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New Testament study is not like the hard sciences, where one generation may build on the work of the past and then move away from it, even to the extent of jettisoning it entirely. This discipline has more in common with the humanities (like the study of Shakespeare), where there is constant engagement with both the new and the old. The seven areas I am going to discuss remain objects of fascination and puzzlement for every generation of biblical scholars. Just when we think we have moved beyond this or that problem, it comes back upon us and demands renewed scrutiny.

This article is concerned with where the academic study of the New Testament has been, is now, and might be in the future. I have chosen areas in which I think significant contributions have been made in the last fifty years (since Vatican II), but some important questions remain. I will explain briefly what has been accomplished, raise a few questions that still clamor for an answer or at least a rethinking, and note an important book or two on each topic along the way.

Early Judaism as an Academic Field

What is meant by “early Judaism” is now best encountered in The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism, edited by John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow.¹ The field of Early Judaism covers the period from Alexander the Great (4th century BCE) to the Bar Kokhba Revolt (CE 132-135), involves both the Land of Israel and Diaspora Judaism, and studies Jewish history, literature, and culture. The major catalyst for scholarly interest in this field was the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls in the late 1940s. As the various manuscripts were made available, they prompted research on related documents and in related fields. The result is that what had been a very sketchy and dry area of study has turned into a full and fertile discipline.

Let me list some of the major accomplishments in the field of early Judaism in recent times. The publication of the Dead Sea scrolls has been completed, largely due to the great learning, industry, and organizational skill of the Israeli scholar Emanuel Tov. The general availability of these texts to the scholarly world has now ushered in a new round in the restudy of these often difficult and fragmentary texts. This has been accompanied by the rediscovery of the importance of the so-called Old Testament Apocrypha or Deuterocanonical Books and recognition of their value for introducing new generations of Bible readers to a sample of Early Jewish life. Likewise, the serious attention to the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha through new textual editions and translations has greatly opened up

¹ John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow, eds., The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).
our perspectives on Early Judaism. Work on these texts has also inspired new editions, translations, and commentaries for the works of Philo and Josephus.

Many of these early Jewish writings are about or inspired by the Hebrew Bible, thus bearing witness to the centrality of the Hebrew Bible in Early Judaism. Of course, the biblical manuscripts among the Dead Sea scrolls have provided us with the earliest textual evidence, by more than a thousand years, for all the biblical books except Esther. The biblical commentaries found in the Qumran Pesharim, the phenomenon of the “rewritten Bible,” and the obvious importance of the Bible in much of early Jewish literature further attest to how important “the Bible” was in this world.

From careful study of the use of biblical texts in these writings, we have come to see that, in some cases, the Septuagint was not a free rendering but was based on a different Hebrew text, and the text of the Hebrew Bible was more fluid than had been imagined. Renewed interest in careful study of the biblical texts has in turn led to several fine translations and commentary projects on the Greek Septuagint and the Aramaic Targums, as well as an appreciation of the distinctive literary practices and theologies of these translations.

We have also learned that Early Judaism was not a hermetically sealed entity confined to the Land of Israel. Rather, as Martin Hengel and others have shown, it was part of the larger Hellenistic world and the Roman Empire. Diaspora Judaism spawned a rich literature (Tobit, the Greek Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon, Philo, Josephus, etc.) aimed at securing the place of Jews in foreign lands.

Despite all the great accomplishments in the study of early Judaism, its practitioners still acknowledge that “we see in a mirror, dimly” (1 Cor 13:12). The major emphasis in this field has been to show the great diversity within Second Temple Judaism. However, the old questions remain. What, if anything, held early Judaism together? Was it simply the trio of Land, Law, and Temple? Do we need to imagine something still more unifying, like E. P. Sanders’s “common Judaism” or George Foot Moore’s “normative Judaism?” Do we have only a set of marginal fragments that have been preserved accidentally? How do we link the traditions preserved in the early rabbinic writings to Early Judaism and to the New Testament? These are old questions. But they take on new urgency in light of the many positive achievements in the study of Early Judaism.

**The Greco-Roman World as a Context of Early Christianity**

Developments in the field of Early Judaism have been accompanied by major shifts in what we used to call the classics, that is, those Greek and Latin writings that once achieved quasi-canonical status in secondary education and in many colleges and universities. Somewhere along the line that classical canon got broken up, and attention was given to a much larger corpus of materials consisting not only of ancient literary writings but also of inscriptions and other archaeological artifacts. At the same time, biblical scholars like Martin Hengel were showing that Hellenistic influences had penetrated many different areas of life in Palestine and that the Roman Empire was very much a presence in the land and life of Jesus.

A watershed in the study of early Christianity in the Greco-Roman world was Wayne A. Meeks's *The First Urban Christians*. This book offered a social description of life within the Pauline communities on the basis of Greco-Roman writings, archaeological evidence, and Paul's own statements. It treated the urban environment of Pauline Christianity, the social level of the Pauline Christians, the formation of the *ekklesia*, governance, ritual, and patterns of belief and life.

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Where Meeks represented the method of social description, Bruce J. Malina in *The New Testament World* applied theoretical social science models, developed by cultural anthropologists to explain various segments of human behavior, to the first-century Mediterranean group of “foreigners” who produced the New Testament.⁴ The toolkit of this social science approach included honor and shame as pivotal values, the dyadic relationship between individuals and the group in the understanding of personality, the perception of limited good, the function of kinship and marriage, and the concepts of clean and unclean according to rules of purity. Attention to the patriarchal and hierarchical character of the world of the New Testament raised questions in turn about whether the earliest followers of Jesus could have constituted ‘the discipleship of equals’ envisioned in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s groundbreaking *In Memory of Her*.⁵

Still another area of interest regarding the social situation of early Christians in the context of the Greco-Roman world has been their relationship to the Roman Empire itself. The explicit New Testament evidence is slim and ambiguous, apart from the cautious attitude displayed by Jesus in Mark 12:13-17 and Paul’s exhortation to cooperate with the governing authorities in Romans 13:1-7. Of course, the book of Revelation can and should be read as a sustained polemic against the efforts of a local Roman political and/or religious official in western Asia Minor to force Christians into worshiping the emperor and the goddess Roma. But more common in recent years have been sustained scholarly efforts also to read the Gospels and Paul’s letters as written explicitly in the context of pressures and persecutions coming from the Roman empire. Often this approach has been accompanied by implicit or explicit suggestions that the Roman empire of the first century had much in common with the alleged American empire of our own time.⁶

These different approaches to the social setting of early Christianity have greatly enriched our reading of New Testament texts. They do, however, raise their own set of problems. The materials used in social description are often fragmentary and sometimes distant in time and place from the biblical passages they are alleged to illuminate. Also, social science concepts and methods developed in very different cultures may not fit well into the first century; they may be forced to fit the ancient texts. Much of the support for the empire studies approach seems textually thin, apart from Revelation. There are some anti-Roman empire elements in the other texts, but how much is hard to know since there is much ambiguity.

**The Third Quest of the Historical Jesus**

The so-called Third Quest is often dated to the publication of E. P. Sanders’s *Jesus and Judaism* in the mid-1980s.⁷ What was ground-breaking in Sanders’s work was his effort to describe the actions and teachings of Jesus rigorously within the context of first-century Judaism. Rather than contrasting Jesus with Judaism and thus showing his superiority to it (as many scholars have done), Sanders wanted to place Jesus within Judaism. He claimed to act as a historian, not as a theologian. Primarily interested in what the Gospels say about Jesus’ actions, Sanders then fitted what they say that Jesus taught within the framework of what he did. He gave special emphasis to the so-called “cleansing of the Temple” episode (a traditional title that Sanders vigorously disputed) as galvanizing Roman and Jewish opposition to Jesus and facilitating his arrest and execution.

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⁶ For example, see Richard A. Horsley, *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008).
The quest of the historical Jesus has a long history, of course. Its first phase—from Reimarus in the late 1700s to Wrede in the early 1900s—was brilliantly catalogued and critiqued by Albert Schweitzer. Its second phase was very brief, a mere blip on the radar screen. In the 1950s and early 1960s, the students of Rudolph Bultmann rose up in opposition to their teacher’s skepticism about achieving historical knowledge of Jesus and sought to recover Jesus’ own existential self-consciousness.

What have we learned from the Third Quest? On rereading Schweitzer’s work, one might say not much. There are not many things said in the recent incarnation of the Quest that are not also somehow present in Schweitzer’s descriptions of various representatives of the First Quest. However, there has been in much of the Third Quest a new and sounder emphasis on first-century Palestinian Judaism as the proper context for understanding the life and teaching of Jesus. Whereas representatives of the Second Quest made abundant use of the criterion of “double dissimilarity” (what is dissimilar to both Judaism and to early Christianity very likely goes back to Jesus), Sanders and those who have followed him have given much more attention to those aspects of Jesus’ life and teaching that fit best within the context of first-century Judaism, that is, to the criterion of similarity.

In his multi-volume study of the historical Jesus, John P. Meier has tried to cut a middle path between the old and new approaches. On the one hand, he has used the so-called authenticating criteria (such as double dissimilarity, multiple attestation, etc.) to isolate Jesus’ distinctive teachings on matters such as marriage, divorce, and on oaths. On the other hand, Meier has repeatedly emphasized first-century Palestinian Judaism as the proper context for the historical study of Jesus. The result is the title of his book on Jesus, A Marginal Jew. Thus he seeks to preserve and balance the distinctiveness (if not uniqueness) of Jesus (the “marginal” one) from the Second Quest and the emphasis on the Jewishness of Jesus from the Third Quest.

The Third Quest of the Historical Jesus has produced thousands of books and articles, including several of my own. But when the New Schweitzer comes along to cover the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, I am convinced that John Meier’s project will receive great attention. The reason is that he has taken the best elements of the Second and Third Quests, subjected them to rigid scrutiny, and produced a modest portrait of what can be known about Jesus from strictly historical methods.

The problem now is the question so what. Certainly any serious historical study is worth doing, and worth doing well, as John Meier has done. But Pope Benedict XVI/Joseph Ratzinger in his two-volume Jesus of Nazareth has raised some hermeneutical issues that biblical scholars also need to take seriously. In an endnote he refers to John Meier’s project as illustrating both the value and the limits of historical criticism. The pope is skeptical about what can be achieved by going behind the texts of the Gospels as they have come down to us to reconstruct “the real Jesus.” Rather, his starting point for studying Jesus is the Gospels themselves. In trying to understand Jesus he sometimes refers to first century Palestinian Jewish texts. But his range of resources is much wider; it involves the theological tradition, including various patristic and modern theological sources. His Jesus is not so much the historical Jesus as it is the theological Jesus.

Perennial Problems with the Gospels and Acts

In many respects research on the Gospels has become relatively tranquil in recent years. There are now few organized challenges regarding the Synoptic Problem. Most of us make do with the Two Source Hypothesis while

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acknowledging its deficiencies around the edges (those pesky “minor agreements”). The reconstruction of the most primitive text of the Q Source remains a major ongoing enterprise. Although most accept that the Gospel of Thomas may include a few cases of primitive sayings, there does seem to be a growing consensus that the so-called apocryphal Gospels and the Nag Hammadi texts tell us more about second and third century Christianities than they do about Jesus and the earliest Christians.

What is now abundantly clear is that the individual Gospels exhibit distinctive literary styles and theologies. Proof of this can easily be found in Pheme Perkins’s excellent synthesis in her *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels*. While the three Synoptic Gospels share a common geographical-theological outline and a common stock of Christological titles, at the same time they emphasize different aspects of Jesus—the Suffering Messiah in Mark, the Wise Teacher in Matthew, and the Good Example in Luke—and what it means to follow him. Working with an independent tradition, John, of course, has Jesus make several journeys to Jerusalem and stresses Jesus’ identity as the Word of God—the revealer and the revelation of God.

What is not so clear are the Gospels’ historical settings, genre, and historicity. Although I find the traditional view of Mark’s composition in Rome around Nero’s time to be fruitful, efforts to move it eastward to Syria or Galilee have met acceptance in many circles. The post-CE 70 anti-“Jamnia” settings for Matthew and John, which again I have found quite reasonable and productive, have also been losing support among scholars. And no one is quite sure where to locate the composition of Luke. Indeed, the rise of literary analysis and of narrative criticism of the Gospels has tended to put those historical hypotheses on the shelf.

In turn, these new literary methods, which work best with fiction, raise questions about the Gospels as historical documents. Should they be described as biographies, even in the ancient sense of the term? Are they not products of a long and complex traditional development? Were they the result of the cleverness of the individual evangelists? Do they portray a real person behind the texts or an ideal figure or myth with little grounding in history?

These issues are even more severe in scholarship on the Acts of the Apostles. A sizable number of reputable scholars now regard Acts as fiction, a kind of early Christian novel or romance, while others dutifully search for remnants of history within it. Most scholars are in the middle of this debate, supposing that Acts consists of both literary artistry and some historical information. But the problem of trying to discern what is fact and what is fiction in Acts remains.

**New Perspectives on Paul**

In recent years, biblical scholars, both Christians and Jews, have developed new and better ways of looking at Paul and his letters. They have tried to take much more seriously first-century Judaism as the proper context for understanding Paul’s life and work, and they have situated Paul’s preaching about the saving significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection in its wider biblical framework. This approach has been called “the New Perspective on Paul.” Its most prominent proponents include a Lutheran bishop (the late Krister Stendahl), a self-described “low church Protestant” (E. P. Sanders), a charismatic Scotch Methodist (James D. G. Dunn), and an Anglican bishop (N. T. Wright). Catholic and Jewish scholars have eagerly participated in the conversation. One can find a good discussion of this movement in the wider context of modern Pauline research in Magnus Zetterholm’s *Approaches to Paul*.  

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The title “the New Perspective on Paul” may give a false impression that these scholars all agree, and that there is only one new perspective on Paul. Neither proposition is true. Thus, I prefer to speak of new perspectives on Paul. Here is my version of ten of the new perspectives. 1) Paul’s work and writings must be interpreted in the context of first-century Judaism. 2) Jews in the time of Jesus and Paul were not legalists per se. 3) Paul did not have a tender conscience with regard to his past in Judaism. Rather, his experience of the risen Christ trumped his past in Judaism. 4) Paul’s conversion was from one form of Judaism (Pharisaic) to another (Christian), and his call was to bring the gospel to non-Jews. 5) Paul did not set out to found a new religion separate from Judaism. Rather, he regarded himself as a Jew and viewed Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel. 6) The major and most pressing concern in Paul’s letters to the Galatians and the Romans was not the theological principle of justification by faith but the ecclesiological-pastoral question about how non-Jews could be part of the people of God. 7) For Paul, the “faith of Christ” (Jesus’ fidelity to God) came before and provided the basis for “faith in Christ” (Jesus as the object of faith). 8) Paul was reasoning from solution (Christ) to plight (all humankind before and apart from Christ was under the hostile powers of Sin, Death, and the Law). 9) For Paul, the works of the Law were first and foremost the distinctive identity markers attached to Jews in the Greco-Roman world: circumcision, Sabbath observance, and ritual purity and food laws. 10) Paul looked forward to the salvation of “all Israel” in accord with his own pronouncement in Romans 11:26: “And so all Israel will be saved.”

Each of these propositions is both interesting and controversial, and each has been vigorously debated and criticized. Their most obvious contribution has been to breathe new life into Pauline studies and to rescue it from repeating the same old Reformation/Counter-Reformation theological arguments. They have also changed our image of Paul from being mainly a writer of dense and often opaque letters (as if he were a professor of theology) to being an apostle and a pastoral theologian addressing the problems and needs of early Christian communities as they arose. They have helped Jews and Christians to see that Paul can now be viewed as a bridge between them and thus a help toward appreciating better our common spiritual heritage.

Most of the opposition to the new perspectives on Paul has come from conservative Protestant scholars. For many of them, the Reformation heritage is at stake. Their major concern has been the dilution of Paul the theologian into the historical Paul—the first-century Mediterranean Jewish apostle of Christianity. As in the case of the quest of the historical Jesus, again we meet the conflicts between historical particularity and abiding significance, between history and theology, and between justification by faith alone and salvation history (mystical experience as the center of Paul’s theology and apostolic activity). I should also mention here that what I have been calling the “new perspective” on Paul is, of course, no longer so very new. The “new new perspective” on Paul comes from a very unlikely source: European philosophers (most of them non-Christians, and even nontheists) who have taken a lively interest in Paul’s writings. But that is a story for another day.

Reading the Bible Both Critically and Religiously

For many years in biblical studies we have repeatedly come up against the tension between the historical-critical reading of texts and the spiritual or religious reading. Most of us have been trained in some version of biblical criticism, and despite our criticisms of it we regard it as foundational to what we do. Many forms of official Catholic documentation about the Bible and its interpretation produced since Pope Pius XII’s 1943 encyclical Divino af - 15 These ten theses summarize my 2010 Cardinal Bernardin Jerusalem Lecture, “Paul and Judaism: Ten New Perspectives.” The full text is available from the website of the Archdiocese of Chicago: Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.
mission and Pope Benedict XVI’s *Verbum Domini* (2010), have dealt with this issue. In the typically Catholic way they tend to affirm both critical reading (within certain theological and philosophical limits) and spiritual reading (within certain textual limits) as possible, necessary, and indeed indispensable.

Most of these documents, it seems to me, have been concerned with describing what the Bible is and is not (theological issues) and with insisting on the importance of the spiritual or religious reading of biblical texts. In *Divino afflante Spiritu*, the historical-critical reading was sketched and affirmed, and this sketch in turn provided the basis for its treatment in *Dei verbum* and subsequent documents. However, by far the most thorough and useful treatment appears in the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s 1993 “Document on the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church.” Early on, the document asserts that “the historical-critical method is the indispensable method for the scientific study of the meaning of ancient texts.” It characterizes Holy Scripture as the “word of God in human language” and affirms that “its proper understanding not only admits the use of this method but actually requires it.”

Besides affirming the value of historical criticism, the document also describes the various methods that constitute it: textual criticism, literary criticism, genre criticism, tradition criticism, redaction criticism, and so on. It also notes the major limitations of the historical-critical method: “It restricts itself to a search for the meaning of the biblical text within the historical circumstances that gave rise to it and is not concerned with other possibilities of meaning which have been revealed at later stages of the biblical revelation and history of the church.”

Another limitation would surely be the European Enlightenment’s philosophical and theological presuppositions, which have been associated with the historical-critical method since the time of Baruch/Benedict Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* of 1670. What the Biblical Commission has given us is a version of the historical-critical method that is compatible with Catholic theology and practice. In this context historical criticism is preparatory to a theological, spiritual, and/or religious reading of the biblical text—something like a rigorous form of *lectio* in *Lectio divina*.

For those seeking to read the Bible both critically and religiously, the recent Catholic documentation on biblical interpretation can provide a good model or framework, especially on the religious side. The documentation also insists that the task of interpretation does not end with determining the Bible’s meaning in the past, challenging us to consider its significance for today and inviting us to engage in a religious or spiritual reading of the text.

In dealing with Old Testament texts especially (but also the New Testament), a special challenge for biblical scholars is helping Catholics in the future be more open to and comfortable with the historical-critical method as we have come to understand it. There are many untapped riches in biblical texts, and the historical-critical method can help us to recover them. In particular, our appreciation of Old Testament texts may be greatly enriched by taking them more seriously on their own merits rather than forcing them into a “promise and fulfillment” Christological schema (however valid that may be).

**Problems and Possibilities in New Testament Theology**

The obituary for biblical theology and for New Testament theology in particular has been written many times. But a look at any issue of *New Testament Abstracts* will show that, for many biblical scholars, it is alive and well. It can take many forms. To name just a few, it can be the study of a word or theme in one or several biblical books; a synthesis of the theological thoughts of a book, such as Matthew’s Gospel or Paul’s letter to the Romans; or the use of biblical material in constructing a theological argument.

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Frank J. Matera’s *New Testament Theology* strikes a good balance by moving from the individual writings to more general themes. Most of his book is devoted to describing the distinctive theological approaches in four major blocks of New Testament books: the Synoptic tradition, the Pauline tradition, the Johannine tradition, and other voices. Within those blocks he treats the key theological perspectives in individual writings: the kingdom of God (Mark), the righteousness of the kingdom (Matthew), the salvation that the kingdom brings (Luke-Acts), and so on. What sets Matera’s approach apart is his effort also to trace five master themes through the New Testament as a whole: humanity in need of salvation, the bringer of salvation, the community of the sanctified, the life of the sanctified, and the hope of the sanctified.

A more traditional and yet more daring approach is taken by the evangelical scholar, Thomas R. Schreiner, professor of New Testament interpretation at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, in *New Testament Theology*. There he proceeds from the general to the particular. He contends that “magnifying God in Christ” can be taken as the master theme of the entire New Testament. He summarizes his work in this way: “NT theology is God-focused, Christ-centered, and Spirit-saturated, but the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit must be understood along a salvation-historical timeline; that is, God’s promises are already fulfilled but not yet consummated in Christ Jesus.” His thematic approach is balanced by devoting separate sections to Matthew, John, and Paul as he develops various aspects of his main theme.

A related development that fits under the heading of biblical theology is the rise of what is often called theological exegesis. At its simplest level, that phrase means taking seriously the theological and religious concerns of the New Testament texts. Perhaps a better term is theological reading. This is what Pope Benedict does in his books on Jesus. In some respects, theological exegesis represents a reaction against the modern massive commentaries, stuffed with everything but theological and homiletic concerns. This approach takes its inspiration from the church’s great commentary tradition represented by the Church Fathers, Thomas Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, and Karl Barth. While not ignoring totally the concerns of historical criticism, theological exegesis puts its energy into the theological thoughts of the New Testament writers.

The major methodological problems with biblical theology are familiar, and they too are still alive and well. Is the canon of the New Testament more a source of diversity than of unity? Is it better to move from the particular to the general, as Matera has done, or from the general to the particular, as Schreiner has done? Should New Testament theology be simply descriptions of the biblical writers’ theological thoughts? Should it be more than that if it is to be called theology? Is theological exegesis rigorous enough to merit the noun “exegesis?”

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20 Schreiner, 23.
21 For example, see *David M. Williams, Receiving the Bible in Faith: Historical and Theological Exegesis* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2004); and *A. K. M. Adam et al., Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).