



# PREFACE

## *The Perspective of This Introduction*

In our current environment I find two rather different ways of reading and searching the Scriptures. With a devotional reading of Scripture, hearing from God is the focus. The academic study of Scripture focuses on understanding the text in relation to its historical context.<sup>1</sup>



These two approaches and their results are often posed antagonistically against one another. There are critical scholars who devalue the devotional reading of Scripture and the quest to hear the voice of the living God in it. There are others who dismiss the academic study of these texts as inconsequential, since the Spirit is “all they need” to interpret the Scriptures. The former reduce the witness of Scripture to a basic, workable, rational morality that does not interfere with the modern agenda. The latter privilege their potentially idiosyncratic and erroneous readings and applications with divine authority.<sup>2</sup> As the reader will quickly discern, I find neither position and neither result acceptable.

Both kinds of inquiry can and should work together in the community of faith. The academic study of the Scriptures can be used by people of faith as a means to allow the text to speak its own word on its own terms. But this avenue of inquiry is also best pursued prayerfully and in connection with the God who continues to speak through these texts. With these spiritual disciplines, the fruits of academic study are brought back into the conversation with God and with other Christians about what God would say to God’s people today through these texts. The critical study of the New Testament acknowledges the distance between the modern reader—in his or her cultural, political, theological and economic setting—from the author and immediate readers of a New Testament text. The devotional use of the New Testament presumes the imme-

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<sup>1</sup>As J. J. Griesbach, one of the leading figures in nineteenth-century Gospel studies put it, “the New Testament must be explained as every ancient book is explained” (quoted in William Baird, *A History of New Testament Research*, vol. 1, *From Deism to Tübingen* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], p. 139).

<sup>2</sup>David L. Dungan has written a bold analysis of the ways in which the historical-critical study of the Bible arose as part of a movement to delegitimize the power of king and priest and to end religious interference in secular affairs. Historical criticism, he avers, served to reduce Scripture to a book that taught private morality, of no consequence to the political and economic spheres, which were now made safe for capitalism, democracy and rationalism. Reflecting on his own work as a biblical scholar, he writes, “I never knew that I was a foot soldier in a great crusade to eviscerate the Bible’s core theology, smother its moral standards under an avalanche of hostile historical questions, and, at the end, shove it aside so that the new bourgeois could get on with the business at hand” (*A History of the Synoptic Problem* [New York: Doubleday, 1999], p. 148). His book serves as a reminder that there are no neutral readings of Scripture and that every reading—whether devotional or critical—grows out of an agenda, legitimates real-life arrangements in this world, and is made possible only by a host of presuppositions about the way things “really” are.



diacy and accessibility of the Word for the worshiper. Pursuing both avenues of inquiry, allowing neither to overwhelm the other, bringing the results of each into vigorous interaction with the other, puts the Christian leader on the surest ground, enjoying the riches of both while being less liable to the limitations of either.

This introduction to the New Testament seeks to nurture this kind of integrated approach to Scripture, attending both to the methods and results of academic and critical study of the New Testament as well as to the ways that these texts continue to speak a word from the Lord about discipleship, community and ministry. My objectives in writing this book are to prepare Christian leaders to (1) more fully engage the critical and prayerful study of the New Testament, and (2) more reliably discern the direction the Spirit would give through these texts for nurturing disciples and building communities of faith that reflect the heart and character of their Lord. These objectives have shaped this introduction in a number of ways.

First, I take a text-centered as opposed to phenomenon-centered approach. My focus remains on the texts that make up the New Testament (and, of course, on the situations envisioned by each text) rather than the broader phenomena behind the New Testament that belong properly to “early church history” and “Christian origins.” I am interested primarily in the context, production and message of each text, in the pastoral challenges each addresses and in the way each author brings the revelation of God in Christ to bear on those challenges. There is thus no attempt to reconstruct the Jesus of history, though I do, of course, introduce the working principles of that important scholarly pursuit. There is no discussion of the history of the expansion of the church from the “Q community” to Rome, except insofar as such topics have bearing on reading and understanding particular New Testament texts.

Second, I give a great deal of attention (probably a full tenth of the book) to a wide range of interpretative strategies that represent the major trends in scholarly study of the New Testament and that remain available and accessible for every student’s exploration of the text. These “Exegetical Skill” sections appear in every chapter on a New Testament text (twice in some chapters). I usually include an extensive example of the exegetical strategy at work in a particular passage and offer suggestions for further exercises and study. It is my hope that these sections will not only open up new strategies for reading but also enable readers to interact more critically with commentaries and other literature written about the text (including devotional literature *and* sectarian propaganda). The student is urged to employ a variety of these avenues of exploration when studying any particular passage in the New Testament. Each interpretative strategy is designed to answer particular questions or bring into focus certain kinds of data: only in conjunction with one another do they provide a meaningful basis for interpretation.

Third, my discussion of the message of each text, and more particularly my reflections on how the text contributes to ministry formation, gives this textbook a distinctive focus on the church (from the local congregation to the global family of God) and the work of ministry (from the general ministry of all Christians to a variety of professional ministries). These texts are formative and transformative, a facet that often goes unexplored in New Testament introductions. If

academic study of these texts is to inform their prayerful and practical application, a New Testament introduction is precisely the place to begin forging that connection. Since I believe that hearing the text in its original pastoral context leads directly to the most fruitful explorations of how the text invites Christian leaders and workers in our age to en flesh its ideals anew, I close each chapter with a section on ministry formation. These sections are intended

1. to keep the reader mindful of the ways that careful study can connect with careful application (to close the gap between the two ends of the typical seminary curriculum, namely, biblical studies and practical theology)
2. to stimulate thought and discussion about what I take to be the primary value and purpose of these texts—shaping faithful disciples, supportive communities of faith and ministry to the world.

In the process of writing this introduction I have been continually reminded and often daunted by the fact that the study of the New Testament is a broad field with many questions and problems that despite centuries of critical study remain unanswered. I do not, therefore, pretend to write as an expert on every topic. Some chapters and sections will reflect years of careful study, reflection and prior writing on my part. Some sections reflect my own initial efforts to wrestle with issues I have encountered but only begun to engage seriously in the preparation and writing of this volume. The reader is therefore invited not to learn from a master but to wrestle alongside a fellow learner with these magnificent texts that have opened up hearts to God, nourished faith and shaped lives for two millennia.

While the footnotes and bibliographies show those older and wiser students to whom an author is indebted for intellectual support, it is the custom of authors to use a preface to acknowledge the many other people whose support, influence, insight and love contribute equally, if not more, to the book. Dr. Dan Reid of InterVarsity Press, who kindly received my proposal for this textbook, offered many helpful suggestions for making the book more useful for the audience it seeks to serve and showed a great measure of patience with this laborer as I took a full year longer to complete the book than we had originally agreed. Several readers made helpful comments after reading portions of the draft of this book, but pride of place must go to Dr. Paul N. Anderson of George Fox University for his generosity in providing many specific, detailed suggestions that have made this textbook stronger.

The majority of illustrations in this book were selected from the more-than-five thousand pictures in the *Pictorial Library of Bible Lands*, a digital collection maintained by Mr. Todd Bolen. This book would have been so much less without the glimpses of important sites and artifacts from the Mediterranean made available by him. I am also grateful to Dr. Michael Bennett and Dr. Rachel Rozenzweig of the Cleveland Art Museum for providing me with images of three important pieces from their collection of Roman Art; Dr. Trainos Gagos, archivist of papyrology and associate professor of papyrology and Greek at the University of Michigan, for permission

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Finally, I wish to thank my parents but, in this volume, especially my father, Dr. J. A. F. deSilva. He always pursued excellence in his intellect and in his professional achievements and set a fine example in this regard for me to follow. In my youth he always took the time to take me to the park on weekends and taught me the importance of always finding time to play with my own sons. He taught me that there are two sides to every argument, and he perhaps contributed more than anyone else to my awareness of ideology and rhetorical strategy in people, no less than in texts. It is with gratitude, respect and love that I dedicate this book to him.

*David A. deSilva*