

Western Kentucky University

TopSCHOLAR®

---

Faculty/Staff Personal Papers

WKU Archives Records

---

4-2021

## Historical-Critical Methods

James W. Barker

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/fac\\_staff\\_papers](https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/fac_staff_papers)



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#)

---

This Contribution to Book is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty/Staff Personal Papers by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact [topscholar@wku.edu](mailto:topscholar@wku.edu).

## Historical-Critical Methods

James W. Barker

In 1670 Baruch Spinoza anonymously published the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, which included a chapter on interpreting the Bible. Spinoza said first to read biblical texts in their original language and then to note their obscure and contradictory passages.<sup>1</sup> While Byzantine Christians had never stopped reading the Greek NT, Greek literacy had been uncommon in Europe throughout the Middle Ages. And while medieval scholars had carefully noted seemingly contradictory passages,<sup>2</sup> scholastics typically resolved biblical contradictions or left questions open, rather than declaring one putatively inspired Scripture true and another false. Spinoza continued:

Finally our historical enquiry must explain the circumstances of all the books of the prophets whose memory has come down to us: the life, character and particular interests of the author of each individual book, who exactly he was, on what occasion he wrote, for whom and in what language. Then the fate of each book: namely how it was first received and whose hands it came into, how many variant readings there have been of its text, by whose decision it was received among the sacred books, and finally how all the books which are now accepted as sacred came to form a single corpus. All this, I contend, has to be dealt with in a history of the Bible.<sup>3</sup>

The *Tractatus* was formally banned in 1674, yet Spinoza had prefigured historical criticism—not only the scope and methods of its inquiries but also the accompanying clashes between church and academy.

Historical criticism attempts to understand NT texts in their original contexts, free of later dogmatic presuppositions. This essay describes its traditional inquiries and methods as well as recent trends. The discussion divides into four sections: textual criticism, the Gospels and Jesus, Paul and his letters, and the limits of canon. Textual criticism explains why different manuscripts (MSS) of the same text don't always say the same thing. Building on insights from textual criticism, source criticism and redaction criticism discern why different Gospels don't always tell the same story in the same way; historical critics also ask who wrote the Gospels and for whom as well as whether one can get behind the texts to find the historical Jesus. Contemporary studies of Jesus and Paul take renewed interest in their first-century Jewish context,<sup>4</sup> and Pauline studies continue to question whether he wrote all the NT letters attributed to him. Similar concerns about authorship and authenticity prevail in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 100.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Abelard, *Yes and No: The Complete Translation of Peter Abelard's Sic et Non*, trans. Priscilla Throop, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Charlotte, VT: MedievalMS, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 101.

<sup>4</sup> Besides the Tanakh, see Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

remainder of the canonical NT, namely Hebrews, the General Epistles, and Revelation. Yet historical criticism is hardly limited to the NT canon: to avoid canonical prejudice, the (eventually) canonical texts should not be read in isolation from the (eventually) extracanonical texts, which are just as important for understanding earliest Christianity in context.<sup>5</sup>

## Textual Criticism

In Renaissance Europe, reading any Greek text was a novelty, and Erasmus collated half a dozen medieval MSS for the first published Greek NT. Half a millennium later, there are more than 5,600 Greek NT MSS evincing approximately half a million textual variants.<sup>6</sup> Textual criticism sifts the variants to recover the earliest stage of transmission.<sup>7</sup> Longstanding canons privilege the shorter reading (*lectio brevior*) and the more difficult reading (*lectio difficilior*) while asking, "Which one gave rise to the other?" (*utrum in alterum abiturum erat*).

In the process of accumulating MSS of greater antiquity, text critics developed a classification of three types. The Alexandrian text is chiefly represented by the fourth-century Codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus as well as earlier papyri, and this type is presumably closest to the earliest recoverable text. The Western text is chiefly represented by the sixth-century Codex Bezae (consisting of the Gospels and Acts) as well as earlier patristic citations, and this type arguably contains numerous corruptions despite having emerged quite early. The Byzantine text is represented by the vast majority of Greek NT MSS (especially the minuscules, which date from the ninth century), and it has been viewed as a later development that is also corrupt.

Although text-types are posited as a helpful way to sort thousands of MSS, the traditional classification faces increasing scrutiny. One reason is that the MSS within a designated type can still vary widely from one another. Another concern is that text-types may cause critics to miss or dismiss early readings preserved in late texts. In theory, text critics agree that a late MS can preserve an early text, just as an early MS can abound with corruptions. In practice, however, text-types have often privileged earlier MSS over later ones.

---

<sup>5</sup> See James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols., ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1983–1985); J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Peter J. Gurry, "The Number of Variants in the Greek New Testament: A Proposed Estimate," *NTS* 62 (2016): 97–121; the number of MSS includes lectionaries, and the number of variants excludes spelling differences.

<sup>7</sup> The *initial* text represents a subtle distinction from previous generations of text critics, who aspired to recover the one *original* text: Michael W. Holmes, "From 'Original Text' to 'Initial Text': The Traditional Goal of New Testament Textual Criticism in Contemporary Discussion," in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Questioners*, ed. Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., NTTSD 42 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 637–88.

With or without text-types, some crucial text-critical decisions still stand. Most notably, contemporary editions and translations relegate to brackets or footnotes notorious interpolations such as the Longer Ending of Mark (16:9–20), the Adulteress Pericope (John 7:53–8:11), and the Trinitarian heavenly witnesses (1 John 5:7–8).<sup>8</sup> Text critics have traditionally denied the authenticity of these passages because they are lacking from quintessential Alexandrian witnesses. Yet even those who reject text-types altogether can reject the same passages based on the shorter reading.<sup>9</sup> Other passages are more problematic if one consistently prefers *lectio brevior*. For example, Codex Bezae includes Jesus's sweat becoming like blood while praying in Gethsemane (Luke 22:43–44, a 'Western interpolation'), but Bezae does not include the risen Jesus showing his hands and feet to the disciples (Luke 24:40, a 'Western non-interpolation'). Some text critics prefer the shorter reading in both instances, while other critics consider both Bezae readings secondary.

To assess significant NT textual variants, the main problem is how to account for so much data. To this end, the most important development in recent decades is the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method (CBGM).<sup>10</sup> 'Coherence' simply means how much agreement there is among texts. The CBGM initially tabulates whether readings are the same or different in hundreds of test passages across hundreds of MSS. Without appealing to text-types, these tabulations offer a general impression of how similar the texts of any two MSS tend to be; the distinction between *text* and *manuscript* is essential, since a late MS can preserve an early text.<sup>11</sup> From there, text critics weigh specific variants to see which text gave rise to the other. Between any two texts, the direction of dependence may change from one variant to another; it is also possible for the text of one manuscript to be influenced by the texts of multiple manuscripts.<sup>12</sup> CBGM diagrams thus appear complicated, yet they are designed to be as simple as possible given the complexities of textual transmission. One limitation is that the CBGM does not incorporate patristic quotations or ancient versions, many of which attest readings as old as the earliest extant Greek NT MSS. Nevertheless, the CBGM powerfully organizes a wealth of data concerning the NT text.

---

<sup>8</sup> Yet text critics increasingly study deliberate alterations in their own right; Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> The method of thoroughgoing (a.k.a. radical) eclecticism attempts to weigh each variant individually, irrespective of the age or tendencies of the MS; see J. Keith Elliott, "Thoroughgoing Eclecticism in New Testament Textual Criticism," in *Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 745–70.

<sup>10</sup> Tommy Wasserman and Peter J. Gurry, *A New Approach to Textual Criticism: An Introduction to the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method*, RBS 80 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017). Developed by Gerd Mink of the Institut für neutestamentliche Textforschung, the CBGM is used for the INTF's ongoing publications of *Editio Critica Maior*, thereby influencing the most recent editions of *Novum Testamentum Graece*, Nestle-Aland, 28<sup>th</sup> ed. (2012) and *The Greek New Testament*, United Bible Societies, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (2014).

<sup>11</sup> E.g., according to the CBGM, in the General Epistles the text of the tenth-century MS 1739 influences the text of the fifth-century Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus (Wasserman and Gurry, *New Approach to Textual Criticism*, 97).

<sup>12</sup> E.g., according to the CBGM, in the General Epistles the text of Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus is influenced by the texts of Codex Vaticanus and MS 1739 as well as the editors' reconstructed initial text (Wasserman and Gurry, *New Approach to Textual Criticism*, 97).

Another important text-critical trend focuses on scribal habits as discerned from singular readings, that is, variants appearing in only one NT MS.<sup>13</sup> Given thousands of MSS and hundreds of thousands of variants, singular readings most likely reveal how particular scribes altered their source texts. An early insight was that the scribe of Papyrus 45 sometimes made the text more concise; accordingly, *lectio brevior* should not automatically be posited as the earlier text.<sup>14</sup> Scribal habits represent the micro level of textual alteration, while the CBGM works toward the macro level of textual flow. Yet the two approaches are complementary: singular readings amount to a tiny fraction of variants, but these clarify the kinds of changes scribes actually made; scribal habits can then be considered when determining which text engendered another, case by case across exponentially more variants in the CBGM. Reconstructing the initial Greek NT is an ongoing process, and all these methods undergo continual refinement. Scholars make gradual progress, and recent insights into scribal habits extend well beyond textual criticism into source and redaction criticism.

## The Gospels and Jesus

Across the Gospels, parallel stories and word-for-word agreements indicate that one writer copied from another. The enduring historical-critical methods of source and redaction criticism clarify the interrelations of the Gospels. Historical criticism also raises questions of authorship and authenticity: who wrote the Gospels, and for whom? Moreover, "the quest of the historical Jesus" attempts to go behind the Gospels to reconstruct what Jesus really said and did. Jesus's Jewish context figures prominently in recent research.

Approximately ninety percent Mark has parallels in Matthew, and approximately seventy percent of Luke has parallels in Matthew or Mark. These Gospels do not simply tell many of the same stories: they often tell the same stories using nearly the same words.<sup>15</sup> Since so much of their material can be compared side by side, Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the 'Synoptic' Gospels. Already in the early church, readers wondered why they were so similar and yet so different, an inquiry known as the Synoptic Problem.

Around the turn of the fifth century, Augustine wrote a treatise on the harmony (Latin: *consensus*) of the Gospels.<sup>16</sup> He supposed that the Gospels were written in canonical order and that each subsequent evangelist was familiar with the preceding Gospel(s) (*Cons.* 1.3–4).<sup>17</sup> Augustine noted that Gospels sometimes agreed verbatim (*Cons.* 1.4) and yet they sometimes disagreed in the order of narration; he

---

<sup>13</sup> E.g., James R. Royse, *Scribal Habits in Early Greek New Testament Papyri*, NTTSD 36 (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Ernest C. Colwell, *Studies in Methodology in Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, NTTS 9 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 106–24, here 118–21.

<sup>15</sup> Similarly high levels of verbatim agreement are found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, but such slavish copying is atypical for Greco-Roman literature: John S. Kloppenborg, "Variation in the Reproduction of the Double Tradition and an Oral Q?" *ETL* 83 (2007): 53–80, here 77.

<sup>16</sup> Augustine, *The Harmony of the Gospels*, trans. S. D. F. Salmond (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 6:73–236).

<sup>17</sup> As in the Vulgate and contemporary English versions, Augustine knew the canonical order as Matthew, Mark, Luke, John; some ancient MSS attest other orders such as Matthew, John, Luke, Mark in Codex Bezae.

suggested that the evangelists recorded events in the order they remembered them rather than the order the events actually occurred (*Cons.* 2.44). The harmonious, Augustinian solution to the Synoptic Problem stood virtually unchallenged through the Middle Ages and Reformation until the era of Deism and Enlightenment.

Near the end of the eighteenth century, Johann Jakob Griesbach reassessed the Gospels' literary dependence. He also challenged the very notion of harmony, since the Gospels' narrative chronologies so differ from one another. Griesbach's solution to the Synoptic Problem was that Matthew wrote first, Luke used Matthew, and Mark used Matthew and Luke. Since Mark copied his predecessors and offered hardly any original material of his own, Griesbach rejected the patristic testimony associating Mark with the apostle Peter. Moreover, Griesbach concluded, "Those who argue that Mark wrote under the influence of divine inspiration must surely regard it as being a pretty meagre one!"<sup>18</sup> Griesbach's hypothesis was highly influential in the following decades, especially given its acceptance by Ferdinand Christian Baur and David Friedrich Strauss of the Tübingen school.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Two-Source hypothesis developed as a viable alternative. Its fundamental argument is for Markan priority: the Gospel of Mark was the first, not the last, of the Synoptics. Mark begins with Jesus's baptism, says that he was an exceptional teacher without relating very much of his teaching, and ends with a young man saying that Jesus has risen from the dead—the end; using Mark as a source, Matthew and Luke each added birth stories, expansive teachings, and resurrection appearances respectively to the beginning, middle, and end of their Gospels. The other essential argument of the Two-Source hypothesis is that Matthew and Luke wrote independently of one another. There are numerous sayings and a few narratives found only in Matthew and Luke. This material derives from a lost source called Q, an abbreviation for *Quelle*, the German word for 'source'; the wording and sequence of this hypothetical, written source have now been fully reconstructed.<sup>19</sup> Mark and Q are thus the two sources underlying Matthew and Luke. B. H. Streeter solidified this hypothesis in 1924,<sup>20</sup> and the Two-Source hypothesis has held the consensus for nearly a century.

---

<sup>18</sup> J. J. Griesbach, *A Demonstration that Mark Was Written after Matthew and Luke*, trans. Bernard Orchard, in *J. J. Griesbach: Synoptic and Text-Critical Studies 1776–1976*, ed. Bernard Orchard and Thomas R. W. Longstaff, SNTSMS 34 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 103–35, here 135.

<sup>19</sup> James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann, and John S. Kloppenborg, *The Critical Edition of Q*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> Burnett Hillman Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study in Origins* (London: Macmillan, 1924). Streeter actually called his solution the Four Document Hypothesis: besides Mark and Q, Streeter referred to M and L for the unique material found in Matthew and Luke, respectively; for example, Matthew and Luke each record nativity stories and resurrection appearances, but their accounts vary widely and are not attributable to Q.

The consensus appears less firm at the moment. In recent decades, some have rehabilitated the Griesbach hypothesis,<sup>21</sup> and the Augustinian hypothesis has occasionally been reclaimed.<sup>22</sup> Another alternative is a synthesized Three-Source hypothesis, which accepts certain arguments for Luke's use of Matthew while maintaining Luke's use of Q.<sup>23</sup> Others now argue for Matthean Posteriority: Mark wrote first, Luke used Mark, and Matthew used Mark and Luke.<sup>24</sup> The strongest rival to Two-Source hegemony presently comes from the Farrer hypothesis,<sup>25</sup> which argues for Markan priority, Matthew's use of Mark, and Luke's use of Matthew and Mark.<sup>26</sup>

Matthew and Luke sometimes make the same change at the same place in Mark. For example, Matthew (26:68) and Luke (22:64) both add verbatim, "Who is it that struck you?" when Jesus is being mocked on the night before the crucifixion; this phrase is lacking from Mark 14:65. The Two-Source hypothesis typically refers to such brief coincidences as "minor agreements." More extended agreements occur as well, as in the preaching of John the Baptist (Matt 3:7–10//Luke 3:7–9), where Matthew and Luke add more than sixty words verbatim to Mark's account. The Two-Source hypothesis assigns these longer agreements to Q, such that Mark and Q overlap in some instances. Augustinian, Griesbach, and Farrer theorists consider literary dependence between Matthew and Luke to be more parsimonious, while Two-Source theorists maintain Q as a sufficient hypothesis.

All these solutions to the Synoptic Problem employ the method of redaction criticism, which studies how authors edited their sources. F. C. Baur's tendency criticism laid the groundwork in the nineteenth century,<sup>27</sup> and redaction criticism fully emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. For example, Hans Conzelmann argued that Luke redacted Mark so that final judgment

---

<sup>21</sup> Allan J. McNicol with David L. Dungan and David B. Peabody, *Beyond the Q Impasse: Luke's Use of Matthew* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996); David B. Peabody with Lamar Cope and Allan J. McNicol, eds., *One Gospel from Two: Mark's Use of Matthew and Luke* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> John Wenham, *Redating Matthew, Mark, and Luke: A Fresh Assault on the Synoptic Problem* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1992).

<sup>23</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

<sup>24</sup> Allan Garrow, "Streeter's 'Other' Synoptic Solution: The Matthew Conflator Hypothesis," *NTS* 62 (2016): 207–26; Robert K. MacEwen, *Matthean Posteriority: An Exploration of Matthew's Use of Mark and Luke as a Solution to the Synoptic Problem*, *LNTS* 501 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Austin Farrer, "On Dispensing with Q," in *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot*, ed. D. E. Nineham (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1955), 55–88; Farrer's theory was anticipated by E. W. Lummis (*How Luke Was Written* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915]) and expounded by Michael D. Goulder (*Luke: A New Paradigm*, 2 vols., *JSNTSup* 20 [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989]); my thanks to Mark Goodacre for pointing out Lummis's work.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Goodacre, *The Case against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002); John C. Poirier and Jeffrey Peterson, eds., *Markan Priority without Q: Explorations in the Farrer Hypothesis*, *LNTS* 455 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> Ferdinand Christian Baur (*The Church History of the First Three Centuries*, trans. Allan Menzies, 2 vols., 3rd ed. [Edinburgh: Williams & Norgate, 1878–1879], 1:77–82) contrasted Luke's Pauline universalism with Matthew's Jewish particularism.

would sound less imminent,<sup>28</sup> and Gerhard Barth argued that Matthew redacted Mark and Q to emphasize Torah's enduring significance;<sup>29</sup> Mark also purportedly edited sources,<sup>30</sup> but Markan redaction has proven harder to identify.<sup>31</sup> Overall, redaction criticism helpfully elevated the evangelists to composers and theologians in their own right, rather than mere copy-and-paste compilers. At the same time, redaction critics were often preoccupied with theological emphases, but not every editorial detail requires a theological rationale. Accordingly, recent advances in redaction criticism explain Gospel writing more fundamentally in terms of ancient composition and rhetoric.<sup>32</sup>

Not all Gospels are as closely related as the Synoptics, and not all parallel sayings and stories arise via literary dependence.<sup>33</sup> Redaction criticism proves helpful in deciding whether texts are more likely dependent or independent. Helmut Koester recommends, "Whenever one observes words or phrases that derive from the author or redactor of a gospel writing, the existence of a written source must be assumed."<sup>34</sup> Approximately half of the Gospel of Thomas has parallels in the Synoptic Gospels, and Thomas has been shown to reveal traces of the Synoptics in their redacted forms.<sup>35</sup> Approximately twenty-five percent of John is paralleled in one or more of the Synoptics, and John hardly ever agrees verbatim. Although many source critics have considered John independent,<sup>36</sup> the question is currently being reevaluated.<sup>37</sup> The texts of the Apostolic Fathers also evince parallels with the Gospels, so Koester's redaction criterion applies here as well.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960).

<sup>29</sup> Gerhard Barth, "Matthew's Understanding of the Law," in Günther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth, and Heinz Joachim Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, trans. Percy Scott, NTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 58–164.

<sup>30</sup> Willi Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist: Studies on the Redaction History of the Gospel*, trans. James Boyce (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969).

<sup>31</sup> C. Clifton Black, *The Disciples according to Mark: Markan Redaction in Current Debate*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> R. A. Derrenbacker, Jr., *Ancient Compositional Practices and the Synoptic Problem*, BETL 186 (Leuven: Peeters, 2005); Alex Damm, *Ancient Rhetoric and the Synoptic Problem: Clarifying Markan Priority*, BETL 252 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2013); James W. Barker, "Ancient Compositional Practices and the Gospels: A Reassessment," *JBL* 135 (2016): 109–21.

<sup>33</sup> Andrew F. Gregory, "What is Literary Dependence?" in *New Studies in the Synoptic Problem: Oxford Conference, April 2008; Essays in Honour of Christopher M. Tuckett*, ed. Paul Foster et al., BETL 239 (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 87–114.

<sup>34</sup> Helmut Koester, "Written Gospels or Oral Tradition?" *JBL* 113 (1994): 293–7, here 297.

<sup>35</sup> Mark Goodacre, *Thomas and the Gospels: The Case for Thomas's Familiarity with the Synoptics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); see also Simon Gathercole, *The Composition of the Gospel of Thomas: Original Language and Influences*, SNTSMS 151 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>36</sup> D. Moody Smith, *John among the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001).

<sup>37</sup> For arguments that John depends on all three Synoptics, see Steven A. Hunt, *Rewriting the Feeding of the Five Thousand: John 6.1–15 as a Test Case for Johannine Dependence on the Synoptic Gospels*, *Studies in Biblical Literature* 125 (New York: Peter Lang, 2011); Mark Goodacre, *John's Knowledge of the Synoptics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming); James W. Barker, *John and the Synoptics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming). For the argument that John was influenced by the Synoptics while influencing them reciprocally, see Paul N.



Source and redaction criticism have reframed basic questions about the authors and audiences of the Gospels. Since the second century, Christians have claimed that Matthew and John were apostles and that Mark and Luke were associates of apostles; if so, then all four Gospels are based on eyewitness testimony. Although some scholars rigorously reaffirm the Gospels as eyewitness testimony,<sup>39</sup> historical criticism conceivably operates un beholden to ecclesiastic traditions, and source critics have long doubted that eyewitnesses would rely so heavily on a written source. Moreover, the texts of the Gospels do not name their authors, and while Gospel MSS do attach names to the texts, the earliest MSS do not explain who Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were. Scholars can affirm or deny the evangelists' traditional identities, or scholars can leave the question open; conclusive evidence is lacking.

Gospel audiences have likewise proven elusive. Tendency criticism and redaction criticism reified the evangelists' original audiences: authors presumably represented the beliefs and practices of local communities, for whom they wrote; in circular fashion, scholars would read the Gospel, make a composite sketch of an author/community, and then reinterpret the Gospel to match the community's profile.<sup>40</sup> Recent scholarship criticizes such hypotheses in various ways. Richard Bauckham argues that the Gospels were not written for one local community but for general circulation, for "any and every Christian community in the late-first-century Roman Empire."<sup>41</sup> Alternatively, a mediating position suggests that evangelists wrote within specific communities while anticipating an expanding readership.<sup>42</sup> Stanley Stowers forcefully critiques all these approaches: "The way the concept of 'communities' and 'community' is deployed in scholarship hinders historical work on early Christianity, especially if early Christianity is to be treated as a normal human social phenomenon studied in the non-sectarian university."<sup>43</sup> Stowers presents a paradigm shift, redescribing the evangelists' social formation within networks of highly literate readers and writers—even readers and writers who did not personally know each other.<sup>44</sup> Historical criticism has always asked general questions about authors and audiences, and recent scholarship strives for greater nuance.

---

Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus: Modern Foundations Reconsidered* (London: T&T Clark, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> Andrew Gregory and Christopher Tuckett, eds., *The Reception of the New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>39</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017).

<sup>40</sup> The Johannine community is quintessential: J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

<sup>41</sup> Richard Bauckham, "Introduction," in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 1–7, here 1.

<sup>42</sup> Margaret M. Mitchell, "Patristic Counter-Evidence to the Claim that 'The Gospels Were Written for All Christians,'" *NTS* 51 (2005): 36–79; David C. Sim, "The Gospels for All Christians? A Response to Richard Bauckham," *JSNT* 84 (2001): 3–27.

<sup>43</sup> Stanley Stowers, "The Concept of Community and the History of Early Christianity," *MTR* 23 (2011): 238–56, here 238.

<sup>44</sup> Stowers, "Concept of Community," 247–50; for a compelling application of Stowers's reconfiguration, see Robyn Faith Walsh, "Q and the 'Big Bang' Theory of Christian Origins," in *Redescribing the Gospel of Mark*, ed. Barry S. Crawford and Merrill P. Miller, *SBLCL* 22 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 483–533.

From its inception, historical critics have reconstructed lives of Jesus by deciding what Jesus *really* said and did, not just accepting uncritically what the Gospels claim. From the time of Spinoza, criticism entailed rejecting miraculous claims, but miracle stories pose a dilemma: rationality and natural laws can be defined such that miracles are ruled out a priori; yet historical criticism interprets texts in their historical context, and numerous miracle workers (Christian, Jewish, and pagan alike) are attested in the Roman empire.<sup>45</sup> Ultimately, the Gospel stories themselves prove that Christians *claimed* that Jesus performed miracles; historical-critical methods simply cannot go further to prove or disprove whether Jesus actually did so. There is no serious question, however, whether Jesus of Nazareth really was a historical figure; 'mythicist' claims to the contrary have been thoroughly refuted.<sup>46</sup>

Form criticism elucidated the structure of Gospel sayings and stories as they were transmitted orally before being written.<sup>47</sup> Form critics also differentiated the setting of Gospel material, either the life of Jesus or the life of the early church but usually not both. By extension, scholars developed criteria to determine which sayings and stories more likely trace back to the historical Jesus. Some reconstructions of the life of Jesus fruitfully employ these methods even now,<sup>48</sup> although scholars have begun to reject these criteria of authenticity,<sup>49</sup> and form criticism has been eclipsed by (or has evolved into) social memory theory.<sup>50</sup> In particular, social memory theorists disrupt form criticism's either-or: a saying or story might have occurred and meant one thing in the life of Jesus, but then the saying or story might have been reconceived—perhaps multiple times—in the life of the early church.

However the life of Jesus is reconstructed in contemporary scholarship, it is crucial to understand him within his Jewish context and to correct prejudicial depictions of early Judaism. In an earlier introduction to the historical-critical method, Edgar Krentz highlighted Matt 11:28–30, where Jesus offers an easy yoke to burdened people: "Historical criticism makes clear that these words of Jesus are spoken in opposition to the demand for the taking up of the 'yoke of the Torah'; Jesus rather offers the free gift of the rule of God."<sup>51</sup> While Jesus does appear more lenient than Pharisees in some matters (e.g., Sabbath work and handwashing), in other cases Jesus appears far stricter than Pharisees (e.g., what constitutes adultery). Moreover, Pharisees debated halakic strictness and leniency among themselves, and Jesus cautioned against breaking any single commandment. Krentz himself described

---

<sup>45</sup> Graham H. Twelftree, "The Miraculous in the New Testament: Current Research and Issues," *CBR* 12 (2014): 321–52.

<sup>46</sup> Maurice Casey, *Jesus: Evidence and Argument or Mythicist Myths?* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014); Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperOne, 2013).

<sup>47</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

<sup>48</sup> John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 5 vols., A[Y]BRL (New York: Doubleday; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991–2016).

<sup>49</sup> Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne, eds., *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity* (London: T&T Clark, 2012).

<sup>50</sup> Chris Keith, "Social Memory Theory and Gospels Research: The First Decade," *Early Christianity* 6 (2015): 354–76, 517–42, here 519–27.

<sup>51</sup> Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method*, GBS (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1975), 65.

historical criticism as self-correcting,<sup>52</sup> and a key example is correcting the mischaracterization of Torah as overly burdensome to Jews.<sup>53</sup> Increasing attention to Jesus's Jewishness marks a significant advance in the historical study of Jesus and the Gospels.

### Paul and His Letters

The overarching goal of historical criticism is to understand texts in their original context, and it has become imperative to reinterpret Paul within the Judaism of his day. Thus scholars have reconsidered the roles of Torah observance and Jewish apocalyptic, particularly in relation to Paul's self-identification as the apostle to the Gentiles. Historical critics continue to question the authenticity of Paul's letters, and recent studies also consider the Pauline corpus in terms of material history.

In the sixteenth century, no matter how hard Martin Luther tried to overcome his sin, his conscience remained tormented. Studying Romans and Galatians, Luther interpreted God's righteousness as being imputed, not earned by striving for good works. Luther's understanding of justification by grace and through faith unburdened his conscience and shaped the Protestant Reformation. A few centuries later, historical critics strived to read the NT free from doctrinal convictions. Yet the first centuries of historical criticism were dominated by Protestants, many of whom uncritically transferred Luther's tormented conscience onto the first-century Apostle Paul.<sup>54</sup> For the last half-century, scholars have reexamined Paul's Second Temple Jewish context.

A significant movement is labeled the New Perspective on Paul.<sup>55</sup> God made a covenant with Israel, and Israel maintained the covenant by keeping the commandments of Torah. Conversely, the inevitability of sin and forgiveness was built into the covenant (e.g., the annual celebration of Yom Kippur). Accordingly, Jews were never expected to be sinless—let alone to feel tormented for not being sinless. Paul indeed refers to a new covenant through Jesus (e.g. 1 Cor 11:25), but the new covenant should not be defined against a caricature of early Judaism. Once again, Torah observance should not be envisioned as overly burdensome, especially since Paul assumed that much of Torah remained binding. For example, Paul did not require Gentiles to keep the Sabbath, but Gentiles were expected to keep the other nine of the Ten Commandments.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Krentz, *Historical-Critical Method*, 66.

<sup>53</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 126–7.

<sup>54</sup> Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *HTR* 56 (1963): 199–215.

<sup>55</sup> For a helpful overview by a leading practitioner, see J. D. G. Dunn, "A New Perspective on the New Perspective on Paul," *Early Christianity* 4 (2013): 157–82; besides Stendahl's abovementioned 1963 article, a foundational work is E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

<sup>56</sup> Paula Fredriksen, "Paul's Letter to the Romans, the Ten Commandments, and Pagan 'Justification by Faith,'" *JBL* 133 (2014): 801–8.

The relation between Jews and Gentiles features prominently in another trend in Pauline studies, the apocalyptic interpretation of Paul.<sup>57</sup> Apocalypticism was well established in Second Temple Judaism, and Paul used apocalyptic language to describe how God sent Jesus at the fullness of time, how Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection conquered cosmic forces of evil, and how Jesus's imminent second coming would bring about final judgment and the renewal of all creation. In addition to these particularly Christian beliefs, a longstanding Jewish motif involved Gentiles forsaking idolatry and worshipping Yahweh in the eschaton. In the meantime, Gentiles could convert to Judaism, but conversion involved circumcision for men, who thereafter would be identified as proselytes—no longer Gentiles, but not Jews either.<sup>58</sup> As a sign of the beginning of the end, Paul wanted Gentiles to worship the God of Israel *qua* Gentiles, without changing their ethnicity.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, Paul's undisputed letters nowhere forbid voluntary Torah observance by Jewish or Gentile Christians.

Questioning traditional authorship is a pastime of historical criticism. Of the thirteen letters attributed to Paul in the NT, seven are undisputed in current scholarship: Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon; Second Thessalonians is disputed, although the consensus appears to be shifting.<sup>60</sup> The remaining letters differ markedly from the undisputed ones. Colossians (2:8–23) and Ephesians (2:11–22) leave little room for voluntary Torah observance,<sup>61</sup> whereas Romans and Galatians merely opposed compulsory Jewish praxis. Whereas the church at Corinth knew apostles and prophets, the Pastoral Epistles (1–2 Timothy and Titus) describe apostolic succession and the episcopacy along the lines of late first- and early second-century sources; also, the Pastorals were not included in the first attested collection of Paul's letters, Marcion's *Apostolikon* in the second half of the second century.

Regarding authenticity, the question of marriage proves illustrative. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul prefers celibacy, especially for those devoted to the Lord's work, but Paul permits marriage and procreation. In Colossians (3:18–21) and Ephesians (5:22–6:4), Paul instructs husbands and wives as well as their children without mentioning celibacy. In 1 Timothy (3:1–7), bishops must be married with children.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); Douglas A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009); Beverly Gaventa, ed., *Apocalyptic Paul: Cosmos and Anthropos in Romans 5–8* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013).

<sup>58</sup> Both Acts 15 and Galatians 5 portray Paul's opposition to compulsory circumcision, yet Paul's opponents would have espoused an extreme position even within Judaism: Gentiles worshipped at the Jerusalem temple, and Jews, proselytes, and God-fearers were inscribed as members in Roman era synagogues.

<sup>59</sup> Regarding the overlap of cultural, ethnic, and religious categories vis-à-vis early Judaism, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>60</sup> Paul Foster, "Who Wrote 2 Thessalonians? A Fresh Look at an Old Problem," *JSNT* 35 (2012): 150–75.

<sup>61</sup> Douglas A. Campbell (*Framing Paul: An Epistolary Biography* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014]) defends the authenticity of Ephesians and Colossians as well as 2 Thessalonians.

<sup>62</sup> Similarly, in 1 Corinthians (7:39–40) widows are permitted to remarry, but Paul prefers that they remain unmarried; in 1 Timothy (5:14) Paul wants younger widows to remarry and have children.

If Paul wrote any of these disputed letters, then either he changed his mind or he gave different instructions to different audiences. If Paul did not write the disputed letters, then later authors deliberately altered his message. While historical critics have long explained Pauline pseudonymy as an acceptable, honorific practice in its era, this claim is now scrutinized.<sup>63</sup> Even more fundamentally, the modern tradition of Paul's seven authentic letters has been adroitly critiqued.<sup>64</sup>

Another longstanding historical-critical question is the relationship between the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's letters. Most notably, is the so-called Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 the same meeting Paul describes in Galatians 2? Answers to such questions determine how accurately scholars can reconstruct the chronology of Paul's ministry.<sup>65</sup> The narrator of Acts also includes first-person statements as one of Paul's traveling companions. Some scholars defend traditional Lukan authorship and reconcile discrepancies between Acts and Galatians.<sup>66</sup> Other scholars deem the "we" passages of Acts an early second-century literary construction based on a preexisting collection of Paul's letters.<sup>67</sup>

Finally, in recent decades, Pauline studies have focused more closely on material history, particularly the rhetorical education undergirding Paul's epistles,<sup>68</sup> the mechanics of composing and collecting letters,<sup>69</sup> as well as the editing processes apparent in the *Corpus Paulinum* and their bearing on subsequent processes of canonization;<sup>70</sup> related studies constructively put Paul's literary texts in dialogue with material evidence such as epigraphy and statuary.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery: The Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>64</sup> Benjamin L. White, *Remembering Paul: Ancient and Modern Contests over the Image of the Apostle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>65</sup> Rainer Riesner, "Pauline Chronology," in *The Blackwell Companion to Paul*, ed. Stephen Westerholm (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 9–29.

<sup>66</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>67</sup> Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).

<sup>68</sup> Stanley E. Porter and Bryan R. Dyer, eds., *Paul and Ancient Rhetoric: Theory and Practice in the Hellenistic Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

<sup>69</sup> Stanley Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, LEC 5 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004).

<sup>70</sup> Eric W. Scherbenske, *Canonizing Paul: Ancient Editorial Practices and the Corpus Paulinum* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); David Trobisch, *Paul's Letter Collection: Tracing the Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

<sup>71</sup> Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished*, Paul in Critical Contexts (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010); John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus's Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom; A New Vision of Paul's Words & World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).

## The Limits of Canon

For the remaining books of the NT (Hebrews, the General Epistles, and Revelation), the main historical-critical concerns are authenticity and canonicity, concerns that arose already in the patristic era. In the early fourth century, Eusebius of Caesarea counted the letter to the Hebrews as one of Paul's *fourteen* genuine epistles, although Eusebius noted that some church fathers had disputed it (*Hist. eccl.* 3.3). Eusebius accepted Origen's conclusion that the book was the teaching of Paul but the writing of someone else: the Greek style of Hebrews is discernibly different—i.e. better—than Paul's, but only God knows who wrote it (*Hist. eccl.* 6.25). In terms of material history, Hebrews was not included in Marcion's *Apostolikon* in the second century, but Hebrews is included in Papyrus 46, which dates to the early third century; immediately following Romans in Papyrus 46, Hebrews may be read as an intentional imitation and interpretation of Romans.<sup>72</sup> Whether deemed authentic or spurious, Hebrews would have been discussed under the rubric of Pauline epistles in the early days of historical criticism. Hebrews is now stuck in limbo between the Pauline and General Epistles.

The General (a.k.a. Catholic) Epistles comprise James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, and Jude. Writing in the mid-third century, Origen of Alexandria offers the first extant reference to the letter of James (*Comm. Jo.* 19.152). That is rather late emergence for a book purportedly written by Jesus's relative, who—according to tradition—was martyred in 62 CE. Those who maintain the book's authenticity can nonetheless argue that Origen was writing from Caesarea, so it is conceivable that he found the book there and that the book had never circulated very widely. Since not everyone knew and used the book of James, Eusebius included it among the disputed books (*Hist. eccl.* 3.25).

First Peter is attested in the late second century by Irenaeus of Lyons (*Haer.* 4.9.2), and Eusebius considers it genuine (*Hist. eccl.* 3.25). Second Peter is first attested by Origen (Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 6.25), and Eusebius lists it as disputed (*Hist. eccl.* 3.25). The biblical text explicitly claims to be the second letter the Apostle Simon Peter wrote to the same broad audience (1:1; 3:1), yet the two epistles did not circulate together early on. Second Peter not only knows a collection of Paul's letters but also considers them authoritative scriptures (3:15–16); many critics consider this historically implausible, if—as tradition holds—Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome in the mid-60s. The reception of the Johannine letters is similar to the Petrine ones. Irenaeus quoted 1 John and 2 John (*Haer.* 3.16.8), and Origen accepted 1 John while noting that not everyone accepted 2 John and 3 John (Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 6.25); Eusebius thus listed 1 John as genuine and 2–3 John as disputed (*Hist. eccl.* 3.25).

At the turn of the third century, Tertullian of Carthage made the first extant reference to Jude (*Cult. fem.* 1.3). Once again, this is relatively late for a book purportedly written by one of Jesus's relatives. Moreover, Tertullian referenced Jude's quotation of the Jewish apocalyptic book 1 Enoch, thereby raising the question: if Jude accepts 1 Enoch as authoritative scripture, then why does the church's

---

<sup>72</sup> Clare K. Rothschild, "Hebrews as an Instructional Appendix to Romans," in *Paul and Pseudepigraphy*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Gregory P. Fewster, *Pauline Studies* 8 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 245–67; idem, *Hebrews as Pseudepigraphon: The History and Significance of the Pauline Attribution of Hebrews*, WUNT 235 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

canon accept Jude but reject 1 Enoch? Eusebius called Jude disputed (*Hist. eccl.* 3.25), and Eusebius effectively passed over 1 Enoch in silence. Eusebius labeled Revelation (a.k.a. Apocalypse of John) as both genuine and spurious (*Hist. eccl.* 3.25); he knew that mid-second-century fathers such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus accepted it as the work of the Apostle John, but Eusebius also relied heavily on Dionysius of Alexandria's mid-third-century argument that the Apocalypse of John cannot come from the same author as the Gospel of John.

It is extremely difficult to ascertain who wrote these books, to whom, when, and where. In the end, though, Hebrews, the General Epistles, and Revelation were included in the canon as it took shape in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Recent studies have fruitfully examined the production and reception of John's Apocalypse in terms of material culture.<sup>73</sup> Recent editions of the Greek NT also show renewed interest in the order of Hebrews and the General Epistles. In the Vulgate, Jerome placed Hebrews at the end of the Pauline letters, followed by the General Epistles. Erasmus arranged his Greek NT accordingly, and this remains the order of Nestle-Aland and United Bible Societies Greek editions as well as English Bibles. Greek NT MSS, however, predominantly place the General Epistles before the Pauline ones with Hebrews standing between 1–2 Thessalonians and 1–2 Timothy.<sup>74</sup> The nineteenth-century Greek NT editions by Tregelles, Tischendorf, and Westcott and Hort followed suit. The Greek New Testament produced at Tyndale House, Cambridge (2017) splits the difference by placing the General Epistles before the Pauline ones and placing Hebrews after Philemon.

An historical-critical refrain is that the Bible should be read just like any other book, so historical criticism can hardly be restricted to canonical texts. And given early Christian reading practices, it would be short-sighted to ignore extracanonical texts. Each of the four (eventually) canonical Gospels is attested among the Oxyrhynchus papyri, but so is the Gospel of Thomas along with other apocryphal sayings and stories attributed to Jesus. Similarly, the Acts of John and Acts of Peter stand alongside the Acts of the Apostles at Oxyrhynchus, and there the apocalyptic Shepherd of Hermas is better attested than Revelation. Recent scholarship commendably strives to overcome canonical prejudice,<sup>75</sup> for example Fortress Press's commissioning historical-critical commentaries on extracanonical works in the *Hermeneia* series.<sup>76</sup> Analogous to Pauline studies, linguistic and stylistic

---

<sup>73</sup> Garrick V. Allen, *The Book of Revelation and Early Jewish Textual Culture*, SNTSMS 168 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Juan Hernández, Jr., *Scribal Habits and Theological Influences in the Apocalypse: The Singular Readings of Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus, and Ephraemi*, WUNT 218 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

<sup>74</sup> Daryl D. Schmidt, "The Greek New Testament as a Codex," in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 469–84.

<sup>75</sup> Francis Watson and Sarah Parkhouse, eds., *Connecting Gospels: Beyond the Canonical/Non-Canonical Divide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); also, Thomas Kazen ("Sectarian Gospels for Some Christians? Intention and Mirror Reading in the Light of Extra-Canonical Texts," *NTS* 51 [2005]: 561–78) rightly critiques the measurable absence of extracanonical Gospels in Bauckham's *Gospels for All Christians*, and the same critique would apply to Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*.

<sup>76</sup> Fortress's *Hermeneia* commentaries on extracanonical texts include Kurt Niederwimmer on the *Didache* (1998), Carolyn Osiek on *Shepherd of Hermas* (1999), and William R. Schoedel on Ignatius's letters (1985), as well

analysis separates the authentic, middle recension of Ignatius of Antioch's letters from the interpolations and additional letters of the longer recension;<sup>77</sup> even so, the Pseudo-Ignatian material constitutes a fascinating study in its own right.<sup>78</sup> Historical critics have also unmasked forgeries like the so-called Jesus's Wife Papyrus,<sup>79</sup> so historical-critical methods still play an important role in biblical studies, especially on the margins of the canon.

## Conclusion

As centuries have elapsed, historical-critical methods have proven resilient even as they undergo refinement. Textual criticism is necessary given the scale of the manuscript tradition, and each new critical edition makes incremental changes based on recent discoveries and recalibrated methods. Source and redaction criticism can still illuminate the interrelations of the Gospels. Jesus and Paul continue to be reinterpreted, particularly in their Jewish contexts. Historical critics perennially question the authorship and audience of NT documents, and the very notion of canon is ripe for scrutiny. An important current of historical criticism focuses on material history, both the material conditions for writing ancient documents and the materiality of the documents themselves.

Nearly 350 years have passed since Spinoza published his *Tractatus*, and today there is less hostility between church and academy: contemporary biblical scholarship is by no means restricted to confessing Christians; in the past century, the Roman Catholic Church has repeatedly approved of historical criticism;<sup>80</sup> and mainline Protestants and Evangelicals use the same historical-critical methods—even if their conclusions differ.

Despite strong claims of objectivity by pioneers like Spinoza and Griesbach, historical-critical methods are subjective. To be sure, there are objective data, such as whether one MS or book agrees or disagrees with another in a given locus, but interpretations require subjective judgment. Different interpreters weigh the same data in different ways, and interpreters' judgments unavoidably relate to presuppositions—whether acknowledged or unacknowledged. Nevertheless, presuppositions can be determinate without being decisive, as Rudolf Bultmann observed:

---

as George W. E. Nickelsburg and James C. VanderKam on 1 Enoch (2001, 2011) and Michael Edward Stone on 4 Ezra (1990).

<sup>77</sup> Milton Perry Brown, *The Authentic Writings of Ignatius: A Study of Linguistic Criteria* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1963).

<sup>78</sup> Phillip J. A. Fackler, "Forging Christianity: Jews and Christians in Pseudo-Ignatius" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2017).

<sup>79</sup> For initial publication of the fragment, see Karen L. King, "Jesus said to them, 'My wife . . .': A New Coptic Papyrus Fragment," *HTR* 107 (2014): 131–59. For overwhelming evidence that the "Jesus' Wife" Papyrus is a forgery, see the articles in *NTS* 61 (2015). For a superb piece of investigative journalism on the papyrus's owner/probable forger, see Ariel Sabar, "The Unbelievable Tale of Jesus's Wife," *The Atlantic*, July/August 2016.

<sup>80</sup> Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943); Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* (1965); and the Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," (1994).



The question whether exegesis without presuppositions is possible must be answered affirmatively if "without presuppositions" means "without presupposing the results of exegesis." In this sense, exegesis without presuppositions is not only possible but imperative. In another sense, however, no exegesis is without presuppositions, because the exegete is not a *tabula rasa* but approaches the text with specific questions or with a specific way of asking questions and thus has a certain idea of the subject matter with which the text is concerned.<sup>81</sup>

Acknowledging historical-critical methods as subjective need not detract from the expertise they require, first and foremost the mastery of primary texts in their original languages. Historical criticism also requires discipline and imagination to question the results of previous scholarship as well as the role of one's presuppositions. In the end, by whatever methods one studies early Christian literature, "Understanding of the text is never definitive but rather remains open because the meaning of scripture discloses itself anew in every future."<sup>82</sup>

### Further Reading

- Baird, William. *History of New Testament Research*. 3 vols. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992–2013.
- Campbell, Douglas A. *Framing Paul: An Epistolary Biography*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014.
- Dungan, David Laird. *Constantine's Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006.
- Gamble, Harry Y. *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.
- Hurtado, Larry W. *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006.
- Meeks, Wayne A. *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.
- Metzger, Bruce M. and Bart D. Ehrman. *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Parker, D. C. *An Introduction to New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Porter, Stanley E. and Bryan R. Dyer, eds. *The Synoptic Problem: Four Views*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016.
- Smith, D. Moody. *John among the Gospels*. 2nd ed. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001.

---

<sup>81</sup> Rudolph Bultmann, "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?" in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 145–53, here 145.

<sup>82</sup> Bultmann, "Exegesis without Presuppositions," 151.