

2020

Introduction to The State of New Testament Studies

Nijay K. Gupta

Scot McKnight

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Introduction

NIJAY K. GUPTA AND SCOT MCKNIGHT

I (Nijay) first encountered the book *The Face of New Testament Studies*, this book's predecessor, when I was in graduate school. I went to seminary primarily because I wanted to learn how to study the Bible in depth for personal and ministry formation. I had not studied the Bible in an academic setting prior to that. The "world" of biblical studies for this neophyte seminary student was intriguing but mystifying—so many technical terms, multiple differing perspectives, views, and ideas proposed and presented, and all of this was in flux as scholarship moved forward decade after decade. Thankfully, *The Face of New Testament Studies* (2004) gave me insight into the landscape of NT studies, provided some counsel on the key questions and issues under debate and showed me how different views go in different directions and why. Now, about fifteen years later, the landscape inevitably has changed. Not completely, of course. To play a bit more with the geographical metaphor, we can say that certain landmarks, oceans, and mountains will probably always be there, but some parts of this "world" have grown, others have eroded, and some have gone through a life cycle of destruction and renewal. This new volume, *The State of New Testament Studies*, has a similar objective for a new landscape of scholarship: to orient readers to the field of NT studies today. We have retained the basic structure of the earlier book, but all essays are freshly written by current experts, and we have expanded the scope of the project.

At the risk of oversimplification, we can trace at least six major trends in the current state of NT scholarship, tendencies and patterns noticeably demonstrated in many of the essays in this book.

Proliferation of Tools and Methods

The end of the last century saw a major increase of academic methods. Literary criticism, social-scientific criticism, rhetorical criticism, and sociopragmatics all added to the dominant historical-critical method. Now, in the late first quarter of the twenty-first century, we have even further proliferation of tools, methods, and perspectives. In many ways, this is salutary as biblical scholars learn from other disciplines. But it can also lead to microspecialization and minute fragmentation in the guild. Some of the program units at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, for example, are very specific, and it is easy for scholars to focus on the “trees” without stepping back and getting a sense for the whole “forest.” The PhD often forces scholars to become experts in a very narrow area, while teaching duties pull them out into broader topics in Bible and theology. Scholars have always performed this balancing act, but now they must travel further to “exit the forest,” as it were. Thankfully, books such as this one serve as a handy map for eager and inevitably overwhelmed explorers!¹

Global and Diverse Perspectives

One of the major developments in biblical scholarship over the last fifteen years has been a move toward attention to and appreciation of global and diverse perspectives.² The facile notion of “objective reading” has been roundly refuted. Marginalized voices in reading and interpretation have been welcomed in the attempt to “triangulate” meaning (to borrow a helpful idea from my friend David deSilva). And one can easily see that this book has attempted to capture this value with our own group of contributors. And no doubt this value will continue to pervade biblical studies, especially as guild leadership becomes more diverse and global. Yet clearly some fields have not been penetrated as deeply by global and diverse scholarship.

Tending to Neglected NT Texts

One of the most obvious recent trends in NT studies is increased attention to historically neglected NT texts. It is obvious that Paul and the Gospels have received the lion’s share of academic interest for several centuries, especially

1. On biblical studies methods and perspectives, see especially the essay by Dennis R. Edwards, chap. 3 of this volume.

2. See, e.g., Craig Keener and M. Daniel Carroll R., eds., *Global Voices: Reading the Bible in the Majority World* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012).

since the Reformation and in Western Christianity. There are probably more academic books on Romans than on all the other NT books combined! But that tide is turning. Of course scholars are still fascinated with the theology of Paul and the life of Jesus, but Acts, Revelation, and the Catholic Epistles are now being studied much more.

Sophisticated Historical Contextualization

Biblical scholars are also much more attentive to reading NT books in their ancient context—that is, their Jewish, Greek, and Roman worlds. In the second half of the twentieth century, the study of early Judaism became a bona fide discipline. This has significantly expanded in the last several decades. We benefit today from expansive study of the Dead Sea Scrolls, critical Greek editions of almost all relevant Hellenistic Jewish literature, and fresh English translations of all of these texts—a privilege that would have been unimaginable a generation ago.³

Also, in the last few decades there has been a surging interest in reading the NT and understanding early Christian life within the Roman Empire—especially under imperial authority.⁴ This has led to a brand-new subdiscipline in biblical studies called “empire studies.”⁵ Once upon a time, scholars tried to press Jesus or Paul into a Hellenistic or Jewish identity—because they were primarily focused on religious and philosophical influences, “Roman” was seemingly not an option. Now, scholars commonly see Jesus and the early church as part of a complex, pluricultural world with many influences—hence the Jew Paul writing in Greek to Jesus-followers in Rome. Again, now more than ever, NT scholars find themselves especially concerned with what archaeological news comes out of not only Jordan and Jerusalem but also Pompeii and Herculaneum, Ostia Antica, Ephesus, and Colossae.⁶ They are learning from and partnering with departments of ancient Judaism, classics,

3. I (Nijay) remember an era when I had to use a Greek concordance of the OT Pseudepigrapha that was only in print (no digital, searchable version was widely available) and only in French (no English!). Now I have instant, searchable access in Greek and English through multiple software programs. I (Scot) remember when the OT Pseudepigrapha was available only to one who either had lots of money or easy access to a library, and I also remember the excitement of the steady publication of DSS.

4. See the essay by Greg Carey in chap. 1 of this book.

5. See Scot McKnight and Joseph Modica, eds., *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013).

6. See, for example, Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul's Letter at Ground Level* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013); Michael Trainor, “Colossae: The State of Forthcoming Excavations,” *JSPL* 1, no. 1 (2011): 133–35; Alan H. Cadwallader and Michael Trainor, eds., *Colossae in Space and Time: Linking to an Ancient City* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).

and history. These are exciting times as we are able to piece together daily life in the first-century Roman world (education, religious experiences, politics, entertainment, etc.) better than ever, not only with attention to adult men but also to women and children.

Alongside this attention to historical context is an intense examination of Greek grammar and syntax, not to ignore the computer-generated tools now accessible, with regular publications and challenges to age-old paradigms.⁷ Thinking of the developments in our understanding of the Greek language leads also to the recognition today of how the texts we read in the NT were performed to their original audiences, and performance criticism highlights the surge of interest in rhetorical criticism of the Pauline letters.⁸

Theological Interpretation of Scripture

Another major trend worth mentioning is the emergence of theological readings of Scripture.⁹ Of course, over the last two thousand years some people have always been interested in reading the Bible for its theological messages and meaning. But particularly within the *academy*, for far too long the guild was divided between those who read it from a confessional perspective (i.e., Christians and Jews) and those whose interests were more cultural, ideological, and historical. Though it is hard to trace the origins of “theological interpretation of Scripture,” it is now a major interest among many scholars, creating guild space for questions about the theological meaning and importance of the NT texts. This has obviously opened up fresh conversations between confessional and nonconfessional scholars; it has also turned attention to “precritical” literature on Scripture and prompted interest in the works of Catholic, Orthodox, Reformation, and Anabaptist theologians.

Looking to the Past

That brings us to a final trend in modern scholarship—special interest in reception history and history of interpretation of Scripture. Virtually all biblical scholars today readily admit that we read the NT not just off a page, but through lenses and traditions we have received from those who came before us. This helps modern readers better recognize our cultural biases and

7. See the essay by Dana M. Harris in chap. 6 of this book.

8. See, e.g., Ben Witherington III, *New Testament Rhetoric: An Introductory Guide to the Art of Persuasion in and of the New Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009).

9. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

tendencies—not to erase them, but to appreciate this hermeneutical agency. This has brought new, or rather *old*, worlds to life so we can examine carefully how they read and interpreted Scripture. Obviously the global impact of the Bible over the last two millennia has been massive, but reception scholarship is interested not just in theologians and books but also in the Bible's impact on music, art, politics, and popular culture.¹⁰

In twenty-three chapters, the contributors to this book, all experts in their respective fields, survey the state of academic discussion with respect to their text or topic. Each chapter breaks the conversations into a few key headings with guidance on the most important contributions, controversies, and questions. At the end of each chapter you will find a set of reflections that sum up in brief the “state of New Testament studies” today.

10. A good example of this is David Gowler, *The Parables after Jesus: Their Imaginative Receptions across Two Millennia* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017). European publisher de Gruyter is producing a nineteen-volume *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (2009–) with a projected total of thirty thousand entries.