinson College, Cambridge, for the privilege of being a bye-fellow for 2009–10. I thank the libraries of Tyndale House, Cambridge, and of the Faculty of Theology at Humboldt University in Berlin. I also thank warmly Professor Bernardo Estrada and the Faculty of Theology at the Pontificia Università della Santa Croce in Rome for their hospitality. Finally, thanks are due to Trinity College, Melbourne, and the Dalton McCaughey Library of the United Faculty of Theology of the University of Melbourne. All the people in these institutions were exceptionally kind and provided excellent, stimulating contexts for researching and writing. I am grateful to the people—too many to name individually—in these places who read chapters of the present book and gave me valuable feedback. I must also render special thanks to my friend Dr. Steve Young, who read and corrected the proofs of the entire manuscript. The shortcomings of this book remain mine.

I thank Thomas Nelson publishers for permission to use material drawn from the introduction to my commentary on Matthew in the *Word Biblical Commentary* and Baker Books for permission to use material from the

9. Unfortunately, the permission to use the RSV stipulates that no changes be made in quoting the translation. As a result, against my wishes, I have had to retain the objectionable masculine language of the RSV. I ask the reader’s indulgence.

introduction to my commentary on Hebrews in the Understanding the Bible Commentary Series.

I am also grateful to James Ernest, Jim Kinney, Brian Bolger, and the good folks at Baker Academic for their encouragement and excellent work in the production of this book.

When Charles Bigg sent off his monumental International Critical Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude, he wrote, “I send this laborious volume to the press with a clear sense of its limitations. . . . The shortcomings of the work will be at least as evident to others as to myself.”¹⁰ While I would not pretend to possess the stature of a Charles Bigg, these words nevertheless express well my sentiments at this moment.

I wish the reader much joy and excitement in the wonderful adventure of studying the NT—indeed, something of the joy I have experienced in writing this book.

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10. Bigg, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude*, v.

PART 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Approaching the New Testament as the Church's Scripture

The Bible is God's gift to the church. Its contents are acknowledged by the church as uniquely inspired by God and revealed to human authors through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.¹ The NT provides the church not only with the founding story of its incarnate Lord and the salvation accomplished by him but also with a key provision for its ongoing sustenance and guidance. For the church, therefore, Scripture is unique, holy, and possesses irreplaceable, infallible, canonical authority.

The church fully depends on the historical events narrated especially in the Gospels: the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The Christian faith is more than ethics or philosophy: *it rests squarely on the reality of historical events*. Our salvation, as magnificent and transcendent as it is, was accomplished in datable time and locatable space. The notice in Luke 3:1–2, at the beginning of the story, could hardly be more specific in terms of historical particularity: “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his

1. The classic statement is that of 2 Timothy 3:16: “All scripture is inspired by God,” where the word *theopneustos* (“God-breathed”) is used. This word may well allude to the work of the “Spirit” (*pneuma*) of God in the production of Scripture. Although the mechanism of inspiration remains mysterious, it is at least clear that Scripture finds its origin in God and thus bears a divine authority. Note also 2 Peter 1:21: “No prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (cf. Zech. 7:12; Neh. 9:30). What is spoken of in 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:21 is, of course, what we call the OT, but the statement may be applied to the NT writings by analogy.

brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitus, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”

Although Christianity transcends the historical, it is inseparable from the historical. “There cannot therefore be any proclamation of the gospel which is not at the same time a narration of past history.”² The historical basis of the Christian faith is at once its glory and stumbling block. The glory is in the fact that in the biblical story God enters history, so to speak, for the purpose of rescuing his creation. The eternal intersects the temporal. The stumbling block is that history is fragile: full of uncertainties and subject to human investigation and human doubt. But Christianity nevertheless depends squarely on its contradiction of the famous “ditch” that the eighteenth-century German philosopher G. E. Lessing dug between transcendent truth and the vagaries of history.

The Scriptures as Historical Documents

If the story of salvation is above all a historical story, so too the documents of the NT that record that history are documents that originate in history. The NT did not drop out of heaven directly from God, untouched by human hands. On the contrary, its writings are the products of particular human beings, who lived in specific times and places, and who had their own personalities and their own distinctive viewpoints. Nor were these authors simply empty channels, passively receiving supernatural dictation. As God came to us through the agency of a human being, Jesus, so in an analogous way the word of God comes to us through the agency of human words. This is of the essence of Christianity, and it is of the utmost importance. Thus the record and interpretation of the saving acts of God contained in the NT is itself a collection of historical data, mediated by and through history. Scripture consists of a deed/word or event/interpretation complex where every aspect comes to us through historical means. Indeed, there is a sense in which we may say that God has entrusted the whole process of salvation to history: not merely the acts of redemption themselves, but their record and interpretation in the writing of Scripture, in the formation of the canon, and in the transmission of the text. Theology and history remain inseparably bound together.

This single lapidary fact—the inspired word of God comes to us through the medium of history, through the agency of writers who lived in history and were a part of history—*necessitates the historical and critical study of Scripture*. It is the reason for the writing of the kind of book you have in your hands. In no other way than by historical study can we come to an adequate understanding of the Bible that honors it as God has been pleased to give it to us.

2. Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, 44.

Biblical Criticism

Unfortunately, the words “criticism” and “critical” are often misunderstood. As used here, the words do not refer to criticizing Scripture—that is, tearing it down or demeaning it—but rather *to exercising judgment or discernment* concerning every aspect of it.³ As I use them here, the words indicate nothing other than the good use of reason and the various tools available in understanding and interpreting the Bible.⁴ Criticism in this sense is not an option but an absolute necessity if one is going to make any intelligent statement about the Bible or to begin to interpret it responsibly.⁵ The question is not whether we should engage in criticism—if we do not, we will be forced to keep silent about the Bible—but whether our critical judgment is good or bad, well founded or without justifiable basis. Studying the Bible critically may be conceived as one way of loving God with all our mind, as we are directed by Jesus, who cites the Shema as the first and greatest commandment (Matt. 22:37, citing Deut. 6:5).

We must engage in historical criticism, in the sense of thoughtful interpretation of the Bible, both because of the way in which God has given Scripture to us and because of its intrinsic nature. To approach the Bible in any other way is to be untrue to its nature. We are called to deal with the Bible that God gave to us, and *as God gave it*, not as we might suppose or wish it to be.

The historical method is indispensable precisely because the Bible is the story of God’s acts in history. The salvation-historical narrative that begins in Genesis comes to its climax in the NT account of the appearance of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, at a specific time and place. Since the records and narratives of these salvation-historical acts of God in the Bible are themselves products of history, written by individuals located in specific times and places, it is vitally important to immerse ourselves in the history of that era and that culture. If we are to understand these things, they must be studied historically, using the tools and methods of historical research.⁶

3. Underlying the English words is the Greek word *kritikos*, which occurs in Hebrews 4:12: *kritikos enthymēseōn kai ennoion kardias* (“discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart”).

4. “‘Historical-critical method’ simply represents a necessary collection of the ‘tools’ for opening up past events” (Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, 54).

5. A still-useful introduction and defense of the critical method for the beginner, written from an evangelical perspective, is Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism*. Ladd, describing the Bible as the word of God in the words of human beings, regarded the historical-critical method as not just useful but also as indispensable. He demonstrated that it was not a contradiction to be both a committed believer *and* a critical scholar. See also Hagner, “The New Testament, History, and the Historical-Critical Method.”

6. In recent years there has been a proliferation of new methods for studying the NT. For a description and defense of the continuing indispensability of the historical-critical method, see Hagner and Young, “The Historical-Critical Method and the Gospel of Matthew.” Other methods, useful though they may be, must not be allowed to displace the historical-critical method.

For sincere, believing Christians, the word “critical” therefore should be regarded as a good word, and it will be used as such in this book. Only “radical” criticism—that is, a hostile, destructive approach to Scripture—is problematic for faith.

Historical Method and Presuppositions

The main problem with radical, destructive criticism is not the application of critical judgment to Scripture but rather its unjustified presuppositions.

Thus, unfortunately, a feigned neutrality more often than not hides an *a priori* negative bias. As Colin Hemer notes, “The Enlightenment imposes, not freedom from presupposition, but contrary presuppositions.”⁷ A naturalistic worldview, which is not subject to proof and can only be presupposed, rules out the possibility of the transcendent or supernatural and thus necessarily closes the mind of the scholar to the truth of the Bible’s narratives. Hypotheses built on this presupposition are precarious at best. Many indeed contend that such an attitude is required if one is to practice the historical-critical method with integrity. But Martin Hengel’s advice is worth listening to: “The most appropriate attitude for the scholar when dealing with the historical narratives of the New Testament is one which does not disregard *a priori* the testimony and the claim presented in these texts, but is prepared to ‘listen’ openly to what they have to say. Such an approach takes seriously the content of the texts—however strange they may seem to us—and attempts to understand them in terms of their intrinsic concerns. This also involves accepting, rather than denying, their claim to be kerygmatic historical reports.”⁸

It is the bread and butter of the historian to work with causation in history. But historians have no access to the divine causation that is so fundamental to the biblical narratives, a causation outside the closed network of perceivable cause and effect. However, this need not paralyze the historian’s critical judgment. Other matters are indeed accessible to the historian, such as the nature and reliability of the evidence, the identity and credibility of the witnesses, and their proximity to the event in question. Purged from unjustifiable presuppositions, the historical-critical method provides wonderful tools to help us understand the Bible.

Keeping an open mind concerning the possibility of the transcendent in history does not entail the suspension of critical judgment. There is no need

7. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, 443. It should hardly be surprising that Enlightenment rationalism and its accompanying presuppositions would be so unproductive in the study of the Bible.

8. Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, 56. Hengel adds that “the historical method which is appropriate here requires extreme care, guarded intensity, responsibility and reverence towards the truth” (*ibid.*, 57). Hengel’s discussion “Historical Methods and the Theological Interpretation of the New Testament” (*ibid.*, 127–36) is filled with wisdom for those who would study the Scriptures.

for a naive credulity and acceptance of anything and everything simply because one's worldview is amenable to the supernatural. A method, however, that excludes the supernatural from the start will not take us far in understanding documents that find their very *raison d'être* in the activity of God in history.⁹ It would be hard to devise a worse match than so-called scientific (= naturalistic) historiography¹⁰ and the Bible, where the method itself cancels out its subject matter *a priori*.¹¹ It should be no surprise that this approach has been so unproductive. But as N. T. Wright stresses, "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in post-Enlightenment philosophy, as those who have lived and worked in areas of the world less affected by Hume, Lessing and Troeltsch know quite well."¹² The critical method therefore needs to be tempered so that rather than being used against the Bible, it is open to the possibility of the transcendent or miraculous within the historical process and thus is used to provide better understanding of the Bible.¹³

The Spurning of the Historical-Critical Method

Paradoxically, at present it is not only some very conservative scholars who have turned away from the critical method but also more reasonable and even liberal scholars who recognize that the method, as usually practiced, is bankrupt if not dead. Quite remarkably, in recent years the whole enterprise of traditional historical-critical scholarship has come into disrepute. The move away from exclusively historical and theological questions began gently enough with the application of new disciplines to the study of the Bible. Preeminently one thinks of sociology and anthropology, rhetorical and narrative criticism, and especially the new appreciation of the Bible as literature. Although these new approaches are not necessarily antithetical to historical study of Scripture, they

9. "Just as we cannot produce proofs of God with historical methods and from a consideration of history, so it follows that the application of historical-critical methods cannot call for the recognition of an 'atheistic' view of history in which the question of the activity of God becomes illegitimate" (*ibid.*, 52).

10. C. Stephen Evans rightly concludes that the "claim that this approach is more likely to lead to truth because it is 'scientific' seems like an illegitimate attempt to give one party to a dispute an unearned advantage by associating its claims with the deserved and hard-won reputation of the natural sciences" ("The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel," 115).

11. "We are confronted with the paradox of a way of studying the word of God out of which no word of God ever seems to come, with an imposing modern knowledge of the Bible which seems quite incapable of saying anything biblical or thinking biblically" (Casserley, *Toward a Theology of History*, 116). Quoted from L. Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, 10.

12. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 187.

13. "Historical biblical scholarship that assumes a naturalistic framework is unlikely to be more conducive to truth than other approaches unless metaphysical naturalism is true, and I see little reason to think it is" (Evans, "The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel," 115). See also Stanton, "Presuppositions in New Testament Criticism."

can become so if they are used in a reductionist manner. The same can be said of special-interest hermeneutics such as feminist, liberation, and postcolonial approaches. Unfortunately, however, proponents of these approaches often have been highly critical of the historical approach. But it is especially the so-called new literary criticism that has posed itself as the displacing alternative to historical criticism. In its pure form the literary approach is hostile to history, insisting on understanding the text as a self-contained world and as strictly nonreferential. Here the historicity of events is no longer important, and it gives way to the underlying “message” of the Bible.

It is perhaps not surprising that even some evangelicals have jumped onto the docetic bandwagon of “story but not history.”¹⁴ The idea of retaining the Bible’s message without having to wrestle with the uncertainties of history is very appealing to them and perhaps reflects a lurking suspicion that the historical basis of Christianity is too fragile to depend upon.

In many circles of the guild these days it is not uncommon to hear the claim that the hegemony of the historical-critical method in the discipline of biblical study has come to an end. The influence of postmodernism is being more and more widely felt, whether it be through the new literary criticism, poststructuralism, or reader-response interpretation.

Postmodernism and Historical Knowledge

For a number of years now there has been an understandable and justifiable reaction under way to the inflated claims of modernism. Postmodernism rightly criticizes modernism’s undue confidence in the ability of human reason in itself to arrive at fully objective, exhaustive, and absolute truth. All knowledge is partial and skewed by the perspective of the knower. It would be foolish to deny this. Even the Apostle Paul had to say, “For now we see in a mirror dimly. . . . Now I know in part” (1 Cor. 13:12). But it is equally foolish to go so far as to conclude that no real knowledge is possible and to deny the very idea of universal truth. And although complete objectivity is possible for no one, we should at least strive to be as objective as possible.

Many who are influenced by postmodernism have concluded that it is a serious mistake to think of interpretation as “excavating” the author’s meaning in a text. For these scholars, texts serve rather as stimulants to bring out the meanings that interpreters bring to the texts. Meaning thus lies in the reader and not in the text. Attention turns now more often to the reader, the process of reading, and the power of the readers who impose their meanings on texts. The result of such a conclusion is the contention that readers have little chance of hearing anything other than their own thoughts; they can only imagine what

14. For the avoidance of this improper dichotomy, see the excellent discussion in Byrskog, *Story as History—History as Story*.

they see in the text. The inescapable reality of a plurality of interpretations indicates that there is no way to adjudicate between different interpretations. All that we have in the end is the assent of various communities to certain readings of texts that have no objective basis.

Despite the communicable claims of postmodern writers (who presumably believe that what *they* write can be understood more or less correctly!), it is possible to determine the intended meaning of an author in a text, even if that determination is less than perfect and inevitably experiences some interference from the preunderstandings of an interpreter. It is of the greatest importance to insist on the possibility and importance of exegesis.¹⁵ We must indeed fight for the right of texts to be heard, for the autonomy of texts, especially in the case of the biblical texts, the truth of which is all-important to us, and whose teachings we are called to obey. These texts, more perhaps than any others, want to be heard, and it is clear that these authors have something to say. And it is not impossible for us to hear it.

Historical Knowledge and Probability

It may at first be disconcerting to hear the conclusion that all historical knowledge is necessarily only probable rather than certain. The word “prove,” although perhaps appropriate in mathematics and science, is out of place when it comes to historical knowledge. Hengel observes, “The demand to ‘compellingly prove’ something appears all too often in New Testament literature and indicates a lack of historical consciousness”; he continues with a quotation from Adolf Schlatter: “There is no completely accurate historical knowledge for any part of the course of history; we do not even have it for the course of our own life.”¹⁶ We function quite well in life with knowledge that usually amounts only to probability and not certainty.

We cannot have perfect knowledge and cannot demonstrate the truth of any particular historical conclusion, but this does not mean that we cannot know or that we cannot have reasonable confidence in our historical conclusions. It is not a matter of either absolute proof or nothing. Certainty is not a requisite to knowledge. Quite the contrary, there are degrees of probability. And in most of the chapters that follow in this book I will speak of probabilities of varying degree rather than of certainties. Many conclusions about the origin of the NT necessarily remain a matter of critical judgment and varying probability rather than of demonstrable truth. This is because of the very nature of historical knowledge.

There is, of course, at the same time a different knowledge that involves another kind of certainty. This is the subjective knowledge that the believer alone

15. See Hagner, “The Place of Exegesis in the Postmodern World.”

16. Hengel, “Eye-witness Memory and the Writing of the Gospels,” 88n77.

experiences concerning the truth of these matters for his or her existence. Here we know in a unique way, by faith, through the confirmation of the inner witness of the Spirit. This existential certainty should not be thought of as incompatible with the acceptance of probability as the basis of all historical knowledge.

The precarious character of historical knowledge has tempted some believers to the security, or misperceived certainty, of an obscurantist fundamentalism. Repudiation of the critical study of Scripture amounts to a gnostic-like denial of the historical character of the Christian faith. "Fundamentalist polemic against the 'historical-critical method' does not understand historical perception. It can therefore also not perceive the *reality of salvation history*, because in its anxious rationalism, it cannot and will not grasp the true effects of God's action through his Word in history."¹⁷

The Role of Faith in the Study of Scripture

The NT was written for believers, not for doubters. Believers are the implied readers of the NT texts, and therefore believers are in the best place to make sense of the NT texts.¹⁸ It is to believers that the texts open themselves most readily. This is contrary to the frequently encountered claim that faith is an obstacle to the proper understanding of the NT. Only, however, when faith is characterized by openness rather than an a priori dogmatism is it an aid to the study of Scripture.

The advantage that the believer has in the study of Scripture is openness to the truth of the narratives.¹⁹ A hermeneutic of trust can have the salutary and paradoxical effect of making us better historians and scholars of Scripture than those who do not believe. Options that arise from the material itself may be given fairer consideration; helpful constructions may emerge from a positive approach that would not be seen in a negative orientation. Certainly the approach of the believer will be more fruitful and truthful than a hostile approach of one who is predisposed to deconstruct the Christian faith. Theological presuppositions, of course, inevitably enter into the discussions, as indeed they do for those who consider themselves "neutral."²⁰ Without ques-

17. *Ibid.*, 94. Hengel adds, "Fundamentalism is a form of 'unbelief' that closes itself to the—God-intended—historical reality" (*ibid.*, 94n100).

18. Markus Bockmuehl makes this point beautifully in *Seeing the Word*.

19. Peter Stuhlmacher calls for a "hermeneutics of consent" that involves "a willingness to open ourselves anew to the claim of tradition, of the present, and of transcendence" (*Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 85). This approach to Scripture employs a "type of interpretation, which not merely critically dissects but also listens," and it involves "exegesis which serves the church" by its openness to "the truth of God encountering us from out of transcendence" (88). See also Snodgrass, "Reading to Hear."

20. For some, "neutrality" means the denial of the church's view of Jesus, or even the possibility that it could be true.

tion presuppositions will remain crucial.²¹ “The wise course is to recognize those presuppositions, to make allowance for them, to ensure that they do not exercise an undue influence on our understanding of what we read. It is the unconscious and unsuspected presuppositions that are harmful.”²²

It should be stressed once again that the critical method is indispensable to the study of Scripture. It is the *sine qua non* of responsible interpretation of God’s word. The believer need have no fear of the method itself, but need only be on guard against the employment of improper presuppositions. J. B. Lightfoot gave helpful counsel:

The timidity, which shrinks from the application of modern science or criticism to the interpretation of Holy Scripture, evinces a very unworthy view of its character. If the Scriptures are indeed true, they must be in accordance with every true principle of whatever kind. It is against the wrong application of such principles, and against the presumption which pushes them too far, that we must protest. It is not much knowledge, but little knowledge, that is the dangerous thing here as elsewhere. From the full light of science or criticism we have nothing to fear: the glimmering light—which rather deserves the name of darkness visible—hides and distorts the truth.²³

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21. As Evans says, “It is worth reminding ourselves of the elementary fact that judgments of probability are always made relative to a set of background assumptions” (Evans, “The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel,” 114).

22. Bruce, “Primary and Plenary Sense,” 332.

23. “Greek Testament Lectures, Lent Term 1855” (unpublished lecture notes), cited in James D. G. Dunn, ed., *The Lightfoot Centenary Lectures*, 39–40, 72. See also Treloar, *Lightfoot the Historian*, 307.

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