

# The Ethical Challenge of Decolonisation and the Future of New Testament Studies

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## Abstract

The challenge to decolonise academic disciplines has been pertinent for many decades, but it has recently come to a new level of prominence, with vigorous discussion of what responding to this challenge might entail. This article explores what it might mean as an ethical challenge in the discipline of New Testament studies, using examples to illustrate two key (and related) tasks: the ‘parochialisation’ of European approaches to the discipline, and the paying of attention to perspectives from elsewhere in the world. After a brief introduction to the decolonial challenge, there follows a brief survey of changing perspectives on the tasks of biblical studies, beginning with Johann Phillip Gabler’s influential lecture from 1787, then C.H. Dodd’s 1936 inaugural lecture, through to the more recent assessments of Markus Bockmuehl and Martin Hengel. This is followed by a survey of works of New Testament Introduction, moving from the classic work of Werner Georg Kümmel to the very recent *Asian Introduction to the New Testament*, edited by Johnson Thomaskutty. Finally, in light of these surveys, this article offers some reflections on decolonisation and the future(s) of New Testament studies. These reflections may suggest both parallels for the discipline of Christian ethics, and implications for the nature of the relationship between biblical studies and Christian ethics.

## Keywords

Decolonisation, New Testament studies, Johann Phillip Gabler, C.H. Dodd, New Testament Introduction, Asian Introduction

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## Introduction

The purpose and tasks of academic disciplines are not determined by statute or formal constitution, but are shaped by tradition and convention, and sustained by practices that determine what kind of knowledge any such discipline is concerned to seek, and how it seeks that knowledge.<sup>1</sup> One implication of this is that meta-critical and meta-ethical questions are bound up in the pursuit of our disciplines, whether we attend to those questions or not. It may be the case, as Robert Morgan and John Barton comment concerning biblical scholars working in historical mode, that they ‘seldom discuss why they pursue some questions raised by the texts, and not others. Like good soldiers they get on with the job and do not reason why’.<sup>2</sup> But it is important that we do reflect on these wider questions, and on the public responsibilities of the discipline, an issue that pertains to what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza called ‘the ethics of biblical scholarship’, in her SBL presidential address of 1987 under that title.<sup>3</sup> For whom is the discipline’s knowledge of interest, and who benefits from, or is damaged by, that knowledge? What kind of knowledge is sought, and by what means? Moreover, while academics tend to consider such questions, if at all, at the intellectual level, material questions of power and money are also bound up with them: Who pays for us to do our work, and who decides which kinds of work to pay for? Which bodies, public or private, ecclesial or secular, fund our work, what interest do they have in that work, and what benefits do they derive from it? There will of course be immediate and proper reaction against any overly instrumentalised view of academic research, but that does not, I think, make these questions inappropriate.

## The Decolonial Challenge

There may perhaps be times, rightly or wrongly, when such meta-ethical questions do not press upon us, when scholars can ‘get on with the job’ without stopping to ‘reason why’. But the present is not such a time, even if the pressing of the questions is long overdue. With the profile and impact of campaigns such as Rhodes Must Fall, which began in Cape Town, South Africa in 2015, and Black Lives Matter, which was the focus of worldwide protests after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, the call to ‘decolonise the curriculum’ has become

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1. I recognise that to speak of ‘knowledge’ here begs questions about what that means, what counts as knowledge, and whether the kind of inquiry typically undertaken in a field such as biblical studies (or philosophy, literary criticism, ethics, and others) generates ‘knowledge’. I use the term in a broad and loose sense, as is typical, for example, in the criteria universities set for doctoral theses—which must offer a ‘contribution to knowledge’.
  2. Robert Morgan with John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 220.
  3. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107.1 (1988), pp. 3–17.

prominent in the field of education, and specifically in universities, in the UK and elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> The challenge to rethink our academic disciplines in light of the processes of decolonisation has been around for many decades, given the formal political acts of decolonisation that began after the Second World War, in many cases after long and violent struggles.<sup>5</sup> Some disciplines have done more than others to respond to these challenges, and in New Testament studies the challenge of reshaping the discipline in light of the Holocaust—a challenge not unrelated to those arising from the legacies of colonialism and empire<sup>6</sup>—has been more prominently considered than have the issues concerning the discipline’s enmeshment in colonial (and missionary) ideologies of racial and religious superiority.<sup>7</sup>

But it is not straightforward to articulate what the challenge of decolonising an academic discipline might entail, not least given varied and debated views of decolonisation and specifically of decolonising the curriculum. While decolonisation, for example, might be taken to refer to the formal processes of political change, the notion of decoloniality—associated particularly with the generative work of the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano—locates the decolonial imperative in a much wider call to delink from the intertwined operations of modernity and coloniality, which are seen as fundamental to the modern, Euro-American, neoliberal, capitalist

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4. See, for example, Priyamvada Gopal, ‘On Decolonisation and the University’, *Textual Practice* 35.6 (2021), pp. 873–99; Graham Ward, ‘Decolonizing Theology’, *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 3.2 (2017), pp. 561–84; Malory Nye, ‘Decolonizing the Study of Religion’, *Open Library of Humanities* 5.1 (2019), pp. 1–45. For examples of statements and activities from specific universities, see, e.g., Keele University’s Manifesto for Decolonising the Curriculum (at: <https://www.keele.ac.uk/equalitydiversity/equalityframeworksandactivities/equalityawardsandreports/equalityawards/raceequalitycharter/keeledecolonisingthecurriculumnetwork/#keele-manifesto-for-decolonising-the-curriculum>, accessed 22 August 2022); and the programme at the University of Cambridge’s CRASH (see: <https://www.crash.cam.ac.uk/research/networks/decolonising-the-curriculum-in-theory-and-practice>, accessed 22 August 2022).
  5. For one historical overview related to the British Empire, see Nicholas J. White, *Decolonisation: The British Experience since 1945* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013 [1999]).
  6. As has sometimes been observed, Nazi antisemitism may be seen as an inward outworking of the logic of European racial superiority and denigration of the racialised other, just as colonialism expressed the outward enactment of a somewhat comparable ideology. See, e.g., the analysis in Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2022), pp. 98–109; and the pithy remark of Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 125: ‘Fascism was simply colonialism brought home to Europe’. For reflection on the possible connections between Nazi antisemitism and European colonial ideology, see David Tollerton, ‘The Religious Challenges of Linking Holocaust Memory with Colonial Violence’, in Sara E. Brown and Stephen D. Smith (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Mass Atrocity, and Genocide* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), pp. 87–95.
  7. For a recent attempt to do the latter, see Andrew M. Mbuvi, *African Biblical Studies: Unmasking Embedded Racism and Colonialism in Biblical Studies* (London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2022).

system and its structures of racial, patriarchal, heterosexual and economic domination.<sup>8</sup> One aspect of this programme may be of particular relevance to our concerns, and that is the focus on epistemology, or, more specifically, the call for what Walter D. Mignolo calls ‘epistemic decolonisation’.<sup>9</sup> In other words, part of the work of decolonisation involves challenging the particular modes of knowing, and the forms of academic ‘research’, associated with disciplines that trace their origin to European modernity, and which are arguably thereby bound up with colonial ideologies and practices.

Decentring dominant Eurocentric epistemologies and methods will, at a minimum, require that we bring a wider range of global perspectives centrally into our disciplines’ research and teaching agenda, diversifying the kinds of knowledge we allow to define what our discipline is about—not merely as peripheral ‘alternative’ perspectives, or as options for those who happen to have an interest in them. As Priyamvada Gopal puts it:

Decolonisation in the university context should not be conceived of as a sop to ethnic minorities or a concession to pluralism but as fundamentally reparative of the institution and its constituent fields of inquiry ... it entails re-examining the definition of knowledge itself—including what and how we come to know—in very fundamental ways.

A largely white or largely male curriculum is not politically incorrect, as is often believed, but intellectually unsound. Monocultures do not produce good thinking ... An intellectually expansive curriculum that, taken as a whole, puts different ideas, texts and traditions in conversation is pedagogically sound.<sup>10</sup>

We might pause to note that, contrary to the assertions of some—not least some associated with the current UK government—who exaggerate the polarisation of the so-called culture wars by depicting the decolonising agenda as one that calls for the ‘banning’ of white male authors,<sup>11</sup> this vision is essentially one in which the range of perspectives is broadened and diversified, such that the white male traditions of the western European

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8. See, for example, Aníbal Quijano, ‘Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality’, *Cultural Studies* 21.2–3 (2007), pp. 168–78; Rita Segato, *The Critique of Coloniality: Eight Essays*, trans. Ramsey McGlazer (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), pp. 21–48; Walter D. Mignolo, ‘Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of Decoloniality’, *Cultural Studies* 21.2–3 (2007), pp. 449–514.

9. Mignolo, ‘Delinking’, p. 469; cf. also Walter D. Mignolo, ‘Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 26.7–8 (2009), pp. 1–23.

10. Gopal, ‘On Decolonisation’, pp. 880 and 877 respectively.

11. The report of the ‘Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities’ refers to ‘our response to negative calls for “decolonising” the curriculum. Neither the banning of White authors or token expressions of Black achievement will help to broaden young minds’ (Tony Sewell et al., ‘The Report of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities’ (UK Government, 2021), p. 8; available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-report-of-the-commission-on-race-and-ethnic-disparities>, accessed 22 August 2022). Both facets of this description—‘banning’ and ‘token expressions’—distort the target of the critique.

academy do not retain their hegemonic position, that is, they do not continue, by default, to define what and how a discipline seeks to know.

In light of this broad agenda, we might identify two specific facets of the decolonial challenge. The first is captured in the idea of ‘provincialising Europe’.<sup>12</sup> In other words, rather than assume our inherited disciplinary tradition to be definitive of that discipline, we may seek to show how particular, how contextually- and historically-shaped, are its modes of enquiry and chosen foci, despite the masking of such contextual specificity behind claims to detached objectivity or universal relevance. Another way of putting this is to adapt the mantra of historical enquiry in seeking to emphasise the strangeness—or, in Catherine Chin’s words, the ‘weirdness’—of the past, and to challenge the taken-for-grantedness of our discipline’s modes of enquiry by making them weird too.<sup>13</sup> The second facet is the positive flip-side of the previous point: by attending carefully and thoughtfully—‘listening desperately’, as it were<sup>14</sup>—to voices and perspectives from the Global South, we might find ways to reframe and reconceive the tasks of our discipline. In doing so, of course, we not only tackle meta-ethical questions about the discipline of New Testament studies, but might also reframe the ways in which the discipline relates and contributes to others, including Christian ethics. In what follows, I shall attempt both these related tasks, though in an exploratory and limited way; first, by examining some key influences that shape the traditions that define biblical studies, and second, by considering how the discipline is practised through an examination of examples from the distinctive genre of New Testament Introduction.

## The Traditions and Tasks of Biblical Studies: From Johann Philipp Gabler to Markus Bockmuehl

In 1787, Johann Phillip Gabler (1753–1826) delivered his inaugural address at the University of Altdorf in Bavaria, ‘on the proper distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology and the specific objectives of each’.<sup>15</sup> In seeking to establish this distinction,

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12. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, new edn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
  13. See Catherine Chin, ‘Marvelous Things Heard: On Finding Historical Radiance’, *The Massachusetts Review* 58.3 (2017), pp. 478–91. Chin’s work is used by Matthew Novenson in his argument for making Paul ‘weird’, given Paul’s profound and normative influence on traditions of Christian theology. See Matthew V. Novenson, *Paul, Then and Now* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022).
  14. Cf. Barbara Applebaum, ‘White Ignorance and Denials of Complicity: On the Possibility of Doing Philosophy in Good Faith’, in George Yancy (ed.), *The Center Must Not Hold: White Women Philosophers on the Whiteness of Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2010), p. 15.
  15. Gabler’s address is quoted from (and uses the pagination of) John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge, ‘J.P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of his Originality’, *Journal of Theological Studies* 33.2 (1980), pp. 133–58; their translation is also reproduced in the *Midwestern Journal of Theology* 10.1 (2011), pp. 1–11.

Gabler was partly concerned to address the causes of dissension and disagreement among the churches of his time, by asserting a clear difference between ‘the simplicity and ease of biblical theology’ and ‘the subtlety and difficulty of dogmatic theology’.<sup>16</sup> More simply put, the task of biblical theology is to describe, identify and isolate—through sensitive philological and historical examination—a clear outline of the pure scriptural teachings, separated from their historical particulars, which can then be used as a ‘fundamental basis’ for dogmatic theological work.<sup>17</sup> This involves careful attention to the content of the biblical books, recognising that each book, and each author, had a distinctive historical context and style of writing.<sup>18</sup> It also means considering when, in the case of Paul, for example, the author is ‘speaking his own words or those of others’, and whether his opinion is an essential ‘part of Christian doctrine or some opinion that is shaped to the needs of the time’. Indeed, Gabler is candid about the need to differentiate ‘what in the sayings of the Apostles is truly divine, and what perchance merely human’. No one, he suggests, ‘would apply to our times ... Paul’s advice about women veiling themselves in church’, for example. Through ‘exegetical observation only’, this kind of careful and discerning understanding may be sought.<sup>19</sup>

It is clear enough that Gabler’s proposal emerges from a particular European history and is shaped by a specifically European context. The presenting problem is the ‘fatal discords of the various sects’ of Christianity,<sup>20</sup> which have seen Europe riven not only by ecclesial disputes but also by bloody religious war. And the particular form of the solution, discerning the universal truths of the Christian religion from among the historical particulars of the biblical witnesses, through historical critical enquiry, bears the unmistakable imprint of post-Enlightenment European philosophy. Indeed, Gabler’s vision forms a part of the project of creating an ‘Enlightenment Bible’, or an ‘academic Bible’, along with an associated discipline of ‘biblical studies’, in a shift that might be pithily characterised as one from ‘scripture’ to ‘Bible’.<sup>21</sup> While some aspects of Gabler’s programme have not endured well—notably this insistence on separating

16. Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, ‘J.P. Gabler’, p. 135.

17. Cf. Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, ‘J.P. Gabler’, pp. 139–40, 143, etc. As Loren Stuckenbruck explains in more detail, there are thus essentially three steps in Gabler’s approach: (1) ‘to study the various biblical texts in order to describe their respective linguistic and historical settings’; (2) ‘a classification of elements which rise above historical particulars’; (3) ‘by comparing the various elements delineated in step two’, to arrive ‘at common ideas which then may be considered as “divine” products that transcend what is merely human’. Loren T. Stuckenbruck, ‘Johann Philipp Gabler and the Delineation of Biblical Theology’, *Journal of Theological Studies* 52.2 (1999), pp. 139–57, at pp. 144–45.

18. Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, ‘J.P. Gabler’, pp. 139–40.

19. Quotations here and in the preceding sentences from Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, ‘J.P. Gabler’, pp. 141–43.

20. Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, ‘J.P. Gabler’, p. 134.

21. See the rich historical studies of Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005) and Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

universal truths from historical particulars—his influence on the emergence of biblical theology as a discipline separate from dogmatic theology is unparalleled.<sup>22</sup> His influence also remains in terms of the definition of biblical theology as a primarily historical task, in which historical-critical exegesis has ‘a *procedural* priority’.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, his conception of the task of biblical theology has recently received positive attention from Evangelical scholars, who stress the ongoing importance of work in biblical theology which they see as continuing the programme outlined by Gabler,<sup>24</sup> despite Gabler’s insistence that some of Scripture’s teachings are historically conditioned or of human origin, such that true scriptural doctrine must be critically discerned from among the various perspectives in the Bible.<sup>25</sup> Much modern scholarship which is essentially concerned to outline the distinctive theology, or indeed the ethics, of each particular biblical book can be seen, at least in part, as a continuation of the programme and legacy of Gabler.

Gabler’s early vision may be compared with the outline of the tasks of New Testament studies given in another inaugural lecture, delivered in Cambridge in 1936, around 150 years after Gabler’s inaugural address, by C.H. Dodd.<sup>26</sup> In Dodd’s vision, ‘biblical theology’ takes its place among a series of key tasks in the discipline of New Testament studies. These tasks are presented as sequential stages. ‘The foundations are laid in textual criticism’, and once the text is ‘secure’, the questions raised by ‘higher criticism’ may be addressed. These are the introductory questions of date, authorship, circumstances, purpose, sources, and so on. ‘The next stage is detailed exegesis of the text’, a task that demands philological expertise, and which in turn requires the broader contextualisation of the texts within the religious worlds of ‘Judaism, Greek philosophy, Hellenistic religion ... and ... the developing thoughts of the Christian Church after the New Testament period’. Finally, the task of interpretation proper may begin.

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22. Cf. Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, ‘J.P. Gabler’, p. 150: ‘Gabler can be said to have done more than any other single figure to make biblical theology a separate discipline’; Stuckenbruck, ‘Johann Philipp Gabler’, p. 139.
  23. Stuckenbruck, ‘Johann Philipp Gabler’, p. 146 (original emphasis); cf. p. 148: ‘the task of biblical theology for Gabler is primarily historical’.
  24. See Andreas J. Köstenberger, ‘Editorial’, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 55.1 (2012), pp. 1–5, who finds ‘Gabler’s proposal hermeneutically sound, theologically astute, well argued, and altogether timely ... The discipline of biblical theology, which many say Gabler inaugurated that day ... today represents one of the most promising fields in biblical and theological studies’ (p. 1). Note also the republication of Gabler’s address in the *Midwestern Journal of Theology* 10.1 (2011), pp. 1–11.
  25. Cf. Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, ‘J.P. Gabler’, pp. 147–48. Köstenberger, ‘Editorial’, p. 1, comments: ‘To be sure, at the end of his address Gabler seems to fall short of a fully evangelical view of the Bible’s inspiration, opining that “we must investigate what in the sayings of the Apostles is truly divine, and what perchance merely human”’.
  26. C.H. Dodd, *The Present Task in New Testament Studies: An Inaugural Lecture delivered in the Divinity School on Tuesday 2 June 1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936). Cf. also Stuckenbruck’s comparison of Gabler with Krister Stendahl’s famous articles from the 1960s distinguishing biblical theology’s quest for ‘what it meant’ and systematic theology’s task to elaborate ‘what it means’, noting both similarities and differences. Stuckenbruck, ‘Johann Philipp Gabler’, pp. 154–57.

'Interpretation in this sense', Dodd remarks, 'culminates in biblical theology, which is the ἀκρογωνιαίον of the whole building'.<sup>27</sup>

Even if the results of the earlier tasks remain somewhat provisional or incomplete, there is, Dodd believes, sufficient sense of critical advance and progress in the discipline to move on to 'the over-ruling problem of interpretation'. 'The present task', Dodd writes, 'is to make interpretation the conscious and direct aim of our studies'; not to take this step is to risk condemning 'our studies to sterility'.<sup>28</sup> While Dodd differs from Gabler in his insistence that one cannot separate the 'permanent' element in the New Testament from its 'temporary setting', like Gabler, Dodd's vision includes a commitment to the truth of the Christian gospel:<sup>29</sup> the New Testament scholar's task is to enter the strange world of the first century and to return, 'and give to the truth he has discerned a body out of the stuff of our own thought'.<sup>30</sup>

Markus Bockmuehl's overview of the state of the discipline, written six decades after Dodd's, exposes what now seems the naivety of Dodd's vision. In contrast to Dodd's sense of substantial progress, Bockmuehl highlights the methodological diversity and disagreement, the proliferation of publications, the speculative and questionable hypotheses, along with profound differences of view about how—if at all—the discipline relates to theology and to the Church. All these might suggest a discipline with little coherent or agreed sense of contemporary purpose.<sup>31</sup> Even the stages of the enterprise that Dodd saw as reasonably complete—such as the task of establishing the text of the New Testament, and resolving the 'introductory' questions of authorship, date, setting, and so on—continue to be areas of ongoing research and substantial debate. In terms of the historical-critical enquiries that remain prominent in the discipline's work, Bockmuehl remarks, 'Without necessarily reaching agreed solutions, most of the major *historical critical* questions one might wish to ask of the NT have now indeed had a pretty good turn, and the discussion will not substantially advance without the discovery of genuinely new evidence'.<sup>32</sup> Even in Martin Hengel's broadly traditional, historical-critical, philological, and sometimes polemical programme for the 'tasks of New Testament scholarship', published in 1994, there is a candid acknowledgment that

27. Preceding quotations from Dodd, *Present Task*, pp. 7–8. See also the summary of Dodd's programmatic and sequential vision in Markus Bockmuehl, '"To Be or Not to Be": The Possible Futures of New Testament Scholarship', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51.3 (1998), pp. 271–306, at p. 272. A revised version of the article is available in Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2006), pp. 27–74.

28. Quotations from Dodd, *Present Task*, pp. 30–31; on the sense of critical advance, see pp. 10, 30.

29. 'To interpret the New Testament is to understand the various forms which the Gospel takes in such a way as to understand the Gospel itself' (Dodd, *Present Task*, p. 37).

30. Dodd, *Present Task*, pp. 40–41; cf. also pp. 37–38: 'The interpreter I have in mind will be one who, having penetrated to the historical actuality of first-century Christianity, has received an impression of the truth in it which lies beyond the flux of time'.

31. Bockmuehl, 'To Be or Not to Be', pp. 273–80.

32. Bockmuehl, 'To Be or Not to Be', p. 276; original emphasis.

many of the historical questions on which scholarship has focused should simply be acknowledged as unanswerable, and that the discipline risks becoming a 'discipline of opinions' (*Vermutungswissenschaft*):

Do we really believe that here we will come still closer to the truth via a huge mass of computers and doctoral students? Would not an acknowledgment of the doubts (*Aporien*) and a *non liquet* ['it is not clear'] be more honest? Do these and other towers of hypotheses not end in a general state of confusion?<sup>33</sup>

Hengel's solution focuses largely on the need for historical and philological expertise, and for studies that will illuminate the New Testament's texts against the background of the wealth of comparative literature and other material available both from Jewish and non-Jewish sources. It is also notable, however, that he sees this historical and philological work as central to a discipline that is equally rooted in the field of theology:

Our discipline would destroy itself, if it sought to abandon the Pauline and Johannine theological word of God, and to transform itself into a merely descriptive history of religion, in which this question may no longer be posed. For here is the salt that gives our work flavour and a reason to exist.<sup>34</sup>

Practitioners of the discipline must not forget, according to Hengel, that their concern is fundamentally with what Paul calls 'the truth of the gospel', that is, 'with the enduring truth of the earliest Christian message'.<sup>35</sup>

Bockmuehl presents two constructive proposals for a fruitful future for New Testament studies. The first of these is a focus on *Wirkungsgeschichte*, or 'effective history', an area of burgeoning interest in recent decades and one to which Bockmuehl, among many others, has already made significant

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33. Martin Hengel, 'Aufgaben der neutestamentlichen Wissenschaft', *New Testament Studies* 40.3 (1994), pp. 321–57 at p. 336: 'Glaubt man wirklich, hier mit einem Massenaufgebot von Computern und Doktoranden [*sic*] der Wahrheit doch noch näher zu kommen? Wäre hier nicht ein Aufweisen der Aporien und ein *non liquet* ehrlicher? Enden diese und andere Hypothesentürme nicht am Ende in einer allgemeinen Verwirrung?' On the risk of becoming a *Vermutungswissenschaft*, see p. 334. On the polemical aspects of Hengel's presentation, see, e.g., his dismissal of 'feminist' or 'materialist' methods, arguing that these cannot be properly scholarly: 'An das Recht einer spezifisch "feministischen" Exegese glaube ich dagegen so wenig wie an das einer "materialistischen". Wissenschaftliche "Methoden", die ernst genommen werden wollen, können weder biologisch-geschlechtsspezifisch noch ideologisch-parteegebunden sein' (p. 352).

34. Hengel, 'Aufgaben', p. 329: 'Unsere Disziplin würde sich selbst zerstören, wollte sie die vom paulinischen und johanneischen theologischen Gotteswortes aufgeben und sich in bloße deskriptive Religionsgeschichte verwandeln, in der diese Frage nicht mehr gestellt werden darf. Hier ist das Salz, das unserer Arbeit Würze und Existenzberechtigung gibt.'

35. Hengel, 'Aufgaben', p. 349: '... d.h. nach der bleibenden Wahrheit der urchristlichen Botschaft'.

contributions.<sup>36</sup> Bockmuehl's second proposal is for a focus on the 'implied reader' of the New Testament, who is someone who 'has a personal stake in the reference and truth of what these texts assert' and 'is interested in the NT primarily for its apostolic witness to God's work in Jesus Christ'.<sup>37</sup> While this clearly places a primary focus on New Testament studies as an ecclesially-located discipline, Bockmuehl argues that it need not be an overly polarising proposal, since 'the question of the implied reader' can be 'addressed from a wide variety of intellectual and experiential perspectives, including the purely secular and phenomenological, the post-structuralist or liberationist'.<sup>38</sup> But it is clearly enough a perspective that—not unlike Hengel's—locates the discipline fundamentally within the context of the believing community, with readers who are existentially invested in what they study.<sup>39</sup>

The discipline of New Testament studies—and biblical studies more generally—is thus shaped by a long and distinctive tradition, which, broadly speaking, sees its key task as being, through philological and historical-critical study, to elucidate the distinctive theological perspectives of each book or author, in order to provide material that is crucial, if preliminary, to the constructive tasks of Christian theology (and Christian ethics). While Gabler laid out an early and formative version of that vision, and Dodd saw its sequential tasks as largely complete, the following decades have left us with a sense of the fragility of many of the supposedly 'secure results' on which progress might be built—and serious questions, as Bockmuehl shows, about the extent to which such a vision remains coherent, shared, or viable. Surveying this history also helps to destabilise the established traditions of method and task, highlighting their particularity, even their weirdness, and thus to render problematic any inclination simply to 'get on with the job' without 'reasoning why'. Even without any direct consideration of the decolonial challenge, it seems that there are serious questions to address; and these questions and uncertainties make an engagement with that decolonial challenge all the more significant.

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36. Bockmuehl, 'To Be or Not to Be', pp. 295–98; cf. also Hengel, 'Aufgaben', p. 350, on the value of *Auslegungsgeschichte*. Among Bockmuehl's main contributions, see Markus Bockmuehl, *The Remembered Peter in Ancient Reception and Modern Debate* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

37. Bockmuehl, 'To Be or Not to Be', p. 298.

38. Bockmuehl, 'To Be or Not to Be', p. 301.

39. Note, for example, Bockmuehl's closing remarks: 'it may turn out that the implied reader is in a better position to understand the text than the aloof or distrusting interpreter ... To use an image which would have been equally intelligible to C.H. Dodd: there are limits to how much you can usefully say about the stained glass windows of King's College Chapel without actually going inside' (Bockmuehl, 'To Be or Not to Be', p. 302). Likewise, he remarks on a positive feature of Bultmann's existentialist perspective, 'that it took seriously the extent to which the NT texts take for granted a reader for whom interpretation and participation are inseparable parts of the same process' (p. 300).

## New Testament Introduction: From Werner Georg Kümmel to Johnson Thomaskutty

In order to think more about the practice of the discipline, and how it might be reshaped, I shall now look at some examples from the particular genre of New Testament Introduction, including, finally, a recent example with an explicitly Asian orientation. This type of work is, of course, a particular kind of output within New Testament studies, which is a hugely diverse and often contested field. But it is long established as a 'standard' kind of reference work within the field, and also the kind of work that may serve, rather like commentaries, to communicate the findings of the discipline to those working in cognate areas, such as Christian theology and ethics. In relating this to the previous sections, my concern will be to assess how these works represent a particular vision of the tasks of the discipline, and what kind of 'knowledge' it is that they seek and present. In order to focus the discussion, I shall pay particular attention to their treatment of two New Testament books, the Gospel of Mark and the first letter of Peter. This will then enable us, finally, to offer some concluding reflections on the ethical challenge of decolonisation in the field of New Testament studies.

The particular genre of scholarly, historical-critical, 'introduction' to the New Testament, is, as W.G. Kümmel remarks, essentially a post-Enlightenment object, and most of the early examples were produced in the nineteenth century by German Protestants.<sup>40</sup> Kümmel's volume, first published in 1964 and then in revised form in 1973, is itself a replacement for earlier editions in its series, which began with Paul Feine's *Einleitung* from 1913. Kümmel's widely used volume stands, however, as a representative landmark; though now dated, it was a standard work for many who began their studies of the New Testament in the later decades of the twentieth century.

After introductory chapters on the essential tools for New Testament study, and on the nature and history of New Testament 'introduction', Kümmel presents an introduction to each New Testament book, beginning with the Gospels and Acts, then moving through the Letters (though not in canonical order) and ending at the Apocalypse. The volume concludes with chapters on the formation of the New Testament canon and the history and criticism of the text of the New Testament. The introduction to each book follows a broadly similar pattern: first a brief outline of its contents, then some analysis of its literary content, aims and occasion, followed by discussion of authorship, date and location. The precise areas of discussion vary—for example, discussion of the Letters devotes more space to the community addressed, the occasion of the writing, compared with the treatment of the Gospels—but these are the main concerns.

Information on authorship, date and place can be more or less conclusive. With regard to Mark, for example, Kümmel states that 'the author of Mk is unknown to us'; he favours a 'Gentile community in the East' as its location, rather than Rome, and a date around 70 CE.<sup>41</sup> His view on 1 Peter is that it is 'undoubtedly a pseudonymous writing' composed

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40. W.G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd edn (London: SCM, 1975), pp. 29–34.

41. Kümmel, *Introduction*, pp. 97–98.

perhaps in Rome, probably around 90–95 CE.<sup>42</sup> But even conclusions about which Kümmel allows no doubt continue to be open to debate.<sup>43</sup> (A rather different perspective and set of conclusions is unsurprisingly presented in Donald Guthrie's roughly contemporaneous *New Testament Introduction*, which, written from an Evangelical perspective, argues against the likelihood of epistolary pseudepigraphy in the New Testament and defends the authenticity of 1 (and 2) Peter, as well as of the various disputed Pauline epistles.<sup>44</sup>)

In his engagement with existing scholarship on Mark, it is interesting to note how much of Kümmel's discussion is focused on rejecting the proposals that have been presented. He comments, for example, on hypotheses that are 'completely contrived' or 'simply cannot be demonstrated'.<sup>45</sup> It is also striking, with the benefit of hindsight, that even the assertions Kümmel *does* make with confidence about Mark's Gospel—that it has no specific connection with Peter or with Pauline theology—have since been challenged and continue to be topics of debate.<sup>46</sup> Likewise in relation to 1 Peter, where Kümmel sees 'unmistakable references to baptism' in a letter whose author 'no doubt ... stands in the line of succession of Pauline theology', more recent scholarship has rejected the notion of a specifically baptismal focus in the letter (baptism is mentioned explicitly only once, at 3.21), and questioned the extent of its Pauline connections.<sup>47</sup>

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42. Kümmel, *Introduction*, pp. 424–25.

43. As Reinhard Feldmeier comments, the evidence does not allow certainty regarding 1 Peter's authorship, though he concludes that the weight of evidence 'speaks with a greater likelihood against the apostle Peter as the author of this work' (Reinhard Feldmeier, *The First Letter of Peter: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, trans. Peter H. Davids (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), pp. 32–39 (quotation p. 38). Pseudonymity is indeed, in my view, the most likely hypothesis, and defences of authenticity are often influenced by convictions about the importance of this for apostolic and canonical authority; see further David G. Horrell and Travis B. Williams, *1 Peter*, vol. 1 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, forthcoming 2023).

44. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1970). Guthrie's introduction was originally published in the 1960s in three separate parts, then combined (in a revised third edition) into a single volume in 1970 (and revised further thereafter). References here are to the 1970 edition. On the general issue of pseudonymity, see pp. 671–84; on authorship questions regarding the Pastoral Epistles, pp. 584–622; on 1 Peter, pp. 773–90; on 2 Peter, pp. 820–48.

45. Quotations from Kümmel, *Introduction*, pp. 87, 89; see pp. 85–94 for plentiful examples.

46. On the former, see Helen K. Bond, 'Was Peter behind Mark's Gospel?', in Helen K. Bond and Larry W. Hurtado (eds.), *Peter in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), pp. 46–61; on the latter, Joel Marcus, 'Mark—Interpreter of Paul', *New Testament Studies* 46.4 (2000), pp. 473–87.

47. Kümmel, *Introduction*, pp. 421 and 423. For an early push-back against the baptismal focus, see David Hill, 'On Suffering and Baptism in 1 Peter', *Novum Testamentum* 18.3 (1976), pp. 181–89; against the idea of the letter's Pauline character, see Jens Herzer, *Petrus oder Paulus? Studien über das Verhältnis des Ersten Petrusbriefes zur paulinischen Tradition* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998).

Other New Testament Introductions traverse similar territory (as do many courses introducing the New Testament to students).<sup>48</sup> Raymond Brown, despite regarding Kümmel's work as 'deadly for beginning students' and so 'attempting' a volume 'very different from that', covers the same spectrum of questions, even if the approach and style assume less prior familiarity and offer a more accessible entrée to the discipline.<sup>49</sup> For example, Brown's chapter on Mark opens with a lengthy description of the message and content of the Gospel, followed by a discussion of Mark's sources, approaches to interpreting Mark, authorship, place of origin, and date. A concluding section on 'issues and problems for reflection' includes some attention to the question of anti-Judaism emerging from Mark's passion narrative in particular.<sup>50</sup> Brown is somewhat more sympathetic to the traditions that connect the Gospel with an author named Mark, and thereby with Peter, but like Kümmel remains non-committal on authorship. He is also agnostic on the place of composition ('we cannot know precisely the locale addressed by Mark') and reports the 'wide scholarly agreement that Mark was written in the late 60s or just after 70'—though this too continues to be debated.<sup>51</sup>

Something of a shift in emphasis is apparent in the volume by Paul Achtemeier, Joel Green and Marianne Thompson, signalled by their title, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology*.<sup>52</sup> While this Introduction does discuss issues of authorship, date, location and occasion, these are dealt with relatively briefly—perhaps because of the lack of firm evidence in many cases and/or the sense that these are not crucial for understanding the content and message. What receives more attention is the literary and theological content of each book. In their treatment of the Gospel of Mark, for example, the majority of the chapter is devoted to the content and narrative shape of the Gospel (with inset boxes illustrating points of comparison or historical context), while just a few pages are devoted to discussion of Mark's 'setting and purpose', with notably cautious and agnostic conclusions.<sup>53</sup> Regarding 'the identity of the Evangelist and his audience and

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48. Guthrie's work, despite its different theological perspective and related arguments, treats essentially the same issues of content, purpose, authorship, occasion, date and place. A different approach is taken in Raymond F. Collins, *Introduction to the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1983), which organises its chapters by different approaches and methods, illustrating how each of these methods is applied to New Testament texts.

49. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. vii, n. 1. It has recently been abridged and edited (by Marion L. Soards) as Raymond E. Brown and Marion L. Soards, *An Introduction to the New Testament: The Abridged Edition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

50. On the message and content of Mark, see Brown, *Introduction*, pp. 126–49; on the question of anti-Judaism, pp. 166–67.

51. Brown, *Introduction*, pp. 162 and 164. For an example of the ongoing debate, see James G. Crossley, *The Date of Mark's Gospel: Insight from the Jewish Law in Earliest Christianity* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), who argues for a much earlier date.

52. Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green and Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

53. On the content and narrative shape of Mark, see Achtemeier, Green and Thompson, *Introducing*, pp. 123–43; on setting and purpose, pp. 143–46.

when and where he wrote it ... we know nothing certain on any of these issues'.<sup>54</sup> The usual possibilities are nonetheless canvassed—the possibility of a link with John Mark and with Peter, a likely date in the late 60s—but little interpretative weight is placed upon them.

The treatment of 1 Peter gives comparatively more attention to issues concerning addressees, author and setting, but again shows particular concern to locate the content of the letter within the stream of early Christian thought (noting parallels with Jesus traditions, Paul, James, etc.). A brief section on the letter's themes concludes the discussion. A notable contrast with one of Kümmel's more confident assertions is their (somewhat surprising) insistence that 'doubts about Petrine authorship ... are easily laid to rest ... by the implication of 1:1 and 5:12 that Peter commissioned this letter, not actually writing it—a task that would have been undertaken, then, by Sylvanus [*sic*]'.<sup>55</sup>

It is also important to note what seems to be the 'implied readership' of these works of New Testament Introduction.<sup>56</sup> The distinctive genre of such works already suggests a primarily Christian audience, since the focus is on the historical setting and theological content of each of the books contained within the canonical New Testament. A purely historical investigation of the origins of Christianity would be equally concerned with all the evidence pertinent to understanding the earliest Christian movement, and the distinction between canonical and non-canonical texts would be of significance only insofar as the formation of the canon is itself a topic of historical interest. Kümmel's work gives little explicit indication of this assumed audience, though it is clear enough in the closing words of his 1972 preface: 'May this Introduction also in its new form serve the study of the New Testament as *the* source of Christian faith and Christian theology'.<sup>57</sup> The perception of the introductory task itself as *wissenschaftlich*, however, along with the Gablerian distinction between the tasks of biblical studies and the tasks of systematic theology, mean that indications as to the contemporary theological or ethical significance of the New Testament texts are largely absent. The same is true of a more recent work from

54. Achtemeier, Green and Thompson, *Introducing*, p. 143.

55. Achtemeier, Green and Thompson, *Introducing*, p. 519. This is surprising given Achtemeier's arguments in his major commentary on 1 Peter that 'the best working hypothesis is anonymous authorship of a pseudonymous letter'. Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 43 (and see pp. 39–43). Recent scholarship has cast significant doubt on the plausibility of Silvanus acting as secretary; see, e.g., E. Randolph Richards, 'Silvanus Was Not Peter's Secretary: Theological Bias in Interpreting διὰ Σιλουανου...ἔγραψα in 1 Peter 5:12', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43.3 (2000), pp. 417–32.

56. The approach is different in Dale B. Martin, *New Testament History and Literature* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2012), which explicitly adopts a 'secular, nonconfessional point of view' (p. 2) and a 'historical-critical' approach (p. 5), which 'means approaching the New Testament not as "scripture" but simply as ancient documents produced by the movement that eventually became Christianity' (p. 2; cf. pp. 6–12). This also means that the canonical boundaries are less significant: the section on 'Gospels' covers Mark, Matthew and Thomas.

57. Kümmel, *Introduction*, p. 10.

the German tradition, Udo Schnelle's *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, translated into English in 1998.<sup>58</sup> Brown's introduction, by contrast, declares explicitly that 'religious, spiritual, and ecclesiastical issues raised by the NT will receive ample attention throughout this book'. The sections on 'issues and problems for reflection', which we have already mentioned in relation to Brown's discussion of Mark's Gospel, invite reflection on questions 'related to God, Christ, other NT figures, the church, etc.' In offering such material, Brown is explicitly aware that 'the majority of readers will be interested in it [the NT] because it is supposed to be important for them religiously'.<sup>59</sup> A Christian readership is clearly implied in these 'issues and problems' sections, and occasionally—and unusually—located in a particular, if broad, context, as when Brown remarks on the way in which 1 Peter's addressees 'are alienated from their surrounding society'. By contrast, he goes on to note, 'in today's first world, particularly in the United States, to blend into the surrounding society is almost an ideal, with the result that Christians who do not are looked on as sectarian'.<sup>60</sup> A Christian readership is still more prominent in the work of Achtemeier, Green and Thompson, which emphasises at the outset the importance of close literary analysis, historical contextualisation, and the identity of the New Testament 'as the church's scripture':

Most people who read the NT do so not because they find it interesting as literature or history. They read it because they share the conviction that this collection of documents, together with the OT, comprise the Scriptures of the church, its normative witness to the work of God in the world through Jesus Christ ... To acknowledge the NT as the Scripture of the church provides a fruitful prejudice for reading and hearing the NT. The church has regularly assumed that the NT is about human life before God and that its texts offer both descriptions of, and prescriptions for, that way of life. To attend to this dimension of these texts is to hear them on their own terms.<sup>61</sup>

These various Introductions, then, tend to confirm several key features of our earlier discussion. First, there is the continuing influence of the Gablerian vision of the discipline's tasks. Although these works of Introduction might be seen as distinct from, even prolegomena to, the writing of New Testament theology proper, much of their content is devoted to an analysis of the distinctive authorship, style, setting, structure and content of each document. In Dodd's terms, their focus may be on the 'introductory' questions of Higher Criticism, but a good deal of their effort also goes on elucidating the content, often with theological themes and significance in view—moving into what Dodd would see as the task of 'interpretation'. Second, as Hengel and Bockmuehl have highlighted, much of what is said about these introductory questions remains contested and contestable, and subject to ongoing uncertainty and challenge. Any sense of 'firm results' or foundations for progress seems fragile. Dodd's optimism about the achievements and assured results of scholarship seems to have been replaced by a sceptical

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58. Udo Schnelle, *The History and Theology of the New Testament Writings* (London: SCM, 1998).

59. Brown, *Introduction*, p. xi.

60. Brown, *Introduction*, p. 723.

61. Achtemeier, Green and Thompson, *Introducing*, pp. 9, 12–13.

realisation of the uncertainty of many of the discipline's historical findings. Third, these works, while historical in orientation, clearly imply a primarily Christian readership, providing introductory material that is intended to be relevant to contemporary devotion and theological reflection, and vital to theological engagement with the New Testament, even if these theological tasks remain beyond the explicit remit of the Introductions themselves.

This brief sampling of prominent New Testament Introductions from the Euro-American tradition provides a backdrop against which to consider a somewhat different example of the genre: *An Asian Introduction to the New Testament*, edited by Johnson Thomaskutty and published in 2022.<sup>62</sup> With a team of Asian contributors, most of whom are in academic positions in Asian institutions—in India, South Korea, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Singapore (alongside a few in the USA and one in Australia)—the Introduction covers familiar terrain in two key ways. First, the volume introduces each New Testament writing, covering these in canonical order. Second, each chapter gives some attention to the standard 'introductory' questions of authorship, setting and date, drawing on established scholarship to give an overview of the possibilities. Another similarity—made even more explicit in this volume—is that the primary intended audience is presumed to be Christian.<sup>63</sup> The key difference is captured in the opening sentence of the editor's introduction, which describes the book's 'focus on the NT writings in relation to the wider Asian realities'. The overall aim is to 'shift[] the emphasis from the traditional and Western framework in interpreting the NT documents' and to offer a different kind of focus, showing how 'the thought-world of the NT writings can be closely integrated with Asian realities'. Given 'Christianity's shift from the Western Hemisphere to the Eastern (especially Asian) contexts' there is a need for 'readings conducive to the new contexts', and in particular for readings that 'build bridges between the historical situations of the authors and the contemporary realities of the Asian readers'.<sup>64</sup> These concerns are evident in the two wide-ranging chapters that precede those that focus on a specific New Testament text, the first of which, by Kar Yong Lim, deals with 'The New Testament and the Sociocultural and Religious Realities of the Asian Contexts', and the second, by Yung Suk Kim, offers 'An Introduction to Asian Biblical Hermeneutics'. Lim's chapter details parallels between the sociocultural (and religious) features of the societies in which the New Testament emerged and contemporary Asian societies—noting characteristics such as collectivism, honour-shame paradigms, suffering and persecution, and so on. Kim's chapter seeks to illustrate what it means 'to read the NT as Asians', offering examples of intertextual reading

62. Johnson Thomaskutty (ed.), *An Asian Introduction to the New Testament* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022).

63. See, e.g., Thomaskutty, *Asian Introduction*, p. 26: 'how we can reflect on the message of Scripture and ... learn from each other as followers of Jesus Christ'; p. 96: 'an insider and outsider dynamism can work well in the process of witnessing Christ in the Asian context'; p. 467: 'As Christian minorities, we may feel'; cf. p. 491, etc.

64. Johnson Thomaskutty, 'Introduction', in Thomaskutty (ed.), *Asian Introduction*, pp. 1, 3.

in which New Testament texts are interpreted alongside classical Asian texts, such as the *Dao De Jing*, a book of wisdom from ancient China.<sup>65</sup>

When it comes to the chapters on specific books, alongside the discussion of the standard introductory issues there is a major focus on interpreting the texts in relation to ‘contemporary Asian realities’. For example, in Edwin Jebaraj and Johnson Thomaskutty’s chapter on Mark, there is a review of the standard range of possibilities about authorship, date, place of writing, audience and purpose, and a brief outline of the structure of Mark. But a substantial portion of the chapter is devoted to identifying ways in which Mark may resonate with Asian concerns and experiences, for example in the possibility of identification on the part of Dalits in India, the Minjungs in Korea, and the plantation workers in Sri Lanka, ‘with the persecuted, diseased, demon-possessed and dehumanized members of the Markan community’. Mark’s famous secrecy motif is considered in relation to its relevance for Asian contexts where confession of Christian faith ‘requires certain precautions’ given the realities of hostility and persecution.<sup>66</sup>

The chapter on the Letters of Peter follows a broadly similar strategy, beginning (in relation to 1 Peter) with discussions of its historical contexts—authorship, date, genre, structure—then turning to an Asian reading of the letter (a similar treatment of 2 Peter then follows). Unsurprisingly, the letter’s address to Christians ‘who were suffering, ridiculed, and socially harassed on account of their faith’ is found to be of particular resonance for ‘Asian Christians who are in such a situation’ as ‘Christian minorities’ in contexts where ‘they are often viewed as outsiders’.<sup>67</sup> The concerns of 1 Peter to enable its recipients to sustain their Christian identity, and to live good and hopeful lives amidst their hostile contemporaries, even when suffering results, invite application to the situation of Christians as minority groups in countries such as Myanmar, where the author of this chapter teaches. The final paragraph of the chapter indicates both the directness and the bravery of such an interpretative task, with its specific mention of the violence enacted by the Myanmar army on ‘Rohingya villages and the Kachin people’, its identification of Jesus as ‘defender of the defenceless, the poor, the oppressed, and the outsiders’, and the sharp question, ‘Are not we, as his followers, obliged to stand up in their defense no matter what it costs us?’<sup>68</sup>

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65. Kar Yong Lim, ‘The New Testament and the Sociocultural and Religious Realities of the Asian Contexts’, in Thomaskutty (ed.), *Asian Introduction*, pp. 5–27; Yung Suk Kim, ‘An Introduction to Asian Biblical Hermeneutics’, in Thomaskutty (ed.), *Asian Introduction*, pp. 29–45 (quotation p. 30).

66. Edwin Jebaraj and Johnson Thomaskutty, ‘The Gospel of Mark’, in Thomaskutty (ed.), *Asian Introduction*, pp. 75–101; pp. 86–100 on Mark’s resonances with Asian concerns (quotations pp. 93, 96).

67. Layang Seng Ja, ‘The Letters of Peter’, in Thomaskutty (ed.), *Asian Introduction*, pp. 467–93 (quotations p. 471). Cf. also the reading of 1 Peter from an Asian-American perspective by Janette Ok, in which the experience of being regarded as ‘forever foreign’ invites somewhat similar reflection: Janette H. Ok, ‘Always Ethnic, Never “American”: Reading 1 Peter through the Lens of the “Perpetual Foreigner” Stereotype’, in Uriah Y. Kim and Seung Ai Yang (eds.), *T&T Clark Handbook of Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2019), pp. 417–26.

68. Seng Ja, ‘Letters of Peter’, p. 492.

## Reflections on Decolonisation and the Future(s) of New Testament Studies

Standing back from this brief and selective survey of landmarks in the formation of New Testament studies as a discipline and examples of the genre of New Testament Introduction, I shall conclude by offering some initial reflections on the material, and what it might indicate about the possible future(s) for a decolonised New Testament studies. I hope that these reflections also offer some stimulus for thinking both about the possible relationships between biblical studies and Christian theology and ethics, and also about what decolonisation might mean in these related but distinct fields.

One of the challenges that emerges from a cursory overview of reflections on the tasks of New Testament studies—from Gabler's vision at the beginnings of the formation of the modern academic discipline of biblical studies, through Dodd's optimistic vision of the sequential tasks and what remains to be completed, to the more sceptical assessments of Hengel and Bockmuehl—is the risk that the discipline becomes stuck in a kind of Groundhog Day situation. Examination of this disciplinary history can help us to see how particular, how weird, indeed, are its preoccupations. If the focus remains on the long-established issues of historical-critical contextualisation, philological exegesis, and the 'introductory questions' of date, authorship, setting and purpose, then there seems some risk that the lack of sufficient evidence allows room for an endless series of speculative (if learned) hypotheses, or for the continued challenging of 'established results', leaving the discipline without any clear sense of progress or any obvious future direction. Would we be better, as Hengel suggests, to concede that many established questions—not least about date, setting, authorship, or whatever—simply cannot be answered with confidence and might therefore be left as topics where agnosticism must remain? If that is the case, then it is equally apparent that we need alternative visions for the discipline's positive future; and as Bockmuehl's article illustrates, there are various possible proposals for just such a future, among which we might now include the decolonial reframing of the discipline. Such alternative visions and potential reframing also reshape the nature of the relationship between New Testament study and Christian ethics: What should the former discipline most fruitfully provide to practitioners of the latter, if many of the long-established historical questions about the New Testament texts have to be answered with an agnostic *non liquet*?

One of the important questions in considering any such reframing concerns the fundamental issue of purpose, with which my article began. For whom is the discipline's knowledge important, and how is such knowledge best discerned? It is undoubtedly possible to approach the New Testament documents as a historian of earliest Christianity—though in that case, a particular focus on the canonical New Testament (and, indeed, the particular form of New Testament Introductions) makes little sense—but we might also acknowledge that other visions of the tasks are equally possible, and potentially more important to some of the most significant academic, public and ecclesial communities for whom the discipline is relevant. Angela Parker, for example, refers provocatively to 'specialised training in crap no one cares about' as part of her argument that

African American biblical interpretation requires different foci and different priorities from the white male European traditions that have so shaped the discipline.<sup>69</sup>

Insofar as we take the *Asian Introduction* as illustrative of what a decolonised New Testament studies might begin to look like—and of course, it offers only one particular and contestable example—then this reframing need not require any wholesale rejection of the methods and findings of the Euro-American tradition of historical scholarship. As we have seen, the introduction to each New Testament writing begins with its historical contextualisation, drawing on the established parameters of existing research regarding authorship, date, and so on. For some, of course, such a vision of decolonised New Testament studies might exhibit too much acceptance and conformity, lacking the radical critique necessary to dismantle ‘the master’s house’.<sup>70</sup> But insofar as the *Asian introduction* represents one possibility, it suggests not so much a step of radical discontinuity or rejection but rather an additional step in the tasks of exegesis and interpretation, a refocusing of the discipline’s tasks.

We might perhaps frame this as a sixth new step in the sequential tasks of New Testament studies, as outlined by Dodd. Dodd’s vision of the culmination of the discipline’s progress in the work of interpretation shows no acknowledgment of the ways in which such interpretation is shaped by the context and commitments of the interpreter, no sense of the ways in which interpretation is necessarily ‘located’. Given a critical appreciation of precisely such factors, the rejection of ‘the view from nowhere’, it becomes clear that articulating interpretations shaped by, and related to, particular contexts or identities—as in the *Asian Introduction*—is at least one way to acknowledge and respond to this new level of insight. This would also imply a different model of the relationship between biblical studies and Christian ethics than the long-established one in which the former produces historical information to pass along for the latter’s use in contemporary and constructive reflection.

One aspect of this recognition of locatedness raises a further challenge. As we have seen, the *Asian Introduction*—like much other work from what have been called ‘minoritised’ perspectives—acknowledges, labels and foregrounds its reading location. By contrast, work emanating from the Western European historical-critical tradition—represented above in our ‘standard’ Introductions by Kümmel et al.—does not generally make explicit or reflect on the ways in which its approach and its related ‘knowledge’ are shaped by a particular context and by the history of that context. As Gabler’s programmatic statement makes clear, however, and as has been demonstrated in some recent studies of the emergence of

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69. Angela N. Parker, *If God Still Breathes, Why Can’t I? Black Lives Matter and Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), pp. 19–20 (in e-version: pagination differs from the printed version). Cf. also the earlier essay of William H. Myers, ‘The Hermeneutical Dilemma of the African American Biblical Student’, in Cain Hope Felder (ed.), *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991), pp. 40–56.

70. I allude, of course, to the phrase of Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), pp. 110–13, on which see also Wei Hsien Wan, ‘Re-examining the Master’s Tools: Considerations on Biblical Studies’ Race Problem’, in Katherine M. Hockey and David G. Horrell (eds.), *Ethnicity, Race, Religion: Identities and Ideologies in Early Jewish and Christian Texts and in Modern Biblical Interpretation* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), pp. 219–29.

modern academic ‘biblical studies’, this tradition does emerge from a specifically European location, and addresses the demands and needs of that situation.<sup>71</sup> One significant task within the discipline, therefore, is precisely to contextualise and historicise the biblical scholarship that emerges from this Western European tradition—not (necessarily) in order to dismiss or reject it, but rather to demonstrate its own contextually-shaped particularities. This does offer a certain kind of critique, but one that essentially particularises—even ‘parochialises’—such work, relativizing its claims to offer universally relevant ‘international’ insight, and thus makes space for other perspectives and approaches. One reason such particularising is important is in reshaping our definitions of what is central and marginal to the discipline—a key concern of the decolonising agenda. When work in the European tradition remains un-labelled and un-contextualised, while work from other perspectives, such as the *Asian Introduction*, explicitly signals its own contextual particularity, there is the risk that one kind of work is presumed to be ‘standard’ or essential for the discipline, while other types of work are optional, of interest, perhaps, only to those who are in Asian contexts, or other equivalents. But if the former kind of interpretation is also contextually shaped, albeit in different and less explicit ways than the latter, then any course aiming, say, to ‘introduce’ the New Testament should, at least if it pretends to any kind of international perspective or global relevance, include both kinds of work, and should also critically contextualise the work that does not signal its own contextuality.

One feature of the *Asian Introduction*, characteristic of much work that comes from acknowledged locations and identity groupings, is the drawing of analogies between New Testament texts, and their experiences of their addressees, and Asian contexts and the contemporary experiences of Asian Christians.<sup>72</sup> The interpretative method might be labelled ‘associative hermeneutics’, as explained and exemplified in Love Sechrest’s recent work of African American New Testament interpretation.<sup>73</sup> As such it requires expertise in, and analysis of, two contexts—that of the ancient text and that of the contemporary location—placing particular demands on the interpreter, but making explicit a kind of responsibility

71. See esp. Legaspi, *Death of Scripture*; Sheehan, *Enlightenment Bible*; Wan, ‘Re-examining the Master’s Tools’.

72. For earlier but similarly comparative approaches in the history of New Testament scholarship, see, e.g., John S. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background: A Study of the Encounter between New Testament Theology and African Traditional Concepts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (eds.), *Reading from This Place. Volume 1: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States. Volume 2: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995). There are, I think it remains true to say, few examples of explicitly articulated readings in, say, contemporary British, German or American contexts—except among ‘minoritised’ scholars.

73. Love Lazarus Sechrest, *Race and Rhyme: Rereading the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022); cf. also Love L. Sechrest, ‘Double Vision for Revolutionary Religion: Race Relations, Moral Analogies, and African-American Biblical Interpretation’, in Katherine M. Hockey and David G. Horrell (eds.), *Ethnicity, Race, Religion: Identities and Ideologies in Early Jewish and Christian Texts and in Modern Biblical Interpretation* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), pp. 202–18.

to the present that should arguably be part of the ethics of biblical scholarship, to evoke once again Fiorenza's presidential address. Such an approach also draws much closer and more explicit connections between biblical studies and contemporary Christian theology and ethics, and again suggests a rather different model of the relationship between them. Part of the reason why such work may be more prominent in Global South contexts is simply the lack of specialisation in the theological disciplines, compared with the hyper-focused specialisation of the Western academy.<sup>74</sup> But another reason may be a sense of the urgency and importance of the contemporary pressures to which the New Testament interpreter feels bound to respond. 'Specialised training in crap no one cares about' may seem a lower priority than addressing the present realities of persecution and hostility, climate breakdown, poverty or racial prejudice.<sup>75</sup>

The prominence of analogical interpretation also helps to explain why much contemporary contextualised interpretation—as exemplified in the *Asian Introduction*—sees its primary audience as a Christian one, even if there is also a sense that the message of the New Testament has wider relevance and appeal in the context addressed. Interpretations of the New Testament that show, through the drawing of analogies, how it might address the situation of those suffering various forms of marginalisation, deprivation or hostility today are clearly of most relevance to those for whom the New Testament is a source of wisdom and authority, those who wish to be instructed and shaped by its guidance, even if they are also critical of it. Again, this touches on a long and ongoing history of disagreement within the discipline, with stark differences of perspective between those who view the discipline's task as the critical socio-historical understanding of the earliest Christian movement—detached from any religious or theological convictions—and those who (even when they share a focus on socio-historical analysis) see the discipline as connected with the ongoing tasks of theological and ethical reflection.<sup>76</sup> It seems to me difficult to accept the imperative to diversify and decolonise the discipline, without at the same time accepting that ecclesially-

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74. Grant LeMarquand, 'New Testament Exegesis in (Modern) Africa', in Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 72–102, refers to the 'luxury of specialization' (p. 92) that shapes the practice of New Testament studies in Europe and the USA, in contrast to the situation in Africa, where the separation of biblical studies from other theological disciplines does not happen to the same extent.

75. As Stephen Barton has reminded me, in a response to a draft of this article, these issues are of course also pertinent in the Global North: what is notable, then, is that New Testament scholars in different locations, shaped by different priorities and expectations, vary in their perception of whether and how it is necessary or appropriate to address these issues and their contemporary contexts explicitly in their work.

76. For a recent example of this often polemical debate, see Stephen L. Young, "'Let's Take the Text Seriously': The Protectionist Doxa of Mainstream New Testament Studies', *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 32 (2020), pp. 328–63; C. Kavin Rowe, 'What If It Were True? Why Study the New Testament', *New Testament Studies* 68.2 (2022), pp. 144–55. For an earlier proposal that the particular discipline of New Testament Theology should focus primarily on historical studies and, insofar as it is concerned (entirely appropriately, according to Räisänen) with 'actualizing' interpretation, should orientate itself not to a specifically ecclesial audience but rather to a global context in which inter-religious

located and theologically-invested interpretation must remain an acknowledged part, if only a part, of what the discipline validates and values.<sup>77</sup>

But perhaps the final reflection on the ethical challenge of decolonisation to the discipline of New Testament studies should be to mention the broader imperative to challenge the structures of power that determine who decides, in practice, what the discipline will validate and value. If decolonising means anything, it requires that those traditionally ‘at the margins’ be given space not only to articulate their ‘alternative’ perspectives, but rather at the heart of our disciplines, defining and shaping what their present and future tasks are going to be.

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understanding is crucial, see Heikki Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme* (London: SCM, 1990).

77. There is, it seems to me, some tension in Young’s concern to criticise the ‘protectionist’ strategies of ‘mainstream’ New Testament studies—which, he argues, often privilege and reinscribe the voices of the New Testament authors, such as Paul, over against other ancient religious and philosophical perspectives—while at the same time affirming the value of scholarship that challenges ‘the agendas of the largely white and male Protestants who have long dominated the exegetical arenas’ (Young, ‘Protectionist Doxa’, p. 356). ‘Minoritised’ scholarship is, as the *Asian Introduction* demonstrates, often theologically invested in the New Testament’s particular significance, privileging or ‘aligning’ with its ‘voice’ in various ways, such that Young’s distinction between mainstream ‘protectionism’ and ‘dominated-protectionism’ (p. 336) seems difficult to sustain: it is not only the former that ‘aligns with the voices of canonical or dominant texts’ (p. 336).