

Editorial

# Introduction to the Special Issue “Current Trends in New Testament Study”

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Received: 21 November 2019; Accepted: 22 November 2019; Published: 26 November 2019



This special issue of *Religions* focuses on seven of the most important formal methods used to interpret the New Testament today. Several of the articles also touch on Old Testament/Hebrew Bible interpretation. In line with the multiplicity of methods for interpretation of texts in the humanities in general, biblical study has never before seen so many different methods. This situation poses both opportunities and challenges for scholars and students alike.

This issue contains contributions by a mix of established scholars and younger scholars who have recently demonstrated their expertise in a certain method. Some articles will be easily accessible only to biblical scholars, but most will be accessible and instructive for beginning- and intermediate-level students of the Bible. I hope that the free-access essays offered here will become required reading in many universities and seminaries. The readership statistics displayed with each article, with information about how they have been read since their online publication here, show that they already have a wide appeal. I want to thank these authors for their contribution to this issue and for working so well with me and indirectly with the anonymous peer reviewers. Here, adapted from their abstracts, are brief introductions to their articles.

Michele A. Connolly’s article, “Antipodean and Biblical Encounter: Postcolonial Vernacular Hermeneutics in Novel Form,” gives a post-secular exploration of what the Bible offers to modern-day Australia. She maintains that Australian culture, despite its secularity, has a capacity for spiritual awareness in ways that resonate with the Bible. Connolly employs R. S. Sugirtharajah’s concept of “vernacular hermeneutics” to show that a contemporary Australian novel, *The Shepherd’s Hut* by Tim Winton, expresses an Australian spirituality saturated with the images and values of the New Testament, but in a non-religious literary form that needs interpretation for a secular audience. Connolly’s creative and fascinating article speaks not only to the Australian context but can serve as a model for the intersection of postcolonial biblical criticism and contemporary literature from many parts of the post-Christian world.

“A Deep-Language Mathematical Analysis of Gospels, Acts and Revelation,” by Emilio Matricciani and Liberato De Caro, offers a different kind of statistical analysis of the New Testament than scholars may be familiar with. It uses mathematical methods developed for studying what the authors call deep-language parameters of literary texts, for example, the number of words per sentence, the number of characters per word, the number of words between interpunctuations (punctuation within sentences), and the number of interpunctuations per sentence. Matricciani and De Caro consider, in concert with generally-accepted conclusions of New Testament scholarship, the full texts of the canonical Gospels, Acts and Revelation, then the Gospel passages attributable to the triple tradition (Matthew, Mark and Luke), to the double tradition (Matthew and Luke), to the single tradition in Matthew and Luke, and to the Q source. The results confirm and reinforce some common conclusions about the Gospels, Acts, Revelation, and Q source, but the authors show that they cast some new light on the capacity of the short-term memory of the readers/listeners of these texts. The authors posit that these New Testament writings fit very well in the larger Greek literature of the time. For readers unaccustomed to using

mathematical models in the study of the New Testament, this article will present some challenges, but will more than repay the work put into it.

James Resseguie, an expert in narrative criticism of the New Testament, offers both scholars and students a unique and comprehensive “Glossary of New Testament Narrative Criticism with Illustrations.” This glossary lists prominent terms, concepts, and techniques of narrative criticism, all in alphabetical order. Commonly used terms that every student of narrative criticism should know are included, including for example character and characterization, double entendre, misunderstanding, implied author, implied reader, irony, narrator, point of view, plot, rhetoric, and more. Lesser-known terms and concepts are also defined and illustrated. Major methods of reading the text—for example, narratology, New Criticism, and reader-response criticism—are explained with references to the prominent literary critics/theorists who developed them. An important part of this glossary is the illustration of each term drawn from the New Testament, and cross-references to other terms increase the value of the definitions. Resseguie states that this is the first stand-alone glossary of New Testament narrative-critical terms in the English language, and one may expect that it will find its way into many classes in New Testament interpretation as well as be used by scholars as a handy reference tool.

In the next article, Mitzi J. Smith offers a fresh, thought-provoking reading of the story of the Apostle Paul’s circumcision of Timothy, “Paul, Timothy, and the Respectability Politics of Race: A Womanist Inter(con)textual Reading of Acts 16:1–5”. Her approach is intersectional and inter-contextual, featuring a dialogue between African American women’s experiences of race and racism, respectability politics, and the narrative of Acts 16. Drawing on leading critical race theorists, Smith discusses the intersection of race/racism, gender, geopolitical Diasporic space, and respectability politics. Respectability politics, a critical understanding of which stands at the heart of Smith’s essay, claims that when non-white people in predominantly white societies engage in certain “proper” behaviors, they will ameliorate or even overcome the racism they face. Smith concludes that Paul engaged in respectability politics by compelling Timothy to be circumcised because of his Greek father, despite the Jerusalem Council’s decision that Gentile believers should not be required to be circumcised. Smith has included a short video introducing her article.

J. J. Johnson Leese has contributed a significant article on one of the most important issues of our time. “Ecofaith: Reading Scripture in an Era of Ecological Crisis,” outlines the emerging field of ecological theology. Johnson Leese deals especially with the methods of ecological hermeneutics developed by biblical scholars, ethicists, and theologians. This relatively new approach to reading scripture has emerged in tandem with increased awareness of the environmental impact of global warming and climate change. Scholars are now challenged to consider how religious anthropocentric worldviews have influenced past readings of the Bible in ways that have contributed to this crisis and constricted the ecological contours of the ancient text. In the first section, Johnson Leese summarizes the history and trajectory of ecological hermeneutics over the past four decades. In the second section, she gives a concise treatment of the reading strategies being considered among scholars today and includes examples of promising ecocritical readings of biblical texts. These readings are based on a constructive and critical engagement of ancient texts in light of modern environmental challenges.

The next article is by Michael R. Licona, a rising expert in some of the most important matters of New Testament historicity, entitled “Are the Gospels ‘Historically Reliable’? A Focused Comparison of Suetonius’s *Life of Augustus* and the Gospel of Mark.” The question of the historical reliability of the Gospels has been a constant issue since the rise of critical scholarship but has gained new interest and urgency recently. Licona shows that ancient writers of history had objectives for writing that differed somewhat from those of modern historians. Consequently, literary conventions also differed. In this essay, a definition for the historical reliability of ancient texts is proposed, whereby such a text provides an accurate gist of events or an essentially faithful representation of what occurred. Four criteria that must be met are then proposed. Licona then assesses Suetonius’s *Life of the Divine Augustus* and the Gospel of Mark using these criteria. The result of this focused comparison suggests that the *Life of*

*Augustus* and the Gospel of Mark can be called historically reliable in the qualified sense proposed. Both professors and students will benefit from a close reading of this article.

The final article is Peter S. Perry's "Biblical Performance Criticism: Survey and Prospects," which deals with one of the newest critical methods of understanding the Bible. After discussing four aspects of communication events (a communicator, traditions re-expressed, an audience, and a social situation), Perry surveys the history of biblical performance criticism and its current prospects. He then points to the future work of developing a fine-grained theoretical foundation for its work. Unlike many other methods of biblical criticism, performance criticism has an analytical mode, a heuristic mode, and a practical mode. In the analytical mode, a scholar gathers and examines data from a past performance event to describe it, and its effects, in detail. In the heuristic mode, a performer presents a tradition or passage to an audience in order to discover its dynamics more fully. In the practical mode, a person reflects on the performance of biblical traditions in daily life. In these ways, Perry suggests, performance criticism helps to overcome the critical reduction and fragmentation of current biblical study and also bridges the gap between the academic and popular use of the Bible.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.



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