

# Some Ways of Reading the Bible

## 1

**A**t a corner of Central Park, a man waves a Bible and urges the crowd to be “born again.” In Saint Patrick’s Cathedral, worshippers receive bread and wine that have been miraculously transformed into the body and blood of Christ. In another city, a woman and a man sit before a television camera and proclaim that the “end of the world” is near. Their reading of the Bible leads them to specific positions on social and political issues: they oppose most government-funded social welfare programs but encourage voluntary giving to alleviate world hunger; they believe that capitalism is biblically based and that the United States is a Christian nation; they honor “womanhood” but oppose the ordination of women as ministers. These media evangelists identify themselves as Protestant. In a study group in a church across town, however, a minister representing a different sort of Protestantism denies that biblical prophecies apply literally to events in the modern world, but she finds biblical support for environmental sensitivity, disarmament, the radical redistribution of wealth, and full equality for women. Her group learns about peasants in Latin America who, together with Roman Catholic priests and nuns, discuss liberation theology—a school of thought that understands the Bible as announcing God’s solidarity with the oppressed and calling for fundamental changes in the social and economic order. They notice that the version of Catholic theology held by these peasants, priests, and nuns differs as much from that of some other Catholics as does this Protestant minister’s theology from those of the media evangelists and the man in Central Park.

Such diversity of biblical interpretations raises the question of whether it is possible to determine what the biblical texts “really” mean. What would seem to be needed is some way of moving beyond individual prejudices and social conditioning to attain objectivity. Not only is absolute objectivity impossible, however, but one may even question its desirability. To be objective in dealing with a problem is to become detached from the question in the sense of not allowing one’s own interests to distort the evidence. But to religious persons, the demand for detachment might seem a denial of their faith.

A book such as this cannot attempt to resolve such questions, but I hope that the following discussion of various ways of studying the Bible will be of some help to students in formulating their own perspectives. Later in this chapter, I will state how the present text seeks to provide an approach to biblical studies that avoids violating the legitimate concerns of both religious and nonreligious students.

## Historical Approaches

---

Scholars today generally acknowledge the value of reading the biblical texts in light of their historical contexts. Although biblical scholarship has sometimes come into conflict with religious groups over the methods and results of historical criticism, this approach is now generally accepted as a valuable step toward objectivity. Interpreters employing this method do not begin with such questions as

“What does this mean to me?” or “What does my religion teach?” They seek first to determine such matters as when and where the work in question was written, who wrote it, for whom it was written, and why it was written. The goal is to understand what the author meant and what the original readers would have understood.

To view a writing this way means learning about the history, culture, and social organization of a time and place far removed from our own; it also means allowing that writing to say something that may strike us as strange or even unintelligible. Because people in ancient cultures held understandings of the nature of the universe that were quite different from our own, we may find that they not only were giving answers that appear strange to us but also were asking different questions. It is natural to seek in the biblical materials some immediate point of contact with our own interests, but the historian’s point of view cautions us against forcing either “acceptability” or “relevance” upon the biblical text. This does not mean that one must give up one’s prior beliefs as a prerequisite to historical inquiry, but it does mean that we must not allow those beliefs to override the evidence and answer all questions before the investigation begins.

There have been some recent attempts to refine our methods of historical interpretation. Many interpreters are making use of sociological and anthropological methods to determine the social, cultural, and political situations in which the biblical writings were produced. We may therefore speak broadly of social-scientific criticism, which embraces a

variety of emphases. When read against the background of class conflict, for example, a text often takes on an unexpected meaning. And recognition of the patriarchal social system that is presupposed in the writings of the New Testament can help identify ways in which the various texts reflect and/or challenge that system.

Another aspect of historical criticism, which overlaps with literary approaches, is rhetorical criticism. This method analyzes ancient writings in light of the rhetorical patterns (the standardized forms of expression) that were current in the environments in which they were written. Asking how a given work would affect its intended audience, the rhetorical critic of the New Testament studies ancient Greek rhetoric and also tries to learn as much as possible about the historical situation of the original readers.

Many recent interpreters find limitations in the historical method, a fact that has led to the explosion of newer methods discussed in this chapter. The present text presupposes the value of viewing the writings of the New Testament historically. But it is naive to think that this approach ensures objectivity. There is no neutral perspective from which to view the past and no given set of questions a historian must ask; all questions reflect the perspectives of individual historians and their cultural settings. So it is important not only to try to allow the Bible to speak on its own terms, but also to recognize that we cannot study the past objectively unless we identify our own biases and ask how they influence our interpretation.

## Theological and Ideological Approaches

---

As classically formulated, the historical method requires that interpreters avoid value judgments as they try to describe the meaning of a text in an objective way. Because of this, some religious interpreters have proposed various types of theological interpretation as supplements to the historical approach.

The term *theological interpretation* sometimes refers to a description of the theological content of a writing. In that case, it is simply one aspect of historical interpretation. But what concerns us here is a second meaning: an interpretation intended to serve the interests of a religious community. Interpreters who practice theological interpretation in this second sense try to show the relevance of a writing for the contemporary readers' faith. They point out that the Bible is, after all, religious literature, so ignoring its possible significance for contemporary believers would be a violation of its very nature.

Alongside theological interpretation are various modes of interpretation that take specific ideologies as their starting points. Although the term *ideology* is sometimes used in a negative way, I use it here simply to mean a set of values to which a person is committed. Thus, ideological interpretation is an approach to the Bible that openly identifies a specific set of interests on the part of the interpreter.

Both theological and ideological interpretation are subject to the criticism that they could allow interpreters to distort the

meaning of a text in order to satisfy their preconceived interests. Proponents of these approaches point out, however, that all interpreters bring their own perspectives to the text, whether or not they are conscious of this fact. One may note, for example, that until very recently, biblical interpretation was dominated by relatively affluent white males in the industrialized West, who tended to neglect questions of interest to women, persons of color, and the common people in the developing nations. In any case, the key question to ask in evaluating theological and ideological approaches is whether they actually illuminate the biblical text or simply impose a meaning upon it.

One of the most prominent forms of ideological interpretation is feminist criticism. Much of the work in this area is another refinement of the historical method. By asking formerly neglected questions, feminist scholars have uncovered strong evidence that women played a much greater role in the leadership of early Christian communities than was formerly believed. And they have called attention to alternative strains of Christian tradition that were passed on by women but were eventually suppressed.

Although feminist criticism overlaps with historical criticism, it makes no claim to value-neutrality. Some feminist scholars seek to expose and critique the androcentric (male-centered) nature of both the biblical materials themselves and much modern biblical scholarship. Feminist interpreters often make use of the literary methods discussed later in this chapter. But they add feminist twists by ask-

ing such questions as how a writing might appear to a woman rather than a man—and especially to a woman who rejects the male perspective a writing might reflect.

Persons of color and people in the developing nations also have fostered various ideological approaches. For example, African American interpretation, which draws upon the unique experiences of African Americans in U.S. society from the days of slavery to the present, has blossomed in recent decades. And postcolonial criticism draws upon the perspectives of peoples in parts of the world that have experienced the effects of European colonization and the neocolonialism (in which the United States has been a major participant) that followed in its wake. In New Testament studies, postcolonial critics are particularly interested in the attitudes toward the Roman Empire evident in the writings.

Marxian analysis of the class structures of societies and economics sometimes plays a role in some ideological approaches. And we may speak of a broad interest among ideological interpreters in “liberating” interpretation, intended to call into question the various ways in which some groups in the human community oppress others. These forms of ideological interpretation overlap with theological interpretation, since most of their proponents work from within the Christian community.

One theological approach that has influenced modern scholarship is existentialist interpretation. It is grounded in the work of the mid-twentieth-century German biblical scholar and theologian Rudolf Bultmann.

According to Bultmann, the biblical writers viewed the universe as “a three-story structure, with earth in the middle, heaven above it, and hell below it.”<sup>1</sup> Bultmann termed this world picture “mythological” and argued that modern people cannot accept it without involving themselves in serious contradictions, for the language of this world picture speaks of what is understood as “otherworldly” in the same terms that we speak of this-worldly realities. The New Testament, for example, routinely understands God’s transcendence (“apartness” from the world) as spatial distance. And it views as supernatural interventions events that modern people would attribute to natural causation or human decision.

Bultmann thus proposed a method of interpretation that involves “demythologizing.” This term emphasizes the negative task of the interpreter, which is to “strip away” the mythology and look beneath the ancient world picture that determined the authors’ language and concepts. The positive term *existentialist interpretation* indicates that the interpreter does so by identifying the “self-understanding”—the notion of what life is all about—that is expressed by the mythological language. In looking for the self-understanding conveyed in a text, one is searching for an “existential” meaning, one that speaks directly to life as all persons ordinarily experience it, without reference to the supernatural. The New Testament, for example, speaks of a final judgment at which a heavenly court decides the eternal fates of human beings. But Bultmann looked beneath the notion of a supernatural end to

history to find an existential meaning and interpreted the final judgment as symbolizing the view that human beings stand before God in every moment of their lives.

Some critics of Bultmann accuse him of imposing a modern point of view upon the Bible. He claimed, however, that the New Testament itself begins the process of existentialist interpretation, since at numerous points, the authors depart from their mythological world picture and reveal the existential “intention” of their mythological language. However one evaluates Bultmann’s approach, it clearly stimulates reflection upon the question of what interpreters are looking for when they seek “meaning” in a religious text.

Other forms of theological/ideological interpretation, which sometimes draw upon insights from religions outside the Judeo-Christian tradition, emphasize aspects of biblical texts that exhibit positive views of the natural world and deemphasize God’s separateness from the created order. Interpretation from the perspective of process thought, a philosophical/theological school that views the universe as dynamic or ever changing and understands all aspects of reality as interrelated, shares some of these emphases. But a process approach is broader in its interests and has its own specific way of approaching a text. It shares with Bultmann a sense of the cultural distance between the ancient world and our own but envisions more of a dialogue between the two worldviews, in which each is able to question the other in order to achieve a kind of synthesis.

## Psychological Approaches

---

Some recent scholars draw upon the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung to interpret biblical texts. Whereas historical interpretation usually identifies the meaning of a work with the author's intentions, psychological interpretation views writing as in part the product of the unconscious mind. Jung claimed that the symbols used in religious lore are closely parallel to the imagery appearing in dreams. Religious writings thus have a special connection to the unconscious. They can express thoughts of which the author was unaware and can also affect the reader on the unconscious level. Psychological interpretation assumes that some psychological patterns are universal, cutting across history and cultures. It can thus to a large extent bypass historical questions. However, since each reader has an individual psychological history, meaning has a very personal dimension.

It is interesting to view stories of Jesus' resurrection from a Jungian perspective. According to Jung, all human beings share, in the depths of their unconscious minds, a set of "archetypes," or fixed patterns of thought, which are the products not of our individual experiences but of our biological inheritance through evolution. Jung believed that the theme of death and resurrection is one of these archetypal patterns. We all have, in the depths of our unconscious minds, "a pattern of being, in which what appears to be irreparable loss is supplanted by unimaginable gain: being hopelessly lost and then found, being hopelessly ill

and healed, being hopelessly locked into a destructive pattern of living and then forgiven and released."<sup>2</sup> A psychological interpretation of the resurrection stories will have no interest in their literal truth but will focus on how they can release the power of the death/resurrection archetype in a reader's experience.

Psychological interpretation can be criticized from the historian's perspective. Are psychological patterns really so universal? Might we not misread an ancient text if we try to correlate it with our own psychological patterns? Clearly, however, psychological approaches have an immediate point of contact in almost every reader's experience and great potential for awakening interest in biblical studies.

## Steps toward a Literary Approach: Form Criticism and Redaction Criticism

---

Interpreters through the centuries have tended to treat the New Testament as a statement of Christian doctrine, focusing largely on its theological content. Modern historical criticism reshaped this theological concern by insisting that we get at the meaning of a writing by placing it in its historical context. It also added a new interest: because a given work might have gone through one or more revisions, and an author might have made use of various earlier materials, scholars sought to reconstruct the history of the work itself.

The biblical writings, however, are more than sources for the reconstruction of history, and although they express theological ideas, very few if any of them can be called theological treatises. Some of the writings are narratives, or stories, and most of the others are letters or at least have some characteristics of a letter. The Bible is, in fact, literature, and recent scholarship has given increased attention to its specifically literary aspects.

The new emphasis came in stages. Two methods of biblical study that were influential in twentieth-century scholarship served as bridges between the historical and the literary approaches.

The first of these is form criticism, which is based on the recognition that the writings of the New Testament often contain small units of preexisting material. The first task of form criticism is the recognition and classification of these small units according to their literary forms or types. Some New Testament authors have apparently quoted early Christian hymns, and the Gospel writers made use of various kinds of earlier material, such as parables, various types of sayings, miracle stories, and pronouncement stories (short accounts ending in a dramatic saying of Jesus).

Insofar as scholars identify specific literary forms, they are involved in a kind of literary criticism. But form critics are also interested in the stages of development the material might have gone through before it found its way into the present writings. For that reason, this method is also called form history.

This interest in development is particularly evident in the study of the Gospels.

When we compare the different Gospels, we sometimes find the same story or saying in several different versions. So the form critics try to reconstruct the process of development that produced the variations and ultimately to identify the original version. The presupposition is that the stories about what Jesus said and did circulated orally before anyone wrote them down. Presumably, they went through transformations as they moved from one environment to another. Form critics therefore try to determine what specific setting, or life situation, would produce a particular transformation. They are thus concerned not only with literary forms but with history and sociology as well.

Application of form criticism to the Gospels eventually led to the development of redaction criticism. The term *redaction* is the English version of a German word meaning "editing." By identifying how an author has added to, deleted from, or rewritten a source, redaction critics can learn something about that author's interests. For example, by showing that in several cases a writer makes the same kind of change, they identify a consistent emphasis.

Redaction critics are interested in a finished writing as a whole, not simply its component parts. Any student who has written a term paper, however, knows that it is possible to incorporate a quotation one partly disagrees with or perhaps does not fully understand. Approaching a writing as the product of editorial changes of existing material leaves open the possibility that some incorporated material might not reflect the final author's

point of view. So redaction critics will sometimes treat a given passage as an “undigested morsel”—something that does not really serve the author’s intentions.

Some interpreters have pointed out that redaction critics actually interpret something other than the writing itself: the author’s theology. While this might be a valid goal, it is possible to approach a writing differently. We could simply ignore the possible sources that lie behind the text and interpret it as we would any other type of literature. Then we would not be able to write off any passages as undigested material but would be responsible for the entire text as an integrated literary whole.

## Literary Approaches

---

Interpreters have traditionally emphasized the rational content of the biblical writings—the theological ideas they contain. Literary approaches introduce another emphasis. Viewing the biblical writings as literature recognizes that they appeal to the readers’ imaginative powers, not simply their rational capacities. Telling a story, for example, sets up an imaginative world into which the reader is expected to enter. Understanding the story may involve grasping certain ideas, but more fundamentally, it means entering the world the story creates and participating in what happens.

Literary approaches to the New Testament involve such traditional procedures, familiar to students of other literature, as identifying lit-

erary forms, tracing the development of plot and characters, recognizing themes, and appreciating rhetorical devices. Students who have encountered such methods in studying other types of literature may wonder why biblical studies has made so little use of them until recently. The reason is that the Bible’s status as scripture conditioned interpreters not only to look primarily for its doctrinal content but also to focus on the question of historical accuracy. It is because biblical scholars were so long preoccupied with doctrine on the one hand and the question of “what really happened” on the other that they gave scant attention to the Bible as literature.

### Schools of Literary Interpretation

A literary critic can approach a text in three ways: (1) by focusing on the author, thinking primarily in terms of what that author intends for the text to mean; (2) by focusing on the writing itself, asking what the written text means, without reference to the author’s intent; or (3) by focusing on the reader, considering how what is written seems designed to elicit specific responses from the reader. These approaches clearly overlap, but it makes a difference which of these three aspects of a text an interpreter emphasizes. Redaction critics, as we have seen, focus on the author’s intentions. Two current methods of interpretation, in contrast, tend to play down the role of the author.

One of these, narrative criticism, is text centered—that is, its emphasis is upon what

the written text itself means. It takes account of the reader to the extent that it posits a hypothetical reader, termed the “implied reader,” who will understand the text in specific ways. But its emphasis is on the way the text itself prompts the reader’s reactions. Thus, as Mark Allan Powell comments, “It is less necessary to know the historical situation of the actual readers for whom the texts was originally intended.”<sup>3</sup>

Narrative criticism also tends to treat the implied reader as someone who has perhaps read the text many times, so that in analyzing a text, the critic is free to move backward and forward in the story to gather up the many connections that an attentive reader might make.

The other method, reader-response criticism, tends to identify the reader as a *first-time* reader, so that in analyzing a text, the critic tries to stick to what a reader would know at any given point. It also emphasizes the open-endedness and ambiguity of a text, which give the reader options in terms of how to understand and value it. Reader-response criticism comes in many varieties, however. Extreme versions give the reader almost complete control over the text, so that nearly any reading of it is seen as valid. But more moderate versions are similar to narrative criticism in that they stress the way the text gives directions to the reader. Apart from the question of whether one thinks of the reader as a first-time reader, the moderate versions of reader-response criticism are almost indistinguishable from narrative criticism.

Reader-response criticism seeks to identify the ways in which a given text is designed

to elicit responses from the readers, how it seeks to awaken specific emotions or judgments, how it prepares readers for turns in the plot by giving or withholding information, and how it sometimes leaves it to the readers to fill in gaps in the plot and draw their own conclusions. To the extent that it acknowledges that the reader has real decisions to make, it leaves open the possibility of understanding the text in different ways.

There is therefore a sense in which each reader of a given writing reads a different text, since each brings her or his own interests and makes different decisions in reading; even a single reader reads a different story every time she or he reads it. Opponents of this view therefore charge that it leads to a pure subjectivism in which interpreters make the writing say whatever they want it to say, so that there is no way to distinguish valid from invalid readings. Moderate reader-oriented critics avoid the charge by making clear that the reader has a limited range of options in creating meaning and that the role of historical criticism is to help define the limits.

Another current school of interpretation is deconstruction, which denies that texts are capable of presenting straightforward, consistent, and coherent points of view. It therefore tries to show how texts “deconstruct” themselves—how, for example, one set of themes or values in a writing ends up actually making use of its opposite. It shares with the radical reader-response approaches the view that because meaning is open-ended, no interpretation can be final or definitive. But it is distinctive in its denial that a text

constitutes a coherent literary whole, that a text in fact offers its reader a “climactic, completed understanding.”<sup>4</sup> It is therefore even more vulnerable to the criticism of subjectivity than are the radical reader-response theories.

Deconstruction differs from other modes of interpretation in that, rather than looking for an overall meaning in a writing, it identifies strains of meaning that compete with and subvert the dominant strain. Although disclaiming allegiance to any specific ideology, deconstruction gives voice to points of view that are either neglected or suppressed. Moreover, its emphasis on competing strains of meaning is similar to some interpretation carried out from the perspective of process thought. The latter, however, differs from deconstruction by stressing that one can sometimes bring the competing strains together in a higher synthesis.

### **The Problem of Multiple Interpretations**

Proponents of some of the newer literary methods tend to accept the validity of a variety of approaches to interpretation, including those based on specific ideological commitments. Reader-oriented critics and deconstructionists often grant that all such readings are valid within their own frames of reference but deny universal validity to any one approach. Not surprisingly, then, many biblical scholars are wary of such open-endedness in interpretation. They fear that some of the newer approaches undermine the gains made

by historical criticism. But proponents of these methods believe they are coaxing biblical studies into exciting new territory. So the debate goes on. Meanwhile, the man waving the Bible still preaches at the corner of Central Park, while Latin American peasants continue to read their Bibles as texts of liberation.

## **This Book’s Approach**

---

What is the most important objective for beginning students in biblical studies? Should they gain a basic grasp of the content of the biblical “message”? Should they master a method of interpretation? Should they learn how the Bible came into being? These are all worthy goals, but they raise questions. Which interpretation of the biblical message should students learn? Which method should they be taught? Does knowledge of the way the Bible was produced necessarily lead to an understanding of what it means? Without negating such goals as these, the present book has a prior, more basic objective: to foster a genuine encounter with the New Testament, to enhance the process of questioning and “wrestling” with the biblical texts and with the life-and-death issues those texts raise.

It is precisely with the hope of genuine encounter in mind that I have chosen to write a book that approaches the New Testament writings from several different perspectives. To show that there are many ways in which people have found meaning and value in the New Testament invites students into a

conversation; it encourages them to develop their own views as to the meaning and value of the materials they will be reading, even as they explore the opinions of others.

Paradoxically, this approach also contributes to objectivity. Whatever position one takes on the question of multiple interpretations of a text, the fact is that interpreters do offer different readings. Giving students several different perspectives makes it more difficult for them to accept any perspective uncritically—whether this is their prior understanding, the teaching of a religious body, or the views of an instructor or the author of this text.

My hope is to encourage both objectivity and subjectivity in appropriate forms. In asking for objectivity, I affirm the academic environment and reject any attempt at indoctrination; in asking for subjectivity, I acknowledge the nature of the New Testament materials as religious literature, the purpose of which is in fact to encourage readers to embrace certain options regarding faith, belief, thought, and action.

Although I will make some use of many of the approaches to the Bible discussed in this chapter, I will emphasize two methods of study—historical criticism and a moderate version of reader-response analysis—by applying them to each of the New Testament writings. I am convinced that the former, for all its limitations, still provides an important perspective on the text. And the latter has been particularly useful in fostering an initial encounter with the text that can become the basis for further reflection.

Reflection, however, cannot take place in a vacuum; it must be informed by the reader's own life experiences, concerns, and prior understanding. I have therefore not hesitated to allow current interests to influence my agenda. Such matters as economic justice and the status and role of women are pressing concerns in our contemporary world, and the debate over the compatibility of religion with a scientifically informed world picture continues. These and similar concerns define the context within which biblical study in our day actually takes place. My goal has been to let such matters inform my approach to the New Testament without illicitly “modernizing” the ancient texts or ignoring their own frames of reference.

## Exegesis, Hermeneutics, and Contemporary Relevance

---

Another way of describing the intention of the present text is to say that it seeks to involve students in reflection on what biblical interpreters call the “hermeneutical problem.” The term *hermeneutics*, which comes from a family of Greek words having to do with explanation or interpretation, has been employed in a variety of ways in modern biblical studies, theology, and philosophy. According to one definition, the heart of hermeneutics is the theoretical question of what actually happens when an interpreter understands a text and/or communicates its meaning. Since theory

affects practice, however, one may also speak of particular hermeneutical perspectives that inform given attempts to explain what a text means.

One way of understanding the concept of hermeneutics is to contrast it with *exegesis*, a term that comes from another group of Greek words with the root meaning of “leading out,” which also refers to interpretation. Exegesis is systematic explanation of what a biblical text means. Hermeneutics, by contrast, comes into play whenever the process of finding the meaning of a text becomes problematic—that is, when interpreters discover differences between their own world pictures and those represented in the texts, competing strains of meaning within such texts, or different angles of vision from which to approach the task of interpretation. We can clearly identify existentialist and process interpretation, for example, as hermeneutical methods, because they address the problem of differing world-views. And liberating interpretations such as feminist, African American, and postcolonial interpretation also are designed to speak to questions of contemporary relevance.

The hermeneutical question is easiest to identify when the interpreter seeks to render an ancient text meaningful to readers centuries removed from it—that is, to comment on its “contemporary relevance.” It might at first seem that, in relation to the New Testament, the question arises only for Christian believers, those for whom this collection of writings is in some way authoritative. But many hermeneutical theorists insist that although there is a difference between understanding a text

and appreciating it—valuing it positively or negatively—the two cannot be separated in an absolute way. Any understanding of a writing involves some kind of interest in it, so that we cannot really understand it without allowing it to engage us in a struggle for meaning and truth, whatever actual judgment we make about it.

When, for example, a reader finds that a writing endorses a patriarchal system in which women are subordinated, does this mean that she or he must *accept* that system in order to find personal value in the text? Or does the reader have a right to reject that aspect of the text while perhaps accepting other aspects? And what if the various writings in the New Testament do not agree on this issue, or what if there are actually competing strains of meaning within a single text? Hermeneutics involves the process of wrestling with questions such as these. It is always “there,” whether recognized or not, and every attempt at exegesis really presupposes a hermeneutical stance.

To raise the questions of hermeneutical perspective and contemporary relevance is to risk the charge of introducing a personal agenda into an academic text. Certainly, the choice of which concerns to address involves a degree of subjectivity. But a decision to treat the New Testament from a purely historical perspective would in its own way constitute a hermeneutical move and, as we have seen, would carry no guarantee of objectivity.

The truth is that it is impossible to write a totally unbiased text, and I do not claim to have done so. I had no intention of writing

one that is value free. I do hope I have been fair enough on controversial issues to give students some tools for reaching their own conclusions. I hope, in other words, that this text will encourage you to approach the New Testament as a student in the fullest sense—

as a whole human being, exercising your critical intellect with enough detachment to see things clearly, yet deeply engaged in your own quest for meaning and value as you attend to voices that claim to speak the truth.

---

## NOTES

1. Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 1.
2. Wayne G. Rollins, *Jung and the Bible* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983), 83.
3. Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 15.
4. Stephen D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 160.

---

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What advantages and/or disadvantages do you see in how this book approaches the New Testament?
2. Evaluate the following statement: “You can make the Bible say anything you want it to say.” How would a proponent of historical criticism respond? Deconstructionists? Reader-response critics?
3. Explain why it is or is not important to take into account the historical situations in which the biblical authors wrote.
4. Does the historical approach have any limitations? If so, what are they?
5. Name some types of interpretation based on specific theological or ideological commitments, and give your own preliminary evaluation of such approaches.
6. What advantages and/or disadvantages do you see in interpreting the Bible psychologically?
7. How do literary approaches to the Bible differ from the historical approach?
8. Explain each of these terms: form criticism, redaction criticism, narrative criticism, reader-response criticism, deconstruction, exegesis, hermeneutics.
9. Try to identify the presuppositions, biases, and commitments that you bring to a study of the New Testament. How might each of these help you to become genuinely engaged with the New Testament? In what ways might each make such an engagement difficult? Do you think you can maintain an appropriate balance of objectivity and subjectivity as you approach this study?

## FOR FURTHER READING

- 
- Bultmann, Rudolf. *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*. Selected, edited, and translated by Schubert M. Ogden. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.
- Felder, Cain Hope. *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, Family*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989.
- Krentz, Edgar. *The Historical Critical Method*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975.
- McKnight, Edgar V. *What Is Form Criticism?* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969.
- Perrin, Norman. *What Is Redaction Criticism?* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969.
- Powell, Mark Allan. *What Is Narrative Criticism?* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990.
- Rollins, Wayne G. *Jung and the Bible*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1983.
- Schottroff, Louise, Silvia Schroer, and Marie-Therese Wacker. *Feminist Interpretation: The Bible in Women's Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998.
- Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth, ed. *Searching the Scriptures*. 2 vols. New York: Crossroad, 1993–94.
- Sugirtharajah, R. S. *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Tiffany, Frederick C., and Sharon H. Ringe. *Biblical Interpretation: A Roadmap*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1996.