



# SOUTHWESTERN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

THEOLOGY AND READING

## APPRAISING RECENT NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES

B. PAUL WOLFE

## *Appraising Recent New Testament Studies<sup>1</sup>*

*B. Paul Wolfe*

*The Cambridge School of Dallas*

*Dallas, Texas*

*pwolfe@cambridgedallas.org*

Attention to print media over the past decade, especially the popular, secular variety such as *Newsweek* or *Atlantic*, might lead one to think that the most significant and noteworthy developments in the field of New Testament studies within the past fifty years or so are the famous (or infamous) Jesus Seminar or the writings of Bart Ehrman. Nothing could be further from the truth. Ehrman's work is no more than an assembly line of polemics against orthodoxy. The Jesus Seminar rarely registers on the radar screen of NT interpreters, and never would have if not for media and the aggressive popular level publishing by certain members within the Seminar. Apart from the highly unlikely success of its attempt to change the canon of the NT, it never really had the prospects of changing the way the NT is read; it only carried certain ideas to their logical ends. There are, though, fascinating, frustrating, and defining developments within the field today.

Any discussion about developments within Biblical Studies must begin, I think, by acknowledging that the way we read in general has changed profoundly over the last several decades. NT interpretation has not been immune to those changes. With Bultmann's bold and correct assertion that presuppositionless exegesis is impossible,<sup>2</sup> and the equally bold but misguided postmodern assertion that all "truth" is communally constructed, we have completed the journey from the early modern assumption that meaning lies with the author, to the later modern assumption that it lies with the text, to the postmodern assumption that it lies with the reader. An adoption of the latter perspective, closely allied with a hermeneutic of suspicion, has led to the development of various manifestations of special

<sup>1</sup>This essay was prompted by an invitation from Dick Lord to speak to the Arlington Ministerial Alliance at the First Baptist Church, Arlington, Texas, on March 1, 2005. I present the revised material here with much appreciation for the initial invitation and attentive interaction.

<sup>2</sup>R. Bultmann, "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" *Encounter* 21 (1960): 194–200.

interest readings of the NT, everything from the original Latin American liberation theology readings, through various feminist and gender sensitive readings, to anti anti-Semitic readings, and all manner of readings in between.

For purposes of this brief overview I wish to call attention to four specific areas of NT interpretation: one which is a present preoccupation, one which has already become a sweeping and transformative influence, one which is, at least to me, a fascinating restatement of an old assumption, and finally one which has the potential to significantly alter the way the NT is read by scholars.

### A Present Preoccupation

Historical critical methods, each one once the rage, have yielded somewhat to rhetorical and social scientific methods. The ebb and flow of methodological and interpretive fancies continues unabated. However, the latest interpretive preoccupation is with anti-Imperial readings. Within the past decade, doctoral dissertations, scholarly monographs, and popular works alike have focused sharply on demonstrating the subversive nature of the NT writings. Everywhere one looks within the academy, anti-Imperial interpretations are the current rage.

Perhaps the primary scholarly impetus for this development was given by Richard Horsley with his publication of *Paul and Empire*.<sup>3</sup> Horsley has made political readings of the NT almost a cottage industry. Some observers suggest that the approach of political interpretations were given further impetus by various world events, capped off by the imperial actions of the United States. Questions have arisen as to how the NT portrays the Roman Empire and its imperial cult. Everything from the Lord's prayer in Matthew 6 to the confession in 1 Timothy 6 to the mother of all anti-Imperial texts, Revelation, is being read in an effort to answer these questions, and then to analyze the resulting theology. Why was Jesus crucified? A current popular answer is because of his political opposition to Roman rule. Why did Jesus claim to bring the "kingdom of God"? Because, according to John Crossan and Jonathan Reed, by taking over Roman terminology Jesus could more successfully subvert the empire and its oppressive cult.<sup>4</sup> Crossan and Reed seem completely oblivious to the more prominent Old Testament background of kingdom language and concepts.

<sup>3</sup>R. Horsley, *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997).

<sup>4</sup>J. Crossan and J. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus' Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire With God's Kingdom* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2005).

A recent treatment of Philippians 2:5–11 is a good example of anti-Imperial preoccupations. Erik Heen has argued that the expression Ἰσοθεῶν arises in direct response to the imperial cult within Philippi, and thus 2:6–11 is indeed a case of an anti-Imperial confession.<sup>5</sup> The comparison between two figures in vv. 6–7 is not between Adam and Christ, but between Jesus and the emperor. According to Heen, reading the text in this manner undermines a traditional sense of preexistence.

Tom Wright suggests a significantly more nuanced anti-Imperial reading of this text.<sup>6</sup> He primarily focuses on Philippians 3, which is based squarely, says Wright, on the Christological confession in 2:5–11. Paul, in a manner consistent with his other epistles, most notably Romans, is juxtaposing the empire of Caesar with that of Jesus, the parody with the reality. Wright, as opposed to Heen, reads the text in an imperially subversive manner without claiming that this undermines the classical interpretation. To the contrary, Wright gives every reason to conclude that the counter-Imperial reading works precisely because of the classical theology. The letter is counter-Imperial because Caesar's empire is subject to Jesus, and that is because Jesus is the truly divine one.

Scholars are leaving few stones unturned in the attempt to identify anti-Imperial readings of the NT. Many of the new political readings of the NT are coming from non-NT scholars.<sup>7</sup>

### A New Paradigm from Old Evidence

Then there are those developments that actually represent complete paradigm shifts for reading the NT. Ed Sanders's work on Paul and the Judaism to which he was responding did just that.<sup>8</sup> Sanders's work, published in 1977, ushered in what has come to be known as the "New Perspec-

<sup>5</sup>E. Heen, "Phil 2:6–11 and Resistance to Local Timocratic Rule: Isa theō and the Cult of the Emperor in the East," in *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, ed. R. A. Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2004), 139–40.

<sup>6</sup>N.T. Wright, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire," in *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation; Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 160–83. Regarding one recent study related to the imperial cult, Wilhelm Pratscher assessed the author's conclusion saying "This sounds sensible, but we must not forget that this is only a theory, as there is no evidence." (Wilhelm Pratscher, review of *Galatians and the Imperial Cult: A Critical Analysis of the First-Century Social Context of Paul's Letter*, by Justin K. Hardin, *Review of Biblical Literature* (April 2009), [http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/6651\\_7209.pdf](http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/6651_7209.pdf) (accessed 30 June 2009). Oh the beauty of common sense!

<sup>7</sup>For example, J. Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

<sup>8</sup>E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

tive on Paul.” There were predecessors to Sanders’s work who were arguing very similar things, at least on one side of the equation, most notably Krister Stendahl’s “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” a 1961 address to the American Psychological Association in which he argued that the Reformation, following Augustine, had misread Paul and wrongly interpreted him to be concerned with personal salvation or conversion.<sup>9</sup> However, neither Stendahl nor any of the other precursors approached a new reading of Paul from a new reading of Second Temple Judaism. Sanders proposed just exactly that, a new reading of Paul on the basis of a scholarly reassessment of Second Temple Judaism. His work has become enormously influential, setting in motion a complete rethinking of how to read Paul’s letters and thus a complete rethinking of Paul’s theology.

It goes basically something like this. Second Temple Judaism was not a religion of works-based salvation. They were not legalists. Instead, they were the recipients of God’s gracious covenantal salvation on the basis of election; they were born into salvation. The Torah was given to keep them within the framework of the covenant. The moniker “covenantal nomism” was coined as a way to summarize the view. Sanders distinguished between getting in and staying in, and Torah keeping was for the latter. Second Temple Judaism, however, turned the law into boundary markers of exclusion. It became for them their means of keeping people out, rather than keeping themselves in. Paul is not arguing in his letters against legalism, as traditionally understood, but against misguided exclusion. Romans 1–3, for example, is no longer read as Paul’s concern for universal and individual human sinfulness, but as Paul’s concern for Jew-Gentile unity within the church.

Sanders’s rereading of Second Temple Judaism and of Paul has come under severe criticism, especially, though not exclusively, from Reformed interpreters, as one might imagine. There remains much attention being devoted to this and related issues within the field today. It should be stated that certain influential proponents of a New Perspective on Paul are not proponents of the Sanders perspective, but of some variation of it, most notably James Dunn and N.T. Wright. Thus, perhaps we should more properly speak of New Perspectives on Paul.

### Restating Old Assumptions

The assumption that each Gospel was written to one localized community is so deeply rooted in the NT guild that it has been largely unques-

<sup>9</sup>Stendahl’s views were later published in his *Paul among Jews and Gentiles, and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

tioned throughout the modern period. Modern scholarly focus regarding the Gospels has been devoted largely to reconstructing the character of those four original local audiences, and then reading the Gospel(s) on the basis of that reconstructed local audience. Richard Bauckham has recently argued that it is high time to reexamine this assumption. To be sure, he is not the first to question it. For example, in his work on Luke-Acts, Howard Marshall noted that Luke seemed to be conscious of writing “*sacred history*.”<sup>10</sup> But Marshall did not make this point or its implications central to his assessment of Luke-Acts, especially with respect to Luke’s audience. Bauckham, however, has challenged the assumption of the academy head-on. In a forty page essay Bauckham has argued that the Gospel writers worked with the intent of speaking to the widest possible audience, namely a universal audience and a Gospel intended for general circulation. Bauckham presents six crucial evidences to support his contention,<sup>11</sup> and he concludes with a few hermeneutical observations, two of which merit quoting. First,

the chances of being able to deduce from an author’s work what the influences on the author were, if we have only the work to inform us, are minimal. Hence the enterprise of reconstructing an evangelist’s community is, for a series of cogent reasons, doomed to failure. . . . Thus any reader who finds the argument of this chapter convincing should cease using the terms Matthean community, Markan community, Lukan community, and Johannine community. They no longer have a useful meaning.<sup>12</sup>

Second, “the argument does not represent the Gospels as autonomous literary works floating free of any historical context. The Gospels have a historical context, but that context is not the evangelist’s community. It is the early Christian movement in the late first century.”<sup>13</sup>

Bauckham has thrown down the gauntlet for the NT guild. If accepted, his perspective would render a great deal of modern NT work as virtually useless, the equivalent of the sand castle between the waves. This cannot be; and thus, as one would expect, his thesis has been severely challenged on a couple of fronts.<sup>14</sup> I would hope, though I am hardly optimis-

<sup>10</sup>I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 18 (emphasis original).

<sup>11</sup>Richard Bauckham, *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), see especially 30–43.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>14</sup>See in particular Margaret M. Mitchell, “Patristic Counter-Evidence to the Claim

tic, that Bauckham's realism would replace the fantasies within the guild.<sup>15</sup> It appears, though, that the challenges have satisfied the natives, and they proceed as though there is no need to reconsider their approaches. Bauckham's thesis remains an area of study with possibilities for further development.

If NT scholarship were to move in the direction of Bauckham's thesis, we would find far more harmony between our reading of the NT today and the way in which it was read in the early church (in spite of some of the challenges to the contrary). The fathers and their confessional formulations indicate an approach to the Gospels more along the lines Bauckham has argued than the modernist assumptions. Mention of the early church brings us to our fourth development within NT studies today.

### **Rereading the New Testament: Theological Interpretation**

Perhaps the most fascinating and significant development is a renewed interest in and commitment to theological interpretation of the NT. This, of course, is in contrast to the deeply rooted modern commitments to the historical critical method. While the discipline of NT studies has moved beyond a strictly historical critical approach, virtually all other approaches rest squarely on various assumptions of such a method. The assumption of Gospel "communities" as discussed above is an apt example. It should be noted that theological interpretation—at least in the more restrained sense—is very compatible with a nuanced historical approach.

There are several factors contributing to the theological reading of the NT. First, there is a growing interest in formulating biblical theology. Brevard Childs can be credited with providing significant impetus to a renewed interest in biblical theology.<sup>16</sup> He has, in the minds of many, argued persuasively that biblical theology is both possible (at least with respect to identifying common threads and points of unity throughout the canon) and needed (after all, the church professes a particular closed canon of

that "The Gospels Were Written for All Christians," *New Testament Studies* 51 (2005): 36–79.

<sup>15</sup>No doubt Bauckham's argument could be further nuanced and clarified at certain points, especially in light of some of the criticisms. His basic thesis, however, is historically and hermeneutically quite solid. For recent and realistic reassessments of the methods of NT scholarship by two very involved participants see Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009). Also, in his later works Bauckham has taken his criticism of the form critical underpinnings of Gospel interpretations to a new level; see especially his *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

<sup>16</sup>B.S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).



Scripture, whether one includes the Apocrypha or not). Charles Scobie, Cowan Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at Mount Allison University in Canada, has published an important 927-page attempt to sketch the history of biblical theology as a discipline and his understanding of how to construct biblical theology.<sup>17</sup> Scobie's work has received some significant attention, but its influence remains to be seen.

One of the most fruitful areas of study over the past fifty years has been the NT use of the OT. This area is intertwined with the possibility and shape of biblical theology. If it can be demonstrated that the NT writers were reading the (OT) Scriptures theologically, then there is every reason to think they expected their followers to read the Scriptures (OT and subsequently the NT) in a similar manner. C.H. Dodd demonstrated the presence of a central *kerygma* within much of the NT.<sup>18</sup> Since Dodd's day the focus and discussion on this area of study has built into a crescendo resulting in the recent one-volume commentary on the NT use of the OT.<sup>19</sup>

Joel Green and Max Turner, both NT scholars, are editing a new series of NT commentaries from Eerdmans.<sup>20</sup> The Two Horizons series is intended to bridge the alleged gap between biblical studies and systematic theology. Similarly, Brazos Press has commissioned a new commentary series written entirely by non-biblical scholars. They will be penned instead by specialists in other fields, most notably systematic and historical theology.

Related to all of this is a renewed attempt to articulate a NT theology. Recently we have seen a substantial account of NT theology from Howard Marshall, Frank Thielman, Frank Matera, and Thomas Schreiner, and of course we now have the first three volumes of N.T. Wright's proposed multi-volume NT theology. Philip Esler has published his account of prolegomena for NT theology, advocating certain aspects of what is no less theological interpretation. Greg Beale is due to publish his contributions in this area soon. Each of these works approaches the subject matter with a commitment to a unifying theological core within the NT, which illuminates, in one way or another, the entire NT.

All of the above, for the most part, looks behind the NT. Perhaps the most controversial aspect of theological interpretation is its forward movement. In other words, it reads the NT in light of later theological formu-

<sup>17</sup>C.H.H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>18</sup>C.H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Substructure of New Testament Theology* (London: Scribner, 1953).

<sup>19</sup>G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

<sup>20</sup>C. Bartholomew and J.G. McConville are editing the parallel series on the OT.



lations. Daniel Treier has provided a helpful introduction to the practice and agenda of theological interpretation. He refers to the “new movement” which “seeks to reverse the dominance of historical criticism over churchly reading of the Bible and to redefine the role of hermeneutics in theology.”<sup>21</sup> Particularly noteworthy here is the reality that canon and creed inevitably play an indispensable role in theological interpretation, for good or ill, conscious or unconscious. The breadth of this “movement” is indicated by the recent dictionary to facilitate it.<sup>22</sup>

Markus Bockmuehl has called for a closer and more comprehensive evaluation of the reception history of the NT texts, which inescapably confronts us with theological readings of Scripture.<sup>23</sup> Our reading of the NT ought to consider the judgment of the first couple of generations who received and evaluated the NT writings. Without this our readings are surely impoverished. Going hand in hand with this, a renewed interest in and reading of the church fathers is contributing to theological exegesis. New Testament scholars are listening once again to the voices of the earliest centuries of the church. The confessions and creeds of those early centuries are seen as articulations of both the theological structures and sum of the NT writings. This rediscovery of the fathers and their way of reading the NT brings a renewed commitment to canonical, theological, and ecclesial interpretation(s).

This then brings us full circle. At the beginning of my comments I spoke of the hermeneutical developments which characterized early modernity, later modernity, and postmodernity. The attempt to interpret the NT via theological exegesis completes the journey back to a premodern, theological reading of the Bible informed by the nature of Scripture, a renewed understanding and commitment to the *regula fidei*, and a canonical interpretation, thus giving us a fresh sense of what it means to be the people of God, hearing anew the Word of God.

## Conclusion

It generally takes at least a generation, and often longer, for a new development to get enough traction to affect a broad range of interpreters and then begin showing up in subsequent works. The New Perspective on Paul is already deeply entrenched in one form or another and will

<sup>21</sup>D.J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

<sup>22</sup>K.J. Vanhoozer, ed., *Dictionary for the Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

<sup>23</sup>Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word*. See also M. Bockmuehl and A.J. Torrance, eds., *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

likely be a development with significant pedigree. The abandonment of the search for the historical audiences or communities of the Gospels is likely too much to ask of main stream scholarship. Evangelicals and lay readers already approach the Gospels with little concern for such a search, so Bauckham's thesis is not so much of a development as a sophisticated foundation for an approach already widely in place. Unfortunately it will continue to be ignored by most of main-stream scholarship. It is too early to tell if the current trend of anti-Imperial readings of the NT will have much of a legacy. I doubt so, for such readings are under the spell of the current secular political climate, which the readings themselves may not outlast. Theological reading of the NT is gaining significant traction and looks to be a major development with staying power. It, too, is already widely practiced.

I offer here a few parting thoughts about the study of the NT. First, regardless of what we make of the details, forget not that every one of the NT writings is in some way attempting to address the fundamental issues of life. The intentions of the NT authors were not given over to trivial pursuits, but quite to the contrary. They were attempting to speak to the matters which give life purpose, coherence, direction, wisdom, etc. Second, these writings have been embraced with profound gravity and seriousness for two millennia now. The subject matter within these writings and the tradition of reception throughout the ages make it clear that a cavalier and presumptuous attitude toward them must surely be the result of arrogance, foolishness, blindness, deception, or some combination thereof. The nature of the NT writings and the tradition of their reception indicate that they should be considered with soberness and openness. Third, if even only the broad contours of the NT, or the inescapable central points, if you prefer, are correct, then the personal accountability to respond appropriately is a profound reality with which we must all deal. It truly is a matter of life and death, a matter of eternal consequence. Let the reader be warned, the subject at hand has a transforming claim upon your life and destiny from which you can never escape.