

What is Progress in New Testament Studies?¹

The questioner was an eminent scientist. ‘So,’ he said to me, ‘I know what progress is in my discipline. What’s progress in your discipline, in New Testament Studies?’ It is a great question, and it involves various sub-questions which take us to the heart of what New Testament Studies today is about. I gave my scientific colleague a response at the time, and then found myself on the train journey home—and on and off since—reflecting on this issue.

For a professor at London School of Theology (LST), the question acquires two important dimensions, since LST, and my own work as a Christian scholar, faces in two directions: towards the academy and the church. LST is an academic institution: the School values critical thought, the findings of scholarship, and its faculty and research students are committed to engage in the worldwide scholarly conversation about Theology and specifically about the New Testament. LST is also a Christian institution, whose mission is to serve the church worldwide by training and equipping people with understandings of Theology and tools for their own teaching, serving and living for Christ. Thus this lecture, like LST, sits at the boundary of academy and church, facing both ways, and some parts of what I say will be mainly directed one way or the other.

I shall break down my big question, ‘What is progress in New Testament Studies?’ into four smaller questions—each formidable in their own right—to give shape to this paper.

First, to ask about progress in New Testament Studies means to ask about the validity of studying the New Testament at all. Why continue to study this collection of twenty-seven documents almost two thousand years after they were written? This question focuses on the *worthwhileness* of New Testament Studies.

¹ A lightly revised version of the inaugural lecture as Professor of New Testament at London School of Theology, given on 6 March 2012. The lecture was dedicated to the memory of Dr R. T. (Dick) France, a former Vice-Principal of the School, who taught me as a Cambridge undergraduate and encouraged me to pursue doctoral research, and who died on 10 February 2012.

Secondly, why focus on *these* twenty-seven documents, which Christians of all traditions regard as Scripture? Some urge that we should place other documents, such as the Gospel of Thomas, alongside the New Testament as important evidence in studying earliest Christianity. Others, under the banner of ‘reception history’, urge that we should pay attention to how different people in different times and places have actually interpreted the New Testament documents. This question focuses on the *object of study* in New Testament Studies.

Thirdly, what do we mean when we speak of ‘progress’ in general? What ideological baggage does this idea carry, and what impact does that baggage have on how desirable progress is? This question focuses on the *nature of progress in knowledge* in general.

Fourthly, what are the areas where we can see progress in New Testament Studies in the past and present, and what are the areas where we need to see progress in the future? Here, I shall consider some examples of ways progress has been made, and discuss how seeing the New Testament as Christian Scripture affects what we regard as progress in the discipline. This question focuses on *the nature of New Testament Studies* itself.

This is, of course, a big agenda for one lecture, and those who know the discipline will recognise places where I am painting with a particularly broad brush. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to step back and ask ‘big picture’ questions periodically, for otherwise those working in the discipline can have our noses so close to the topic (however that is conceived) that we fail to connect with others affected by our work, or fail to understand our discipline well enough to defend it from the ravages of government spending cuts.

Why study the New Testament?

First, why does studying the New Testament within an academic setting matter in our day? I shall answer regarding the impact of studying the New Testament on recent world history, and regarding the impact of studying the New Testament on students.

Two relatively recent events in world history show the significance of reading the New Testament: the Nazi regime’s treatment of Jewish people in mid-twentieth century Germany, and *apartheid* in South Africa in the third quarter of the twentieth century.

A number of prominent German New Testament scholars were members and strong supporters of the National Socialist Party in Germany in the second quarter of the twentieth century.² They were involved in both the Movement for Germanic Christianity³ and the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life,⁴ which produced a Germanized (un-Jewish) New Testament, *Die Botschaft Gottes*,⁵ a hymn book, *Grosser Gott wir loben dich!*, and a catechism, *Deutsche mit Gott: Ein deutsches Glaubensbuch*.⁶ Grundmann, a key figure, wrote in a letter to the Ministry of Propaganda:⁷

The activities of the Institut tend to develop the scientific conclusions *from the race and folk conceptions of the National Socialist Weltanschauung* for the religious sector of German life. The men united in the Institut, as National Socialists, from the very outset took this stand as opposed to the previous theology and science of religion, which do not accept these conceptions *and therefore are barren for the religious future of the German people*.

For these scholars, the dominant ideology in reading the New Testament is National Socialism. Bishop Ludwig Müller's translation of the Sermon on the Mount sought to express Scripture in contemporary thought-forms and so eliminated key biblical terms. Thus: 'Mercy is an un-German conception. The word "mercy" is one of the numerous terms of the Bible with which we can have nothing to do.'⁸ Such readings of the New Testament gave succour to the Nazi regime as it sought to annihilate the Jewish people, for these readings evacuated the New Testament of its Jewishness and focused attention on New Testament criticisms of Jewish people in such a way that it was then easy to conclude that the 'Christ killers' should be eliminated.

² See Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emmanuel Hirsch*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1985; Marshall D. Johnson, 'Power Politics and New Testament Scholarship in the National Socialist Period', *JES* 23 (1986) 1-24; Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008; Peter M. Head, 'The Nazi Quest for an Aryan Jesus', *JSHJ* 2 (2004) 55-89 (the latter provides extensive further references).

³ Glaubensbewegung Deutsche Christen.

⁴ Institut zur Erforschung und Beseitigung des Jüdischen Einflusses auf das Deutsche Kirchliche Leben.

⁵ Only the synoptic Gospels were published, Head, 'Quest', 79.

⁶ Heschel, *Aryan*, 106-28.

⁷ Max Weinreich, *Hitler's Professors: The Part of Scholarship in Germany's Crimes against the Jewish People*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999, 63 (my italics; facsimile of original on 246). The letter was dated 31 May 1941.

⁸ From the preface of Ludwig Müller, *Deutsche Gottesworte*, Weimar: Deutsche Christen, 1936.

There were, of course, other drivers of the Holocaust/Shoah than German New Testament scholarship, and there were other Christians interpreting the New Testament differently (notably Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church⁹), but we cannot ignore the intellectual and social impact of biblical scholarship. The Holocaust/Shoah is a tragic and awful consequence, at least in part, of one way of interpreting the New Testament.

Similarly, the South African government's policy of *apartheid*, separate development of different ethnic groups, was justified by ways of reading the New Testament (and the Old) which underlined the differences among ethnic groups rather than recognising their common humanity. Richard Burridge¹⁰ shows how the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) defended *apartheid* as in harmony with Scripture, notably in a key report in 1976.¹¹ This DRC report sees the 'boundaries of their territories' (Acts 17:26-27) as signalling in some circumstances that different ethnic groups should live separately.¹² The DRC report also takes the list of peoples in Acts 2:6-11 who hear 'God's mighty deeds in our own language' to justify services in separate ethnic groups, divided by language.¹³ Such interpretations were courageously opposed by some within the Dutch Reformed camp (such as the authors

⁹ See Jeremy Begbie, 'The Confessing Church and the Nazis: A Struggle for Theological Truth', *Anvil* 2 (1985) 117-30.

¹⁰ Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007, ch. VIII (347-409).

¹¹ The key report is Dutch Reformed Church, *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*, Cape Town: Dutch Reformed Church, 1976. The report is not uncritical of the impact of the South African government's policies in the light of their reading of Scripture (for example the results of migrant labour on family life) but the report does read Scripture as underpinning the policy of 'separate development'. See also John W. de Gruchy and Steve de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 25th anniversary edn, London: SCM, 2004, 1-100 on the historical origins of *apartheid* and the churches' involvement in its development and defence.

¹² Dutch Reformed Church, *Relations*, §8 (pp 15-18), discussing the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9). The statement, 'It would not be permissible to infer from these verses a Scriptural justification for the separate development of all people *under all circumstances*' has the force that it would be permissible to infer this in *some* circumstances (§13.4, p 31, my italics). §13.6 (p 32) goes on to affirm that a country might choose 'parallel development' if it considers this to be the best way of 'ordering social relationships'.

¹³ Dutch Reformed Church, *Relations*, §§13.4 (p 31), 29 (pp 46-47), 60 (p 87)

of the Kairos document¹⁴) as well as Christians from other traditions (notably the Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu¹⁵).

My point is simple: the interpretation of the New Testament in both examples had a major impact on political, social and economic structures, war and peace, and the state of the world. New Testament interpretations were a key driver of events and ideology in both Nazi Germany and *apartheid* South Africa, and counter-readings of the New Testament were important in bringing both societies out of the cul-de-sacs into which Nazism and *apartheid* had taken them. Reading the New Testament matters! George Santayana's much-quoted epigram is on target: 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.'¹⁶ It is appropriate for discussion about New Testament interpretation to be public and happen in publicly-funded universities because of the powerful effects such reading has.

Secondly, consider the impact which studying the New Testament has on its students. We live in a time of utilitarianism in British higher education; the pressure on our university colleagues is to demonstrate the 'public good' that their work produces, a pressure driven by a science-focused understanding of academic study, and a pressure which is in serious danger of sidelining the arts and humanities. The Research Excellence Framework (REF), the successor of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which will determine the funding universities get for different subjects, appears to assume that the only worthwhile things in academic study are those which have a (pretty immediate) positive impact in technological, medical or social benefits.¹⁷ It is, of course, appropriate that universities should be accountable for the investment of public money in their operations, but the imprecision of the criteria for the 'impact' of research is now notorious among university academics, especially in the arts and humanities.

¹⁴ The 1985 Kairos document is available online at: <http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/kairos-document-1985-0>, accessed 27 February 2012.

¹⁵ See his submission to the Eloff Commission in 1982, in which he argues from Genesis through to the New Testament, Desmond Tutu, *The Rainbow People of God*, London: Doubleday, 1994, 53-78; for other examples, see Burridge, *Imitating*, 374-75.

¹⁶ *Life of Reason, Reason in Common Sense*, New York: Scribner's, 1905, 284.

¹⁷ See the excellent article by Stefan Collini, 'The Threat to our Universities', *The Guardian* 24 February 2012: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/feb/24/threat-to-our-universities?INTCMP=SRCH>, accessed 28 February 2012. The article is an extract from his book Stefan Collini, *What are Universities for?*, London: Penguin, 2012.

This pressure at research level is affecting undergraduate degrees, where government rhetoric is about equipping people to do things which are useful to society—a rhetoric which promotes more obviously ‘useful’ subjects such as science, engineering and medicine. But even in such subjects it is crucial not only to teach *content*, but also to teach students how to *think*. A solely content-driven curriculum means that five years after graduation students are left adrift, because new methods, approaches, knowledge and techniques will appear. By contrast, to handle content in a way which enables students to think for themselves means that they will be able to reflect and learn in new situations with new tools and new equipment.

Further, the rapid change going on at all levels of western—and world—culture today means that we need people with nimble, flexible minds. This is what good, thoughtful engagement with the New Testament produces. Students who learn to engage well with ancient texts develop skills in understanding ideas, in engaging with different cultures and times, in participating in a corporate enterprise of re-thinking ideas into new settings, which fit them well for adapting to cultural and social change in the twenty-first century. It is even better for them if New Testament Studies does not stop with historical enquiry about the ancient contexts, but goes on to ask how these texts impact us today.

What is ‘New Testament Studies’?

This observation leads into the second theme: why focus on the twenty-seven books known to Christians throughout time and space as the New Testament? Two specific questions concerning the object of study in New Testament Studies are pertinent: the focus on the New Testament—especially the four Gospels—rather than other ancient Christian sources; and the focus on the New Testament rather than others’ readings of the New Testament.

Other Gospels?

There are several down-sides of the publication of Dan Brown’s racy novel *The Da Vinci Code*¹⁸ and the subsequent film, notably Brown’s frequent misrepresentations of early

¹⁸ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, London: Corgi, 2004.

Christian history and development. However, this novel has given rise to some valuable discussion and debate about the books which form the New Testament canon of twenty-seven books. One of Brown's characters asserts that the Christian Emperor Constantine was the one who made the decisions about which books formed the New Testament¹⁹—but Constantine made no such decisions. The four canonical Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, were considered Christian Scripture long before Constantine—they are included in the Muratorian canon list (c. AD 160), and a little later in the second century by Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyons.²⁰ There are several lists of books recognised as Christian Scripture, culminating in Athanasius' Easter pastoral letter in AD 367 listing the twenty-seven books of the New Testament.²¹ and the only Gospels mentioned in these lists are the canonical four. The evidence is that no other Gospels were ever seriously considered for inclusion in the Christian Scriptures.²²

In the last 150 years a number of other books have been discovered which often share the outlook of gnosticism, a term which encompasses a variety of dualistic movements that flourished in the second century AD onwards. Gnostics believed in a heavenly redeemer who entered the world to save people from bondage to the material world by giving them hidden, divine knowledge. Notable among gnostic writings is the *Gospel of Thomas*, found in a fourth-century Coptic library at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945. *Thomas* is a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus, many paralleled in the canonical Gospels. Some are somewhat bizarre, such as paragraph 114:²³

Simon Peter said to them, 'Let Mariham (Mary) go out from among us, for women are not worthy of the life.' Jesus said, 'Look, I will lead her that I may make her male, in order that she too may become a living spirit resembling

¹⁹ Brown, *Code*, 313-17.

²⁰ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.11.8-9 argues for the four—and only these four—canonical Gospels. Irenaeus is also cited by Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 5.8.2-8 in support of a 21-member canon.

²¹ Athanasius, *Ep. fest.* 39.

²² For fuller critique of *The Da Vinci Code*, see J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus: What the Da Vinci Code and other Novel Speculations Don't Tell You*, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006, chs 9-10; Bart D. Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

²³ Translation from Wilhelm Schneemelcher and R. McL. Wilson eds, *New Testament Apocrypha*, revised edn 2 vols, Cambridge: James Clarke, 1991, 1:129.

you males. For every woman who makes herself male will enter into the kingdom of heaven.’

The Jesus Seminar, known for its use of coloured beads in voting whether sayings of Jesus in the Gospels are authentic or not, uses *Thomas* alongside the four canonical Gospels.²⁴ The fact that *Thomas* was not known until 1945, and was not mentioned in other early Christian documents, suggests it was marginal (rather than marginalised); the large majority judgement of scholars is that it is significantly later than our canonical Gospels, dependent on them, and gnostic in character.²⁵

While it makes for good fiction, and plays into the hands of those who love conspiracy theories, to portray the early church as having many Gospels and suppressing those which those in power did not like, the reality is more mundane. The four canonical Gospels are our earliest and best sources for knowledge of Jesus, and the church’s recognition of these four—and only these four—from our earliest records underlines that they are the central object of study for knowledge of Jesus.²⁶

Others reading the New Testament

Another recent development in New Testament scholarship is the advent of ‘reception history’ (*Rezeptionsgeschichte*) or ‘history of effects’ (*Wirkungsgeschichte*). Though there is debate about which is the better term, scholars who fly either flag focus on how the New Testament has been read and interpreted in different times and places. Ulrich Luz pioneered this approach in his 1985 commentary on Matthew 1–7, engaging passage by passage with how earlier interpreters had read the text.²⁷ It is also important for scholars

²⁴ Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover and The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, New York/Oxford: Macmillan, 1993.

²⁵ See now Simon J. Gathercole, *The Composition of the Gospel of Thomas: Original Language and Influences*, SNTSMS 151, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012; Mark Goodacre, *Thomas and the Gospels: The Making of an Apocryphal Text*, London: SPCK, 2012; with Nicholas Perrin, *Thomas and Tatian: The Relationship between the Gospel of Thomas and the Diatessaron*, AcBib 5, Atlanta: SBL, 2002; Nicholas Perrin, *Thomas, the Other Gospel*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007.

²⁶ See further Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels*, Downers Grove/Nottingham: IVP, 2006, esp. chs 3–4.

²⁷ Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus, 1. Teilband, Mt 1–7*, EKK 1/1, Zürich/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benziger/Neukirchener, 1985, ET: Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990.

who practise ‘theological interpretation of Scripture’,²⁸ for they value the guidance of earlier Christian readings of Scripture, particularly from the pre-critical period, in reading Scripture today.

There is undoubted value in reading what earlier interpreters have found in Scripture. For example, there is considerable debate over the composition of the group to whom Peter spoke in Acts 1:15-26, when a replacement for Judas in the apostolic band was chosen: was this group all male or did it include women? Peter’s address to the group is ἄνδρες ἀδελφοί (Acts 1:16), using a specifically masculine term which would normally be translated, ‘Men, brothers.’ This traditional translation is reflection in the 1984 NIV’s ‘Brothers’, whereas the 2011 NIV (‘Brothers and sisters’) and NRSV (‘Friends’) both adopt an ‘inclusive’ translation. If we follow the 1984 NIV, men are the primary audience and the women are excluded from this decision-making process.²⁹ Perhaps surprisingly, the earliest commentator on Acts, John Chrysostom in the fourth century, takes the expression to refer to both men and women: ‘See the dignity of the church, the angelic condition! No distinction there, “neither male nor female.” [echoing Gal 3:28] I would that the churches were such now!’ (*Hom. Act. 3*). Reading Chrysostom prompts looking further, and it is noteworthy that in Acts 17:34 the same expression can include women³⁰—and thus an interpreter more likely to be alert to ancient Greek usage than us, twenty centuries after the writing of Acts—suggests that the group being addressed in Acts 1:15-26 consists of both women and men. Further, as we saw earlier in considering Nazi Germany and *apartheid* South Africa, considering earlier interpretations of the New Testament is important in highlighting the impact of context and culture on interpretation.

However, what is the down-side of this approach? To consider this question, compare how modern Christian interpreters read the New Testament with how Muslim interpreters

²⁸ For valuable introductions, see Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, Grand Rapids/Nottingham: Baker Academic/Apollos, 2008; Stephen E. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, Cascade Companions, Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009. For a stimulating fresh ‘take’ on theological interpretation, which sees its significance as feeding the life of faith, see Joel B. Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation: Engaging Biblical Texts for Faith and Formation*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011.

²⁹ So Paul Ellingworth, ‘Men and Brethren...’ (Acts 1.16), *BT* 55 (2004) 153-55.

³⁰ BDAG 79 s.v. §2.

engage with their sacred book, the Qur'an.³¹ The vast majority of Muslims reading the Qur'an, including those doing so in a university-level context, customarily read the Qur'an through the eyes of key interpreters of the Qur'an: the Hadith (which include sayings of Muhammad absent from the Qur'an), the Sunnah (material about Muhammad's practices, which some Muslims include among the Hadith), and the Tafsir (commentaries on the Qur'an, which vary in the breadth of their acceptance among different groups of Muslims).³² Mainstream Muslims see Qur'anic interpretation today as building on these sources' interpretations and clarifications, and view with some surprise Christian scholars of the Qur'an who suggest interpretations of the Qur'an which differ from those in these traditions. This may be one reason why Muslims have been slow to develop the kind of computer tools which biblical scholars have long used to investigate Christian Scripture:³³ techniques of scriptural interpretation in Islam are different from those in Christian study, where great attention is paid to parallel passages, uses of words, etc. within the scriptural source.

Classic protestant Christian biblical interpretation, by contrast, follows the Renaissance principle of *ad fontes*—back to the sources. The revival of study of the Bible as the primary source of Christian faith—and that in Hebrew and Greek—was a key driver of the Christian renewal movement we know as the Reformation. This principle led Erasmus to produce the first printed edition of the Greek New Testament in 1516, the *Novum Instrumentum omne*. *Ad fontes* has been widely accepted as the basis of modern scholarship in the arts and humanities, and forms the basis of today's biblical scholarship. One of the Reformers' criticisms of the Roman Catholic Church of their day was that the Church's use of tradition obscured Scripture and introduced practices and beliefs which were at least not required by Scripture—in other words, the medieval Roman Catholic Church was reading Scripture in similar manner to traditional Muslims reading the Qur'an.

³¹ I am grateful for the advice of my colleague Dr Mark Beaumont and my former colleague Prof. Peter Riddell on this topic.

³² The exception is a (very) small group of Qur'anists, who regard the Qur'an alone as Islam's sacred text; see <http://www.quranists.com/>, accessed 20 August 2012.

³³ e.g. Accordance (Macintosh), BibleWorks (Windows).

Here lies a potential danger in reception history: it may obscure or replace study of the New Testament itself. To add layers on top of the primary texts—the New Testament—and to read the primary texts through those layers necessarily limits what is seen in those primary texts. The parallel with Jesus' criticism of the teachers of his day, that they obscured the sense of Scripture by the oral traditions which they used to interpret Scripture, is striking.³⁴ Reading later interpreters of the New Testament is, I repeat, a valuable exercise, but it should not be mistaken for New Testament study—it should be seen, instead, as a sub-section of Cultural Studies or (within the broad discipline of theology) historical theology. Christian interpreters of the New Testament will want to maintain the vital distinction between the New Testament and what others say about the New Testament, for in a Christian context, the New Testament carries a weight of importance which interpretations of it do not.

On progress

Let us now consider the idea of 'progress', which is itself contested. Its origins lie in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment,³⁵ and some argue that progress came into being as a secular form of Christian eschatology.³⁶ Bury represents the mainstream view, that the dominant ancient world view contained a cyclical view of time within an overall movement of things getting worse.³⁷ Christian theology, as the inheritor of the Israelite hope for YHWH's restoration of all things, challenged this view of time, bringing its expectation that history was moving to a climax at the return of Christ. This did not mean that things could only get better in the meantime—in many respects Christian writers considered that things would get worse for believers, seeing persecution and suffering as their lot in this earthly existence.³⁸

³⁴ e.g. Mark 7:9-13 concerning Qorban.

³⁵ In spite of valiant attempts by some (e.g. Ludwig Edelstein, *The Idea of Progress in Classical Antiquity*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1967; Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, London: Heinemann, 1980, 10-46) it is very difficult to find clear evidence of the idea of progress in classical times.

³⁶ e.g. John Baillie, *The Belief in Progress*, London: Oxford University Press, 1950, 113-14.

³⁷ J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into its Origin and Growth*, London: Macmillan, 1920, 8-13.

³⁸ e.g. Matt 24:9, 21, 29; Mark 13:19, 24; Rom 8:17; 2 Cor 4:16-5:5; Eph 3:13; Phil 1:29; Col 1:24; 1 Thess 2:2; 3:3, 4; 2 Thess 1:6; 2 Tim 1:8; Heb 10:32, 33; Jas 5:10; 1 Pet 1:6; 2:19-24; 3:17-18; 4:13, 16; 5:9, 10; Rev 2:9-10.

It was in the Enlightenment that people began to think of progress from generation to generation in understanding, knowledge, and mastery of the human environment. Thus the idea of progress came into being, that is, the belief that the world can advance in scientific knowledge, technology, freedom, democracy, happiness, wisdom and other measures of quality of life. This idea is pervasive in thinking since that time: when researching this theme, I found books on progress scattered around the different section of Cambridge University Library, including theology, philosophy, history, and science. Contrast the belief embodied in a now rarely-sung third verse of a nineteenth-century children's hymn:

The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
He made them, high or lowly,
And ordered their estate.³⁹

The American and French Revolutions were both facilitated by the belief that people could change history and move it (as they saw it) forward. A fascinating painting, 'Spirit of the Frontier' by John Gast from about 1872, shows 'Manifest Destiny' leading the American settlers as they move west and bring light from east to west as civilisation comes with the settlers.⁴⁰ Progress soon became what we might call 'progressivism', the belief that progress is inevitable. The sociologist Robert Nisbet defines 'progress' as '*the idea...that mankind has advanced in the past—from some aboriginal condition of primitiveness, barbarism, or even nullity—is now advancing, and will continue to advance through the foreseeable future*'.⁴¹ Nisbet finds five premises of this idea of progress: (i) the value of the past; (ii) the nobility of Western civilization; (iii) the worth of economic/technological growth; (iv) faith in reason and scientific/scholarly knowledge obtained through reason; and (v) the intrinsic importance and worth of life on earth.⁴²

³⁹ From 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' by Cecil F. Alexander, published in *Hymns for Little Children*, London: Joseph Masters, 1848.

⁴⁰ Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:American_progress.JPG, accessed 4 August 2012.

⁴¹ Nisbet, *History*, 4 (his italics).

⁴² Nisbet, *History*, 317.

Nisbet wrote in 1980 before the collapse of the Marxist regimes which dominated Eastern Europe and much of the developing world, and Nisbet saw Marxists as a key pocket of people who continued to believe in progress, thus defined—how things have changed! Nineteenth-century ‘progressivism’ transmuted biological understandings of evolution into evolutionism, the idea that things are inevitably improving and moving on. It is beautifully mocked by C. S. Lewis:⁴³

Lead us, Evolution, lead us
Up the future’s endless stair;
Chop us, change us, prod us, weed us.
For stagnation is despair:
Groping, guessing, yet progressing,
Lead us nobody knows where.

Wrong or justice, joy or sorrow,
In the present what are they
While there’s always jam tomorrow,
While we tread the onward way?
Never knowing where we’re going,
We can never go astray.

To whatever variation
Our posterity may turn
Hairy, squashy, or crustacean,
Bulbous-eyed or square of stern,
Tusked or toothless, mild or ruthless,
Towards that unknown god we yearn.

Ask not if it’s god or devil,
Brethren, lest your words imply
Static norms of good and evil
(As in Plato) throned on high;
Such scholastic, inelastic,
Abstract yardsticks we deny.

Far too long have sages vainly
Glossed great Nature’s simple text;
He who runs can read it plainly,
‘Goodness = what comes next.’
By evolving, Life is solving
All the questions we perplexed.

⁴³ ‘Evolutionary Hymn’, written in a letter to Dorothy L. Sayers on 4 March 1954, and published in C. S. Lewis, *Poems*, London: Bles, 1964, 55-56.

Oh then! Value means survival—
 Value. If our progeny
 Spreads and spawns and licks each rival,
 That will prove its deity
 (Far from pleasant, by our present,
 Standards, though it may well be).

If this is what ‘progress’ means, then there are reasons for not embracing it. The optimistic view that human moral progress was inevitable as better technology became available was shattered by two world wars and many other smaller wars in the twentieth century. The same technology which produces nuclear power also produces nuclear weapons, one of the greatest human-made threats of the destruction of the human race. Similar examples could be multiplied.

It is helpful therefore to distinguish ‘change’ from ‘progress’. ‘Progress’ implies forward movement, positive development, and, if we detach the ideological baggage of progressivism, is an idea usable by those who do not share the somewhat blinkered—and increasingly rare—optimism of the progressivists. However, change in society, structures, approaches to knowledge and the like is not the same as progress. The Nazis presented the preservation of a pure, superior Aryan race as progress; it certainly represented change, but very few today would regard it as progress. The love of novelty which infects western culture today can lead to similar errors in regarding change as ‘progressive’. The challenge, of course, is to discern what is mere change and what is genuine progress, and this is hard in the midst of events and intellectual developments—what appears to be progress may turn out merely to be change.

In scholarship, academic fashions come and go, new questions are asked, and sometimes castles are built in the air on the slenderest of foundations. Professor Richard Bauckham’s plenary paper at the 1995 British New Testament, ‘For Whom Were the Gospels Written?’, cogently attacked the foundations of redaction critical study of the Gospels by arguing that the Gospels were written for a broad Mediterranean audience rather than particular individual local Christian communities.⁴⁴ This was a ‘the emperor has no clothes’

⁴⁴ Later published in Richard Bauckham ed., *The Gospels for All Christians*, Edinburgh/Grand Rapids: T. & T. Clark/Eerdmans, 1997, 9-48.

moment: Bauckham persuasively argued that New Testament scholarship had been down a blind alley for fifty years in reconstructions of ‘the Lukan community’ and the like, and thus change—the development of redaction criticism’s reconstructions of communities—was not progress.

What counts as progress?

So what counts as progress in New Testament Studies? We turn to consider examples of real, identifiable progress before a final discussion of a specifically Christian perspective on New Testament scholarship.

New data

One of the greatest stimuli to progress in knowledge is new data, new information not known to previous generations. It is frequently assumed that the arts and humanities operate with a different approach to the so-called ‘scientific method’. I want to suggest that the divide is not as sharp as is sometimes suggested.

To illustrate, consider paper from 1911 by Ernest Rutherford, then Professor of Physics at the Victoria University of Manchester, and now seen as the father of modern nuclear physics.⁴⁵ Rutherford was seeking to understand the nature of the atom. The then-dominant theory was that of J. J. Thomson, developed in 1904, the so-called ‘plum pudding’ model of the atom, which pictured an atom as a positively charged mass with negatively charged particles embedded in this mass. Rutherford charged his colleague Hans Geiger (the inventor of the Geiger counter) and a 20-year-old undergraduate, Ernest Marsden, with experiments in firing alpha particles at very thin gold film (0.0004 mm thick), to see what kind of deflections occurred as a result of contact between the alpha particles and the gold atoms in the film.⁴⁶ The ‘plum pudding’ model of the atom predicted that most alpha particles would pass through undeflected and a few would have small deflections. The big

⁴⁵ Ernest Rutherford, ‘The Scattering of α and β Particles by Matter and the Structure of the Atom’, *Philosophical Magazine* series 6, vol. 21 (1911), 669–88, available at: <http://mrmackenzie.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Rutherford-paper.pdf>, accessed 3 March 2012.

⁴⁶ Geiger and Marsden reported their results in: Hans Geiger & Ernest Marsden, ‘On a Diffuse Reflection of the α -Particles’ *Proceedings of the Royal Society, Series A* 82 (1909), 495–500, available online: <http://www.chemteam.info/Chem-History/GM-1909.html>, accessed 2 March 2012.

surprise was that a few (about 1 in 20,000) alpha particles were deflected by angles of greater than 90 degrees, and some bounced back from the gold film towards the source. Rutherford commented:⁴⁷

It was quite the most incredible event that has ever happened to me in my life. It was almost as incredible as if you fired a 15-inch shell at a piece of tissue paper and it came back and hit you. On consideration, I realised that this scattering backward must be the result of a single collision, and when I made calculations I saw that it was impossible to get anything of that order of magnitude unless you took a system in which the greater part of the mass of the atom was concentrated in a minute nucleus. It was then that I had the idea of an atom with a minute massive centre, carrying a charge.

This result led to a revolution in thinking about the atom, to the now-orthodox view that an atom consists of a small, positively charged nucleus surrounded by a lot of empty space in which negatively-charged electrons circulate. Rutherford estimated that the nucleus of an atom has a radius some 10,000 times smaller than the atom's radius. The model was refined by Nils Bohr's later work in the early days of quantum mechanics, but not overturned.

Scientific understanding develops by this so-called experimental method: an hypothesis is developed and evidence is sought to either confirm or contradict the hypothesis. Here science and New Testament Studies meet, for advance in understanding of the New Testament develops in much the same way: scholars develop hypotheses about (for example) the development of the earliest Christians' understanding of Jesus' identity, and these hypotheses are then tested against the evidence—evidence here being the writings of the Christians and their opponents and other cultural artefacts to which we have access. In New Testament Studies we are not able to do repeated experiments under varying conditions to test a hypothesis as scientists can, but the point remains: the method, of developing hypotheses and then testing them against the data, is common to scientific enquiry and New Testament Studies. This implies that in both science and New Testament Studies our knowledge is provisional: it is unwise to claim certainty, for in both

⁴⁷ Ernest Rutherford and J. A. Ratcliffe, 'Forty Years of Physics' in Joseph Needham and Walter Pagel, eds, *Background to Modern Science: Ten Lectures at Cambridge Arranged by the History of Science Committee, 1936*, Cambridge Library of Modern Science, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938, 47-74, citing 68-69.

areas we deal in degrees of probability, from highly probable to highly improbable. Intellectual honesty (and, a Christian would add, intellectual humility) requires that we recognise this and do not claim too much.

Much development has happened in New Testament scholarship: our knowledge of the Greek language is significantly greater than two hundred years ago, the quantity and quality of available Greek manuscripts of the New Testament and other writings in Greek has grown enormously in the last one hundred and fifty years, thanks to findings in the rubbish dumps at Oxyrhynchus, in the Sinai peninsula, and in numerous other places. Consider two examples of scholarly views changing through such discoveries.

First, the most significant find of the twentieth century for New Testament scholarship must be the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947. The caves at Qumran gave up hundreds of manuscripts from the second century BC to the first century AD. At a stroke they took our knowledge of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament back one thousand years, for the oldest previously-known texts were those of the Masoretes, dating from about AD 1000.

The Scrolls illuminate many areas of New Testament scholarship. Prior to the discovery of the Scrolls it was a commonplace of scholarship that the Fourth Gospel showed a strongly Greek way of thinking; scholars identified parallels of thought between John and Greek authors, such as his 'dualistic' thinking, contrasting darkness and light and so forth.⁴⁸ The discovery of the Scrolls changed this dramatically, for the War Scroll (1QM) presents a war between the sons of darkness and the sons of light in similarly 'dualistic' terms. Scholars began to recognise that John has a strongly Jewish flavour in his modes of thought and reflection.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Raymond E. Brown, 'The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament' in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *John and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, New York: Crossroad, 1990, 1-8, 7-8; James H. Charlesworth, 'A Critical Comparison of the Dualism in 1QS 3:13-4:26 and the 'Dualism' Contained in the Gospel of John' in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *John and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, New York: Crossroad, 1990, 76-106.

⁴⁹ See the very helpful survey of scholarship in Paul N. Anderson, 'John and Qumran: Discovery and Interpretation over Sixty Years' in Mary L. Coloe and Tom Thatcher, eds, *John, Qumran, and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Sixty Years of Discovery and Debate*, SBLEJL 32, Atlanta: SBL, 2011, 15-50.

Secondly, prior to the discovery of the Scrolls, scholars were accustomed to regard the portrait of the earliest believers' community of goods in the early chapters of Acts (especially 2:42-47; 4:32-35) as pious fiction, painting a picture of an idealised community which had never actually existed. A plank in this argument was that the descriptions of the sharing of resources among Essene communities around Palestine in Josephus⁵⁰ and Philo⁵¹ were not credible. The evidence of the Scrolls, notably the Community Rule (1QS), shows clearly that there was such a community of goods among the Qumran community (who are widely recognised as Essene), and the Damascus Document (CD) evinces Essene 'cells' in villages in Palestine.⁵² Hence Brian Capper⁵³ argues cogently that the community of goods in Acts is historically credible, for we have at least one other example of such a sharing of possessions at the same time in the same land.⁵⁴

New comparisons

One of the ways of being 'original' in a doctoral thesis is to compare two things which have not been compared in that way. Here is also an area where fresh understanding can result. It need not necessarily be that the two ideas or people being compared were known to each other; simply to put the two side by side can illuminate aspects of one or both which were not previously seen, or not seen so clearly. For example, a text may be read in conjunction with particular features of its socio-cultural context(s).

For example, I have argued that a key to making sense of Paul's willingness to accept financial support from the Philippian believers while declining it in Corinth (e.g. 1 Cor 9:12,

⁵⁰ Josephus, *J.W.* 2.8.3 §§122-27; *Ant.* 18. 1.5 §§20-22.

⁵¹ Philo, *Prob.* 76-7, 85-7; *Hypoth.* 11.4-13.

⁵² For discussion and references, see Brian J. Capper, 'Community of Goods in the Early Jerusalem Church', *ANRW* II/26.2 (1995) 1730-1774; Steve Walton, 'Primitive Communism in Acts? Does Acts Present the Community of Goods (2:44-45; 4:32-35) as Mistaken? [with response by Brian J. Capper]', *EvQ* 80 (2008) 99-111, esp. 106-108.

⁵³ An LST alumnus in the School's days as London Bible College.

⁵⁴ Capper, 'Community'; Brian J. Capper, 'ΠΑΝΤΑ ΤΑ ΚΟΙΝΑ: A Study of Earliest Christian Community of Goods in its Hellenistic and Jewish Contexts,' PhD thesis, Cambridge, 1986.

15-18) is to consider both responses in the wider setting of patron-client relationships in the Graeco-Roman world of the day.⁵⁵

The Roman empire was a massive web of patronage, emanating outward from the emperor himself, so that just about everyone was someone's client and many were also someone's patron. These relationships required reciprocal responsibilities: the patron provided for the client, often materially, and the client supported the patron by rendering services and support for the patron in his (and it was normally *his*) political and social ambitions. The greater giver was socially superior. Even to speak of 'friends' (Greek φίλοι, Latin *amici*) was to use a term which brought such a relationship of mutual obligation into play.⁵⁶ Paul's language echoes that used in such relationships: 'the matter of giving and receiving' (λόγον δόσεως καὶ λήμψεως, Phil. 4.15) evokes the whole apparatus of mutual obligation.⁵⁷

My thesis is that Paul uses the language of patronage in such places, but subverts its normal meaning by placing it in a new framework, centred on what God in Christ has done for the world. That is why he rejects the Corinthian offers of financial support, since he wants to offer the gospel free of charge, and without being beholden to anyone or continuing to accept the patronage system's premise that you get nothing for nothing (1 Cor 9:6-18).⁵⁸ God's gracious action in Christ has formed a new community in which no-one is anyone else's patron or client—all are dependent on the grace of God in Christ, through which believers receive something God's gifts for no payment. It is through the Philippians' gifts that God enables Paul to 'do all things' (Phil 4:13), which here means to face all kinds of circumstances, positive and negative. Paul denies that he is hinting that they should give him more (Phil 4:17-18)—for expressions of gratitude were frequently understood in that

⁵⁵ Steve Walton, 'Paul, Patronage and Pay: What Do We Know about the Apostle's Financial Support?' in Trevor J. Burke and Brian S. Rosner, eds, *Paul as Missionary: Identity, Activity, Theology, and Practice*, LNTS 420, London: T & T Clark, 2011, 220-33.

⁵⁶ Richard P. Saller, *Personal Patronage under the Early Empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, 11-17.

⁵⁷ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995, 443, citing Plutarch, *Lib. ed.* 14 (11B); *Herm. Mand.* 5.2.2 (= *Herm.* 34.2).

⁵⁸ Walton, 'Patronage', 221-25.

time as expressions of dependence⁵⁹—but rather he wants them to receive more from God, using καρπός (v 17) in the sense of ‘profit’,⁶⁰ and going on to assure them of God’s continuing provision for them (v 19). Their gifts to Paul are interpreted as a sacrifice to God (v 18b), and thus it is God who will reward them (v 19), and the glory goes to God (v 20). So Paul’s thanksgiving for the Philippians’ gifts is focused on his relationship with the Philippian believers⁶¹—they are not Paul’s patrons, but his partners: they and Paul stand on level ground. Patronage language is given fresh content based on the new reality of the fellowship of believers in Christ.⁶² To read Paul in the setting of the patronage system of his day sheds considerable light on the question of his financial support.

As a second example of reading the New Testament against its socio-cultural context, Peter Oakes⁶³ has considerably illuminated both Philippians and Romans by his fine work on the physical and social contexts of Philippi and Pompeii.⁶⁴ In both studies, Oakes uses knowledge gleaned from archaeological, epigraphical and literary sources to reconstruct the kind of community found in the cities and then seeks to ‘hear’ Paul’s writing through the ears of the kind of people who most likely received the letters.⁶⁵

For example, in Philippi, Oakes portrays a couple who are bakers, Simias and Ianthé.⁶⁶ Half of their bread is sold to three well-off families from the social élite as a regular order; the rest is sold from their shop. Simias, the father, is a member of a burial club which provides for its members to have a good burial, paid for by a regular subscription. At club meetings, Simias meets other bakers and these contacts are very helpful if a big order

⁵⁹ e.g. Seneca, *Ben.* 3.5.2: ‘Listen to the words of petitioners. No one of them fails to say that the memory of the benefit will live for ever in his heart; no one of them fails to declare himself your submissive and devoted slave, and, if he can find any more abject language in which to express his obligation, he uses it.’ More fully, see Walton, ‘Patronage’, 225-26.

⁶⁰ BDAG 510 s.v. §2.

⁶¹ Using both the verb κοινωνέω (Phil 4:15) and the noun κοινωνία (Phil 1:5).

⁶² More fully, see Walton, ‘Patronage’, esp. 225-33.

⁶³ Another LST alumnus.

⁶⁴ Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter*, SNTSMS 110, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000; Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul’s Letter at Ground Level*, London: SPCK, 2009.

⁶⁵ For an imaginative example, see Peter Oakes, ‘Jason and Penelope Hear Philippians 1.1-11’ in Christopher Rowland and Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis, eds, *Understanding, Studying and Reading: New Testament Essays in Honour of John Ashton*, JSNTSup 153, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998, 155-164.

⁶⁶ Oakes, *Philippians*, 89-93.

comes in and he suddenly needs extra oven space. The burial club meets on the anniversaries of death of former members, and eats together at the former member's tomb and prays to the gods for their dead friend.

What would it mean for such a family to become Jesus-believers? Simias would either withdraw from the burial club or miss meetings on anniversaries of death, since he would no longer be willing to participate in prayer to the gods. This would damage his friendship with others in the club, and that alone might lead to some of his regular customers withdrawing their trade and buying their bread elsewhere. It could also mean that fellow-bakers refused to help when Simias needed extra oven space for a big order, so he would lose trade. Problems would arise at the shop, too. Simias and Ianthe, his wife, would remove the shrine of the god popular among bakers from their shop counter, and customers would rapidly notice this, so that people would mutter that they were dishonouring the gods. The effect would be that people would assume the baker's family were disloyal to the city of Philippi—for they were disloyal to a town god—and thus people would stop buying their bread, probably including at least one of the three élite families who are their biggest customers. In addition, their regular supplier of flour would stop supplying them, so that they had to buy from another supplier at about 10% extra cost. Oakes' example is more extended, but this is sufficient to show that for this family to become Jesus-believers would be costly, both economically and socially, because the 'religious' and 'political' spheres were so intertwined in a city like Philippi.

Similarly, Oakes reconstructs the membership of a house church based in one block of ancient Pompeii, consisting primarily of 'craftworkers' of various kinds,⁶⁷ and then considers how such people would hear Romans 12, a chapter full of teaching and exhortation about the kind of lifestyle which flows from the Christian faith.⁶⁸ He comments with surprise on previous work on this chapter of Romans in the commentaries, that others consider the passage's structure, the sources Paul may have used, and potential parallels in other literature, but fail to consider 'what Paul's various instructions might

⁶⁷ Oakes, *Romans*, 1-45, 69-97.

⁶⁸ Oakes, *Romans*, 98-126.

mean in practice in a first-century context'.⁶⁹ Oakes' reconstruction of four possible members of such a house-church allows us to see Romans 12 (and later in the book, Paul's teaching on salvation in Romans⁷⁰) through their eyes, and the picture Oakes paints is fresh and stimulating, not just for the ancient context but also for Christian appropriation of this teaching today.

The New Testament as an ecclesial book

So real progress has been made in our understanding of the New Testament as documents from the ancient world; we are richer from scholars' labours. Some would say that this is the most we can achieve, that to engage with the New Testament from a faith-based perspective is not valid study of the New Testament. Ronald S. Hendel⁷¹ and Michael V. Fox have recently written articles arguing this view. Fox writes:⁷²

In my view, faith-based study has no place in academic scholarship, whether the object of study is the Bible, the Book of Mormon, or Homer. Faith-based study is a different realm of intellectual activity that can dip into Bible scholarship for its own purposes, *but cannot contribute to it...* Faith-based study of the Bible certainly has its place—in synagogues, church, and religious schools, where the Bible (and whatever other religious material one gives allegiance to) serves as a normative basis of moral inspiration or spiritual guidance. This kind of study is certainly important, *but it is not scholarship.*

Fox and Hendel drive a wedge between faith and facts, theology and history, as though they are two separate realms, an extraordinary view given that *the* postmodern insight is that everyone has a point of view, a set of presuppositions with which they come to scholarship and study.⁷³ This division is short-sighted, and many responses to Fox and

⁶⁹ Oakes, *Romans*, 175.

⁷⁰ Oakes, *Romans*, 127-174.

⁷¹ Ronald S. Hendel, 'Farewell to SBL: Faith and Reason in Biblical Studies', *BAR* 36 (2010) 28-29; see the response by the SBL leadership and 95 further responses, including by Hendel and Fox themselves, <http://www.sbl-site.org/membership/farewell.aspx> (accessed 3 March 2012).

⁷² Michael V. Fox, 'Bible Scholarship and Faith-Based Study: My View', *SBL Forum* 4 (2006) , <http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?articleId=490>, accessed 3 March 2012 (my italics); see the SBL Forum for the discussion generated: <http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/SBLForumBrowse.aspx> (accessed 3 March 2012).

⁷³ This point goes back at least as far as Bultmann's famous essay: Rudolf Bultmann, 'Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?', *Encounter* 21 (1960) 194-200; also in Rudolf Bultmann, 'Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?' in Schubert M. Ogden, ed., *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1961, 289-96, 314-15.

Hendel offer cogent critique. In closing, I shall make two brief comments and two longer observations which undergird the work of scholars such as myself who come to the Bible with a faith commitment, in order to argue that our work is both a valid and a worthwhile contribution to the scholarly discussion—and no less so than other perspectives which disavow a faith stance.

First, notice what an odd suggestion is being made here. To disallow Christian scholars a place in conversation about the New Testament is to imply that anyone with a direct interest in the meaning of the New Testament is the worst qualified to engage in the discussion of that meaning. If this principle were applied in other areas of knowledge, imagine the chaos which would ensue: doctors would be forbidden from engaging in medical research, scientists would be forbidden from investigating anything which might agree with the theories they held, and so forth. By contrast, given that Christians believe the New Testament to testify reliably to truth, they have the greatest possible motivation to investigate the New Testament carefully and to understand it accurately—if the New Testament is untrue, integrity requires that this be known. If the Christian faith is based on falsehood, Christians, of all people, want to know this, so as not to waste their lives on an untruth.

Secondly, to reject a place for Christian scholars in conversation about the New Testament is to be blind to one's own ideological stance: everyone has a 'point of view'. Readers who fail to recognise that everyone has a position from which they read are in danger of misunderstanding the text by filtering it through their own ideological position. To illustrate, a Christian gave a copy of the New Testament to a Hindu friend to read. The Hindu came back to the Christian some while later with great enthusiasm. He was greatly impressed to read of Jesus being born, living, teaching, dying and rising from the dead, and then being reborn, living, teaching, dying and rising from the dead, and this going on twice more. The Hindu reader had read the four Gospels in sequence through the lens of his belief in reincarnation, and thus misread them completely.

To turn to two more substantial points, we shall first consider the nature of the New Testament documents themselves, and then consider the kind of readers the documents presuppose.

First, the New Testament documents make truth claims, they invite response and commitment. Bockmuehl puts it well: ‘There can be no subject-appropriate interpretation of the Old or New Testament that highlights their meaning (or meanings) while neglecting the question of its truth’.⁷⁴ To study the New Testament is necessarily to engage with its claims, and the New Testament documents themselves deny that it is possible to be neutral about their claims. Further, the New Testament has ‘converting power’ in changing lives. C. K. Barrett reports an illustration used by Edwyn Hoskyns in speaking about studying the New Testament:⁷⁵

You look down your critical microscope at the New Testament text with a view to finding the religious life of the first-century Christian, and you find that God is looking back at you through the microscope and declaring you to be a sinner.

Christian scholars who have had the experience of meeting God through reading the New Testament have a place at the scholarly table in discussion alongside their ‘secular’ colleagues, for Christian scholars are engaging positively with the truth claims of the New Testament, and may therefore appropriately engage in the scholarly conversation about the New Testament. Because the New Testament documents are public documents, open to inspection and study by anyone, and because the claims they make are claims about ‘public truth’ (as Lesslie Newbigin puts it⁷⁶), this is a conversation that appropriately happens in public, in universities and other places of debate and discussion.⁷⁷ This is not intended as an argument for excluding non-believing scholars from the scholarly conversation either—I myself have gained much from reading and engaging personally with such scholars and

⁷⁴ Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study*, STI, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006, 50.

⁷⁵ C. K. Barrett, *Jesus and the Word and Other Essays*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995, 57; I owe the reference to Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 147.

⁷⁶ See the helpful collection of sources brought together in Paul Weston ed., *Lesslie Newbigin, Missionary Theologian: A Reader*, London: SPCK, 2006, 244-64.

⁷⁷ cf. Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 77.

regard many as good friends. It is a plea for an *open conversation* because of the nature of the claims that the New Testament documents themselves make.

Secondly, the kind of reader the New Testament authors presuppose is a *disciple* or at least one on the way to being a disciple, a person who is committed to worshipping Jesus as Lord and living in tune with that commitment.⁷⁸ Luke write to Theophilus about ‘the certainty (τὴν ἀσφάλειαν) of the things you have been taught’ (Luke 1:4). John writes ‘so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name’ (John 20:31). 1 Peter says of its readers, ‘Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls’ (1 Pet 1:8), again assuming a commitment to loving and following Jesus. Further examples could be multiplied from the different New Testament books.

Thus a reading of the New Testament which stops at analysis of the text in the setting(s) of the ancient world is incomplete. Reading ‘with the grain’ of the text of the New Testament is an activity which asks not merely ‘What?’ but ‘So what?’—what does reading this text imply for life today? This chimes in with seeing *performance* as a key feature of New Testament interpretation, as recent scholars have argued.⁷⁹ Just as the primary form of interpretation of a musical score is the performance of that score by instrumentalists and vocalists, just as the primary form of interpretation of a Shakespeare play is the performance of the play by actors, just as the primary form of interpretation of the American constitution is its performance in the life and society of the United States of America, so the interpretation of the New Testament is about performance, about instantiating the meaning of the text in the life of the believing community and of individual believers. The New Testament is a book written to be *lived*, and the Christian

⁷⁸ cf. Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 68-74, 91-92; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, Leicester/Grand Rapids: Apollos/Zondervan, 1998, 380-81.

⁷⁹ See Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*, London: SCM, 1986, ch. 3; Frances M. Young, *The Art of Performance: Towards a Theology of Holy Scripture*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1990; Stephen C. Barton, ‘New Testament Interpretation as Performance’ in Stephen C. Barton, ed., *Life Together: Family, Sexuality and Community in the New Testament and Today*, Edinburgh/New York: T. & T. Clark, 2001, 223-50.

community has the greatest possible interest in reading the New Testament aright in order to live aright. ‘The ultimate goal of exegesis is for the individual and community to become a *living exegesis* of the text.’⁸⁰

This point can be developed, as Joel Green does, by utilising Umberto Eco’s notion of the ‘model reader’ of a text, a reader who engages cooperatively with the communication going on through the text.⁸¹ Such a reader reads with a hermeneutic of consent, not a hermeneutic of suspicion, with openness to the text’s message—this is an ethical approach to reading which respects the text as a conversation partner, rather than imposing our own view on it.⁸² Thus Christian readers today do not ‘visit these ancient texts as though they were alien territory’,⁸³ but regard them as speaking to us. Christian readers identify with their original recipients and listen attentively to find out what God has to say to them.⁸⁴ Christian readers of the New Testament are not reading someone else’s mail, but their own. Therefore one measure of progress in New Testament Studies from a Christian perspective is how far the churches model and live the truth and lifestyle revealed in the New Testament—how far the churches are turning from sin and being faithful to Christ (as the Ash Wednesday service has it).

The temptation for some modern Christian readers of the New Testament is to come at this task entirely from their end of the conversation with the New Testament, and to read the New Testament solely with today’s questions in mind. It is clearly important to read the New Testament to answer modern questions, for there are situations and issues today which did not exist in biblical times. Thinking Christianly about nuclear power and weapons necessarily involves imaginative engagement with a wide range of biblical

⁸⁰ Michael J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers*, revised & expanded edn, Peabody: Hendrickson, 2009, 160 (his italics).

⁸¹ Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, *Advances in Semiotics*, London: Hutchinson, 1981, 7-11; discussed: Green, *Practicing*, 18-20.

⁸² See the valuable discussion in Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 368-78, 382-84; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics*, Leicester: Apollos, 2002, 248-50. Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 372 draws attention to Booth’s helpful image of treating the text as a friend (Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, esp. 169-98, 138-42).

⁸³ Green, *Practicing*, 20.

⁸⁴ e.g. Green, *Practicing*, 20-25 constructs a picture of the model readers of James.

material in order to come to a Christian mind for today on these topics.⁸⁵ However, ethical reading, which respects the ‘otherness’ of the New Testament, will want and need to seek to listen to the New Testament on its own terms too—and will give priority to such reading over a reading focused solely on today’s questions and concerns. Given that Christians regard the New Testament as Scripture, knowing what questions these ancient documents are concerned with, and the answers they give to those questions, is much more important than human opinions. Christians aim to shape our lives around the teaching of the New Testament, rather than to shape the New Testament around their own opinions. As Lindbeck writes, ‘To become a Christian involves learning the story of Israel and of Jesus well enough to interpret and experience oneself and one’s world on its terms.’⁸⁶

Envoi: the future

We have travelled quite a journey, from the validity of New Testament study in a public context to the real advances and progress which have taken place. Where will New Testament Studies go in the future? I have no crystal ball, so let me note some areas where I hope we shall see progress.

First, the continuing growth in our knowledge of first-century culture, society and history will hopefully continue to illuminate our reading of the New Testament. The proposed excavation of Colossae is an example.⁸⁷ Just as discoveries in cities of the seven churches of Asia Minor have enabled us to understand the letters in Revelation 2–3 much better,⁸⁸ so also knowledge about Colossae, never excavated since the earthquake which destroyed the city in AD 60 until now, will hopefully lead to progress in reading Colossians. To make such progress some need to immerse themselves in ancient texts in the original languages and in ancient cultures—here is a challenge for students to consider.

⁸⁵ For a thoughtful example, see Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically*, London: SPCK, 1989, 131–41.

⁸⁶ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, London: SPCK, 1984, 34.

⁸⁷ See <http://www.flinders.edu.au/ehl/theology/ctsc/projects/colossae/>, accessed 3 March 2012.

⁸⁸ See particularly Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, JSNTSup 11, Sheffield: JSOT, 1986.

Secondly, the ‘centre of gravity’ of global Christianity has shifted south, so that the large majority of Christians in today’s world live in countries whose indigenous cultures are, arguably, closer to the cultures underlying the New Testament texts.⁸⁹ Those from the ‘global north’ will benefit as they dialogue with and learn from New Testament scholars from the ‘global south’. One development has been the growth of postcolonial approaches to the New Testament, which consider how the texts sound and can speak in a situation of being the underclass, or the oppressed, rather than those in power.⁹⁰ An interesting example of such New Testament reading is the recent *Africa Bible Commentary*,⁹¹ and we can but hope for more.

Thirdly, creative interdisciplinary work, both between different theological disciplines and New Testament Studies, and between other academic disciplines and New Testament Studies, is a fresh and growing area. I count it a privilege to have supervised Keith Small’s doctoral studies with my then-colleague Prof. Peter Riddell: Dr Small studied the transmission of the texts of the New Testament and the Qur’an and produced a groundbreaking, fresh, engaging and stimulating study.⁹² Such work is challenging, for it involves mastery of two fields and, in Small’s case, two languages, Arabic and Greek; but if carried out well, it has great value for illuminating both areas of study. For those looking for a research topic for a doctorate and ready for a challenge, the interface of New Testament Studies with another area is one to consider.

I could go on with other hopes, but let me close with one final thought. New Testament Studies is presently in a period of ferment not previously seen. Fifty years ago, historical

⁸⁹ For example, the work of Kenneth Bailey, a missionary for many years in the Middle East, provides helpful insights into New Testament stories, e.g. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983; Kenneth E. Bailey, ‘Women in the New Testament: A Middle Eastern Cultural View’, *Anvil* 11 (1994) 7-24.

⁹⁰ e.g. Fernando F. Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah eds, *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, London: T & T Clark, 2007; Stephen D. Moore and Fernando F. Segovia eds, *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections*, London: T & T Clark, 2005; R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001; R. S. Sugirtharajah ed., *The Postcolonial Bible*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998.

⁹¹ Tokunboh Adeyemo ed., *Africa Bible Commentary*, Nairobi/Grand Rapids: WordAlive/Zondervan, 2006.

⁹² Keith E. Small, ‘Mapping a New Country: Textual Criticism and Qur’an Manuscripts,’ PhD thesis, London School of Theology/Brunel University, 2008, partly published as: Keith E. Small, *Textual Criticism and Qur’an Manuscripts*, Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2011.

criticism was just about the only game in town; today, the discipline is full of variety, to the extent that some scholars only talk with those who practise the same kind of approaches as them. That is a pity, for if we are engaged, as I have argued, in seeking to understanding the New Testament texts in their variety of textual, literary, linguistic, social, cultural and historical settings, we need each other—New Testament Studies is a field where it is impossible to have mastery of even a small number of the approaches, and collaboration will be crucial to the future, in tune with the call of Paul to ‘Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God’ (Rom 15:7).