De-Introducing the New Testament

Texts, Worlds, Methods, Stories

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(De-)Introduction

Seeing Old Stones Anew

The woman in stone pictured on the cover of this book occupies an important spatial and temporal intersection in the Bronx borough of New York City. The image is that of a large statue of Lady Justice that adorns the front of an imposing neoclassical building. This building, the former Bronx Borough Courthouse, is an icon of the South Bronx and sits on a plaza where several main thoroughfares converge. During the early 20th century, following the consolidation of five boroughs into the City of New York, there was a push to build municipal structures that would reflect the grandeur and cosmopolitanism of this most "civilized" of American cities. Completed in 1914 amidst bickering between architects, corruption charges, and construction delays, the Bronx Borough Courthouse was at the time the most majestic structure in that borough, and yet it was not the courthouse for long. As the largely immigrant population in the Bronx swelled to more than a million people, the demand for "law" was more than this particular Lady Justice could handle and a new courthouse was erected nearby in 1934. The Bronx Borough Courthouse continued to serve as "auxiliary" chambers until 1977, when it was boarded up by the City. Since then, this building has been sold to a private real-estate investor who apparently has long refused to either tear it down (which would be a challenge since the building is landmarked) or render it usable to the residents of the South Bronx again. For the

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moment, Lady Justice is enthroned atop a fenced-in façade. Adorned with her usual attributes, as well as with graffiti and pigeon roosts, she watches over one of the poorest neighborhoods in the United States.

To some, this image is just of an old building in disrepair, and nothing more. If we look at little closer, though (Figure I.1), we might notice something else, we might ask some larger questions, and we might make some connections between this particular image and others in our culture. The figure of Justice as depicted here is part of a long history of representing personifications of virtues as female bodies, and sometimes goddesses, a tradition that goes all the way back to the ancient world, including the world of the New Testament. Lady Justice has been used to signify a particular kind of project in humanity and the humanities: she stands for morality, order, and righteousness. This image of Lady Justice is very much contextualized. Like the New Testament in terms of Western culture, the figure of Justice is a classic icon that has appeared over a long period of time. She is everywhere on courthouses, in the night sky (as the constellation Virgo), and in popular culture, and yet it is easy to overlook her or to relegate her importance to law alone. Indeed, Justice carries the weight of tradition, which is historical and value-laden.

Figure I.1 Detail of Lady Justice, exterior of the Bronx Borough Courthouse (built 1905–14), Bronx, New York. Architecture attributed to both Michael John Garvin and Oscar Florianus Bluemner; sculpture Jules Edouard Roiné. Photo by Davina C. Lopez.

And yet we are compelled to look twice at this particular image in the Bronx, for Justice here is deconstructed by what seems to be a real invasion – the graffiti. But the graffiti is also now part of the image: who is to say it does not belong? It would not be a stretch to speculate that many people would be horrified at the desecration of this statue. But what would that say about the viewers' assumptions? The building has been empty for nearly 40 years – could we reasonably expect it to remain pristine? Likewise, it would be easy to suggest that the markings actually mar the image of Justice, implying that people desecrated the statue, not knowing or respecting her or that for which she stands. However, such a view would also ignore the machinery and conditions – poverty, abandonment, municipal and bureaucratic negligence – that helped nurture the physical space that made the graffiti possible in the first place. The artists might be called "vandals" and "criminals" – but in some way the street drawings bring Justice "home" and welcome her to the realities of the neighborhood. There would be some resistance to this particular reading since Justice still holds weight – or she should – as a guarantor of what is good and right and lawful. But we find ourselves wondering, as we dwell on this image: is Justice *betrayed* by these marks, or is she *liberated*?

The presence of graffiti, which is thought to be lawless and thoughtless, creates a tension in this image of lawful, thoughtful Lady Justice. What are we to make of such a venerable figure being both desecrated and appropriated at the same time? Is this a dismissal of something old or the creation of a new image altogether? How would we know the difference? Certainly the tension created between the revered image and its more recent appropriation generates a space for critical reflection on a host of issues related to the intersection of the past and the present, and the assumptions and expectations we hold with respect to both. As with Lady Justice, so also with the study of the New Testament. In this book we aim to "tag" and decenter several current methodological claims made about, and trajectories followed in, the discipline of New Testament studies, itself a venerable icon of sorts. We are calling our exploration "de-introducing" the New Testament, which acknowledges the ancient texts and modern disciplinary formation as important sites for the articulation of identity, power relationships, and questions about the connections we want to cultivate with the past. The stories we tell about our field, particularly in the context of explaining it via "introducing" the New Testament, also provide occasion for reflection on what we take for granted in terms of categories and methods. In so doing, we will look again at what we think we know, and articulate some themes and questions about the study of the New Testament that we hope will provide an occasion for further consideration and conversation, particularly with respect to methodology in the study of early Christian history

and literature. In our view, thinking about not just *what* we do as New Testament scholars, but *how* and *why* we do it, and what difference it makes, matters a great deal, and these sentiments undergird this book. If the New Testament and the study thereof stand on the side of Lady Justice in this configuration, our current book is something akin to the graffiti. However, by this we intend no disrespect, but hope, rather, to open up a space for examining the intersection between the past and present, and particularly the deeply rooted interconnectedness of the two. In so doing, we understand that the venerable tradition might well gain renewed vitality, imagining a different kind of future in the process.

Introducing the New Testament as Introducing Traditional New Testament Scholarship

In order to articulate more fully what exactly it is we mean by "de-introducing" the New Testament, and why we think it might help us gain renewed vitality in the field, we will attend briefly to what could readily be conceived of as its semantic opposite: that is, "introducing" the New Testament. Obviously one rather large area to engage here is a genre of introductory materials, namely textbooks, that are put to service in pedagogical contexts claiming to "introduce" students to the New Testament and early Christian literature. This is no small matter, as the most popular (as in, most often taught) undergraduate religion course in the United States is, and has been for some time, the introductory Bible course – either Old Testament, New Testament, or, as is increasingly the case, the one-semester "Introduction to the Bible." Accordingly, there is a substantial niche of the publishing industry devoted to the production of introductory Bible and New Testament textbooks (not to mention "handbooks" and "guides" and other hybrid introductory reference works). These books are thought to make a profit due to their "relevance" for teaching, e.g. their ready-made customer base of students taking courses that use introductory materials. Indeed, the landscape of the field is shaped by the proliferation of such materials in the academic marketplace.

We should note that we both have extensive experience teaching undergraduates at small, private liberal arts colleges in the United States, and as such are quite familiar with the introductory Bible course and its textual apparatuses. We have not had the luxury of working with graduate teaching assistants, so we are subject to a rich array of direct experiences with undergraduate students and their understandings of what it is that is going on in the classroom. We do not object to introductory textbooks as such, and we have used introductory textbooks and see their value inside the classroom. At the same time, as we will discuss in this book, New Testament

scholarship – indeed, biblical scholarship as a whole – is likely one of the more opaque and misunderstood disciplines in the higher-educational landscape, especially among undergraduate students. We can say that the majority of our students come to our courses with some measure of familiarity with, and piety, trepidation, and/or skepticism about, the Bible, for they have an idea that it is an "important book" in some way. They might have questions that they cannot yet fully articulate, or they might want to "dive deeper" into the material they hold so dear. For the most part, though, these students certainly do not expect to be introduced to biblical scholarship as an academic discipline when they sign up for a "bible class," and many of our own students would say they had no idea, before taking such courses, that something called a "biblical scholar" exists. And yet the uncritical presentation of biblical scholarship is, for the most part, the predominant direction in which introductory textbooks are slanted. Why that might be the case, and what difference it makes to organize "introducing" in that way, is, to us, an enduring question of our field and the humanities as a whole.

The introductory New Testament textbook serves as a means to introduce to readers not only the texts of the New Testament themselves – although the rhetoric of textbooks might argue otherwise – but also, if not primarily, the academic discipline of New Testament studies. Contemporary introductory textbooks tend to be presented in such a manner that New Testament scholarship is mentioned in a surface-level way throughout the work. Textbooks might attend to the chronology, backgrounds, and sources of the New Testament writings, which will affect how material is organized. While not all introductory textbooks are the same from cover to cover, we do note some structural similarities in terms of how these books reflect the norms of the discipline. An introduction that claims to be "historical," for example, will often start with a discussion of Jewish and Greco-Roman backgrounds as well as the "world" and person of Jesus before the canonical New Testament texts are explored. An argument for organizing the material this way in an introductory textbook is that "context matters," without a discussion of how scholars arrive at decisions as to what to include, and not include, in contextual considerations in the first place. Presenting material in an historical framework, of course, suggests a different orientation than the canonical organization of the New Testament texts themselves.

Similarly, an introductory textbook might include a cursory discussion of the two-source theory concerning the formation of the Gospels, canon formation, or the Pauline epistles, without going into great detail about the live and unsettled debates in scholarship about any of those issues. An introduction to the New Testament could include photos of archaeological objects and sites, suggesting that material culture is important for understanding the texts, without helping readers understand how exactly that came to be

the case or what is at stake in working with objects. Although the author of an introductory textbook may provide an introductory essay written in the first person that could explain his or her own interest in and/or ideological positioning vis-à-vis the material, the author's "voice" largely disappears as the textbook progresses, giving the illusion of "objectivity" in the presentation of information. These maneuvers are methodologically significant, they have their own histories as part of larger discourses, and yet they are rarely explained to new initiates beyond statements that ancient contexts are important for understanding how these ancient New Testament texts came to be, and what significance they might have had in the ancient world that produced what we now call "Christianity."

A cursory survey of introductory textbooks in, say, Germany and the United States over the last century will reveal some measure of diversity in terms of organization, orientation, and outlook. In our estimation, a commonality that books in this genre share is that they serve a largely contradictory function in relation to their audiences in their own historical and social contexts. That is, textbooks serve as a means to introduce readers to a collection of texts that in many ways needs no introduction. The Bible is, and long has been, a foundational text, object, and fetish of people across time, appropriated and re-appropriated throughout history and across cultures for various ends. The "religious" or "theological" appropriation of the New Testament is also a popular use. Even as ecclesiastical structures constitute an important piece of the interpretive landscape, those structures do not have a monopoly on meaning-making by any stretch of the imagination. In the United States, some aspect of the New Testament and related literature – be it the characters of Jesus, Paul, or the apostles, the sayings of the Gospels or letters, the "rapturous" events of Revelation, or the "forbidden" texts that did not make it into the canon – is invoked regularly in the media, in public debates, in advertising, literature, and other cultural forms, well beyond church boundaries. The New Testament is, in some respect, a cultural apparatus of its own, deployed both as a catalyst for culture-making and a means of understanding culture itself. The New Testament is the site of much cultural production and argumentation – to be sure, not about the ancients, but about us: who we are, where we came from, and who we ought to be together. And yet introducing the New Testament is an introduction to disciplinary formation through purportedly attending almost exclusively to the ancient world that produced the New Testament texts and canon.

Further, no matter the thematic accent – whether historical, literary, or theological – the rhetoric of the New Testament textbook assumes either a certain kind of previous engagement with texts on the part of the reader or no engagement at all. The problem, of course, is that in the United States it

is extremely difficult to find oneself in a situation where one would have had no exposure to the New Testament. People may not have read the texts or be "biblically literate," but they are the heirs to the complex legacies and afterlives of the New Testament – even if unwittingly – through its deployment as Christian scripture. Readers who pick up an introductory textbook or enroll in an introductory course in New Testament are not "blank slates" – at least, not as far as the basic idea that the New Testament is somehow important in culture. Another primary assumption of introducing the New Testament is that the texts, and their ancient contexts, are interesting, relevant, and useful to the reader. Even if the implied audience of an introduction to the New Testament has never read the texts (which actually applies to "believers" and "non-believers" alike), the case can still be made for an introduction: after all, the New Testament is prominent as a foundational text of Western civilization.

That said, introducing the New Testament through introducing the field of New Testament studies serves as a means for readers to unlearn whatever it is that they have "brought" to the material, or at least become aware that their learning does not represent the only available position on the texts. If a reader learned the New Testament in the context of an ecclesial community, then "introducing" the New Testament might involve learning a different, non-faith-based, viewpoint and framework for interpretation. An embedded assumption common to an "historical" introduction to the New Testament is that the student has already been "introduced" to the texts – that such an introduction has occurred, before the introductory course and textbook are encountered, in a setting and framework that are more conducive to theological agendas and patterns of faith-based or spiritual engagement – that is, in explicit relation to a Christian church community or individual religious experience. The implied audience of the introductory New Testament textbook, then, is that which has had a prior relationship with the texts, perhaps in an explicitly "religious" way that is more concerned with faith than facts. Thus, the "historical" agenda in introducing the New Testament is itself a de-introductory project of its own in that it comprises an unlearning of theological ways of reading through an introduction to historical ways of reading. However, the same could be said for any position that a student might bring to the material: "introducing" the New Testament is a signifier for challenging and evaluating one's assumptions through encountering a different view.

What, then, does it mean to "introduce" the New Testament if everyone already has an idea of what that is, but also has no idea? According to the logic of the introductory textbook (and, by extension, the introductory course), it means to orient students to the texts through learning the rather traditional procedures, methods, and conclusions of the field, which

are presented without critical reflection as that which is the way to be "introduced" to the texts, contexts, and histories of interpretation. That is to say, scholars who participate in "introducing" the New Testament might be well aware of its enduring status in culture, and yet persist in maintaining that the best way to introduce the New Testament is through extensive attention to the ancient contexts in which the texts and traditions originated, which in the language of the discipline is called a "historical-critical" approach. It is the historical-critical study of the New Testament that is positioned as that which must be learned against the unlearning that students must do so that they might be properly "introduced" to the texts. In this schema, the New Testament must be studied historically if it is to be understood correctly, historical criticism must be consistent with "scientific" and systematic methodology, and engaging the New Testament through historical criticism should precede efforts to make the texts relevant or meaningful in the present. In introducing the New Testament, the field is presented as stable, fixed, and isolated from the history of ideas and the humanities more broadly. Delineating and stabilizing the categories of the field is almost a prerequisite for introducing the New Testament, irrespective of what the audience brings to the material.

Aside from serving as introductions to the study of the New Testament through various issues in the discipline, introductory textbooks also implicitly assist in narrating the field as that which is concerned with the ancient world alone – concerned with authorial intent, for example, or with the sources, occasions, and meanings for the texts in the first century CE. This traditional way that the New Testament is introduced through the classroom and textbooks is not without criticism. As we have already mentioned, there inheres a potent disconnect between contemporary orientations to the New Testament and the focus on the ancient world characteristic of introductory materials. In some way, this apparent contradiction between historical-critical introductory materials and the orientation of the reader and audience is symptomatic of a long-standing tension in New Testament scholarship between historical criticism and newer approaches aligned with literary criticism, social-scientific approaches, or methods that front the social locations and identities of readers and interpreters. While these tensions may not always be addressed in introductory New Testament materials and courses, they are certainly alive in the discipline. Whether the ancient or modern world should be emphasized in the study of the New Testament is a core question with no easy solution or professional consensus. Nevertheless, criticisms of historical criticism persist, and we will sketch below, in broad strokes, the contours of such criticisms as well as the difference they might make for a project that claims to "de-introduce" the New Testament such as this one.

Introducing Criticisms of Traditional New Testament Scholarship

"Historical criticism" enjoys a long and complex history as the foundational orientation of the discipline of New Testament studies. In the broadest possible sense, historical criticism is less a method on its own and more a catch-all term for a range of approaches to biblical interpretation that focus on attempting to understand ancient texts in their original historical, literary, cultural, and political contexts, according to, as far as it is possible to discern, the standards, norms, and values of the time in which those texts were produced. The hallmark of historical criticism, in our view, lies in cultivating an understanding that ancient texts meant something quite different in those worlds than they do and have in other worlds, which points to a basic sentiment that meaning changes across time and cultures. Moreover, reconstructions of ancient worlds and meanings are much more provisional and partial than universal and totalizing. In a best-case scenario, historical criticism should yield important "de-introducing" questions of its own about how meaning and purpose are never fixed, stable, or universal, showing in the process that biblical texts are not the sole property of contemporary apparatuses of power such as the church or state.[1] In much contemporary rhetoric about the field, however, historical criticism serves as an important signifier when discussing the state of methodological development and engagement. Critics of this most basic approach in biblical scholarship tend to characterize it within an oppositional framework. Depending on the position taken with respect to historical criticism, it is deployed as a cipher for what is wrong with the field, or what is right with it – what must be overcome, or what must be preserved – in order for the study of the New Testament, Christian origins, and early Christian literature to proceed.

There are many criticisms of historical criticism that rely on arguing that it represents the dominant and traditional way of doing things that scholars would do well to challenge, resist, and overcome. Let us be clearer about the contours of these conversations through thinking about some contemporary characterizations of biblical studies by its professional practitioners. We will note here that the contemporary landscape of biblical studies is rhetorically configured in such a way as to consist of a tension and dichotomy between "historical criticism" and "everything else." We find ourselves interested in the discursive configuration of the complex of approaches to biblical studies called "historical criticism" by both proponents and detractors, although here we focus on the latter. We highlight here two main and interrelated tropes in such discussions: the assumed consolidation and control of meaning by biblical scholars who use historical criticism, and historical

criticism's purported denial of the contours of identity and social location among readers and interpreters.

A central trope of narratives about the history of biblical scholarship that seek to engage the "status quo" is that the discipline can be divided into a universalizing, monolithic, "traditional" historical-critical past and a particularizing, pluralistic, less traditional present and future. As John Collins has noted, "it is not unusual to narrate the history of biblical scholarship as a succession of methods, each of which initially exhibited its anxiety of influence by attempting to kill its father, and whose fathers sometimes disowned the offspring."[2] One major shift that is often noted is due to the so-called linguistic turn in the humanities and social sciences, the effects of which saw a tension between "historical" and "literary" approaches to biblical texts and traditions.[3] Proponents of newer, less "traditional" approaches accuse historical criticism and its proponents, in the past and in the present, of being overly concerned with the text at the expense of the reader, and empirically and imperially inclined by way of being scientistic, objective, falsely value-neutral, and so on. By great contrast to the singularity of historical criticism, a plurality of approaches that privilege other matters than those of the ancients is positioned as "making progress" or that which breaks from "traditional" ways of doing things by attending to the plurality of meanings, the "real readers" of texts, and the subjectivity of scholarship.

A chief complaint about historical criticism claims that by focusing on the origins and orientations of biblical texts in the ancient world the range of possible meanings in the present is limited. The expert biblical scholar then becomes the sole mediator and guarantor of meaning, as opposed to churches, other institutions, scholars who might want to use different (e.g. literary) approaches, or ordinary people who read biblical texts in non-scholarly circumstances. Indeed, we note that a primary anxiety about historical-critical discourse among its contemporary critics is that it represents the promotion of a singularity of meaning that can only be produced, controlled, and disseminated by biblical scholars. As Stephen Moore and Yvonne Sherwood have put it,

> the emergent science of biblical criticism was designed precisely to ward off a plurality of meaning, and hence a plurality of readers, by identifying the true meaning, and making specialist scholars its official guardians … [p]rofessionalized philological method emerged as the touchstone and guarantor of valid biblical meaning. Biblical scholarship became a discipline that was narrowly specific in terms of the meaning that could legitimately be attributed to the biblical text, but diffuse in terms of the methods that could legitimately be utilized to mine and refine that meaning.[4]

For Moore and Sherwood, the issue seems to be that the increased specialization of biblical scholarship and its emergence as a disciplinary formation served to foreclose on who could access and read biblical texts as well as what they could say about those texts. With the invention of "the biblical scholar" as an interpretive entity and subject position, an elite class of readers and meaning-makers was established. To some, this has functioned as a means to produce a univocal, authoritative, "true" scholarly reading and meaning that prevents the proliferation of multiple readings and meanings. Of course, the rhetoric of "identifying the true meaning" has a history grounded in the articulation of biblical criticism as an epistemological framework separate from, and resistant to, ecclesiastical authority in the specific context of Enlightenment-era Europe, and particularly Germany. The meaning that historical analysis yielded was "true" as opposed to the "true" meaning that church tradition, especially through dogmatics and doctrine, had long maintained to the exclusion of other meanings.

Thus, while doing history in other disciplines might take for granted the contextualization of texts and traditions, the history of historical criticism as a means of examining biblical texts has always been in tension with ecclesiastical hierarchies and mechanisms of authority and control, which in Europe were bound up with the nation-state. These debates were not without consequences. In the United States, early historical critics who trained in Germany and argued for biblical interpretation that was free from ecclesiastical control could lose their academic posts and, in some cases, be tried for heresy by denominational bodies. The tension between scholarly and ecclesiastical authorities persists. In some cases this tension precipitates the charge that biblical scholars "control" meaning – which hurts the church in the end, since the biblical texts are, as Roy Harrisville and Walter Sundberg claim,

> remote from the concerns of contemporary life. In this perspective, biblical interpretation tends to be treated as a forbiddingly difficult attempt to find a way to leap across the great chasm of time that separates the present from the biblical era. The enormous effort thought to be required for this dampens the traditional Christian habit of reading the Bible spontaneously and experiencing one's life directly mirrored in its pages.[5]

We note that Harrisville and Sundberg come to biblical scholarship from different ideological orientations and inclinations than Moore and Sherwood, and the latter duo may not claim that historical criticism has caused a "serious and recurring problem" for theology and an "intellectual and spiritual agony" for the life of the church.[6] Yet both sets of scholars have characterized historical criticism in similar terms: it is a

tool that biblical scholars use to "control" meaning and to remove biblical texts from ordinary, contemporary (Christian) readers by fronting a concern with history, and with the ancient world in particular. In both cases, the predominant concern appears to be that historical criticism is a means by which biblical texts are "taken" from the hands of non-specialists – importantly, theologians – and placed under the "exclusive" care of a new class of expert.

Closely related to the claim that historical criticism is a method that is used to help biblical scholars exact exclusive control over biblical texts and their meanings is the claim that historical criticism, as "objective" scholarship, fosters and encourages a "hegemonic" view that reifies its position as value-free. Further, in this schema historical criticism becomes a "colonial" tool that denies the possibilities for non-dominant-culture identification and meaning-making. According to some critics, biblical scholarship in its traditional forms lacks self-reflexivity on its own positionality and participates in the "silencing" of minority voices. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, has long argued that biblical studies must attend to its "margins," rather than its "center," in order to become relevant, stating that

> only if biblical studies relinquishes its posture of value neutrality and claims of scientific status, will it be able to turn into full-fledged critical rhetorical studies. Only if it moves out of its academic ivory tower and becomes a publicly responsible discourse, will biblical scholarship be able to recognize the voices from the margins and those submerged by the kyriocentric records of biblical and contemporary hegemonic texts.[7]

For Schüssler Fiorenza, a "full-fledged critical rhetorical studies," as opposed to traditional biblical studies, is part of a "rhetorical-emancipatory" paradigm that is necessarily informed by critical feminist theory and praxis.[8] Such a paradigm attends to the rhetorical effects and ideological contours of biblical discourses, as well as the discourses of biblical scholarship. Unlike historical criticism, which is positioned as hiding its own rhetorical dimensions and not being all that interested in liberation or justice, critical rhetorical studies is invested in the well-being of all people, and as such attempts to cultivate all voices in struggles against domination.

One antidote to the traditionalism that historical criticism is thought to represent lies in the proliferation of different identity-based criticisms – feminist, queer, postcolonial, African American, "cultural," and so on. Proponents of these criticisms tend to characterize the field in a linear, developmental manner, moving from "old" value-neutrality and dominant identity formation to "new" paradigms that privilege the social locatedness of interpreters as driving the meaning-making process as far as biblical

texts are concerned. Herein biblical scholarship is narrated as proceeding in stages, with each stage across time dismissing and/or improving upon the previous one. Each group that desires to participate in biblical interpretation, then, will propose a reading that takes the identity and experience of the group seriously as a source of knowledge and power, rather than adhere to the Enlightenment-era rationalistic, elitist, positivistic antiquarianism of historical criticism. In fact, reading from a specific social location has become a hallmark of biblical scholarship that seeks to challenge the "hegemony" of historical criticism and its implied universal (male, European, heterosexual) subject. Again, biblical scholars who use historical criticism are the target for the charge of forced singularity and domination, and the use of social location in biblical scholarship serves as a way to suggest that, contrary to how traditional scholarship might be presented, it is not actually without values, perspectives, or ideologies of its own.

As far as some critics are concerned, then, historical criticism is thus positioned as a methodological tool that both hides its own positionality and potentially shapes, even denigrates, the positionalities of others. It is linked to a dominant "center" of biblical scholarship that is opposed to the "margins," both in terms of method and identity. And when "imported" from one social location to another via pedagogies of biblical studies, historical criticism, which developed in the context of European imperial and colonial prowess, can serve as a colonial "civilizing" tool of its own. As R. S. Sugirtharajah has stated,

> The greatest damage that historical-criticism did was … making the contents of the Bible look primitive and uncouth alongside the march of modern progress. In the stages of human development and human thought, biblical narratives came to be seen as the literary product of tribal people and uncivilized times. As seen from the urbane, romantic and humane eighteenth-century Western perspective, the biblical myths and morality looked crude and in need of refinement and civilization.[9]

As the Bible, and then historical-critical biblical scholarship, were brought to theological classrooms in India, Sugirtharajah notes that the colonial assumption that the indigenous population was less civilized was implicitly supported by biblical scholarship that used historical analysis to determine the developmental stages of biblical literature: "[w]hereas in the West [the Bible's] poetic images were seen as a pure and lofty form of spiritual aesthetics, in India the biblical images were seen as a way of exposing the spiritual inadequacies of Indians, and, as such, a vehicle for eventual conversion."[10] Accordingly, the indigenous Indian population, as the orientalized "other," was perceived as in need of education and civilization,

on the one hand, and incapable of higher-order thought, on the other.[11] Through colonial (re-)education, those who received theological training absorbed and inhabited an identitarian space defined by expatriate colonizers who were aided by the tools of historical criticism. While the particulars might change, the basic structure – that is, that historical criticism is a tool that helps to position those on the margins as "others" who must learn the dominant ways of (European) knowing and thus assimilate in some way into dominant culture – can be traced throughout narratives of the field as articulated by critics of "dominant" biblical scholarship.

Thus far we have been concerned with a major tension in biblical scholarship that can often be obscured by the ways that "introducing" the New Testament might occur, at least as presented in much introductory material. That tension can perhaps be summarized by the question of whether, and to what ends, we might interpret biblical texts: by starting with the ancient historical context in which the texts were produced, or by starting with our own contemporary situation in which the texts survive and are deployed. We empathize with these difficult methodological issues, and are well aware of the ways in which power has been exerted in the name of the Bible and biblical scholarship. We are also keenly aware that a primary reason to investigate the ancient world of the New Testament is that the texts are of critical importance to understanding many aspects, religious and non-religious, of contemporary culture. We do find that attention to contemporary issues, balanced with attention to the ancient world, works well in our classrooms, even as introductory textbooks may not explicitly "go there" in terms of contemporary questions and concerns.

That said, in terms of the conceptualization and rhetoric of the field itself, we are not convinced that an "either-or" approach works when it comes to introducing the study of the New Testament. We should be clear that we would not deny that there are significant methodological questions and difficulties that historical criticism poses for the present. As is the case in our context, earlier scholars who developed historical criticism were doing so at least partially in response to the world in which they were situated. Nevertheless, the tension we have been describing in the discourse of the field is fraught with a persistent series of conceptual binaries that place historical criticism – the basic mode of conducting biblical scholarship wherein texts are placed in their historical contexts – in a largely negative position. In addressing the question of methodology, historical criticism often serves as the "tradition" out of which the "innovation" of newer approaches is generated; it is "controlling" in contrast to approaches that provide greater "freedom"; it is the "center" that pushes the "margins" down; it is the "objective" stance of "elite specialists" that denies the lived "experience" of "flesh-and-blood readers."

As part of the project of "de-introducing," we are concerned with how we develop, reify, and deploy the categories we do in the study of the New Testament and early Christianity, with the understanding that all of these categories and narratives about the field will necessarily reflect modern, and not ancient, circumstances and questions. In other words, we want to underscore the point that the study of the New Testament is not simply about the texts themselves, but also concerns what people do with texts in different time periods, cultures, and media forms. In some way, texts and what people do with them are intertwined. To this end, we observe that rhetoric in the field that aims to denounce historical criticism in some sense repeats the same structural narrative about the history of the field as is present within historical-critical narratives about Christian origins and the development of early Christianity. Representing historical-critical discourse historically as the "old" against which the "new" is framed creates a linear developmental model for the "stages" in the history of the field, as if there were a single origin point and branches that came off over time, with there now being an emerging panoply of approaches thanks to the diversification of practitioners and methods. This "from the one to the many" narrative functions as a myth of origins of sorts that serves more to justify current social relations and hierarchies than it does to say anything substantive about the actual history of the field.

Some New Testament scholars who are critical of historical criticism might take to theory, and particularly deconstruction, as a means to appraise and destabilize what are thought to be a text's intentions and implications. By identifying and challenging a text's assumptions, or what it might take for granted, a whole host of new readings and questions might be possible beyond those concerned with origins, authorship, and ancient social settings. Aside from "new" readings of "old" texts, though, the deconstructive task also, in a best-case scenario, aims to reveal something of the frameworks and scaffolding that have shaped the ways we think about early Christian texts and phenomena in the first place. Within methodological approaches to the study of the New Testament that are inclined toward deconstruction, though, we observe a tendency to participate in another process of stabilization concerning the "biblical scholar" and "biblical studies" as fixed and singular entities. We wonder whether such a maneuver represents, to some extent, a reluctance to use deconstruction to its full potential as a tool that could reveal the ideological contours of a discipline through appraising the ways texts are created and managed by readers and interpreters, historical critics and deconstructionists included.

Further, representations of historical criticism such as those we have considered above tend to downplay the reality that all historical analysis takes place in political and social contexts, even if not explicitly stated in

the writings under discussion. It is certainly the case that earlier incarnations of historical-critical biblical scholarship were largely conducted by, for example, elite Protestant males of European and American descent. That the shape of the field has changed dramatically in terms of who can actually become a New Testament scholar is a critical part of its legacy. We would also not deny that New Testament studies, as a discipline, has been implicated in affirmations and perpetuations of oppressive hierarchical power arrangements. However, to focus on the politics of inclusion and exclusion, "center" and "margins," without attending to broader discourses, socio-political and historical circumstances, and power relationships denies the possibility that for every narrative about the field there is always a counter-narrative. When we write our narratives of biblical scholarship, we might do well to consider to what extent have we conflated the proposals of New Testament scholarship with the identity politics of the scholar(s) making them. It is critical to talk about who we are in relation to our work, and the politics of identity has emerged as a critical component of doing that work. But to focus on identity, who's in and who's out, to the exclusion of broader issues and structural matters that any power analysis demands is to do what we might call cultural criticism without critical theoretical engagement. We do find it curious that so much responsibility, for so many problems in the field and the world, is mapped onto those who have practiced historical criticism of biblical texts in the past and the present. For example, to criticize European biblical scholarship for its orientalizing tendencies without criticizing the missionaries that brought the Bible to the Third World in the first place is to leave out an important piece of the puzzle of power relationships. We would rather argue that sustained attention to power dynamics is a vital aspect of interacting with the vast and varied history of the discipline, recognizing that human lives and relationships are complicated and not, as it were, binarily formed.

We do not raise these questions and issues to criticize or dismiss important conversations and controversies in the guild. In our view, biblical scholarship has long enjoyed status as an intellectually challenging field in the humanities – one of its strengths lies in its attention to methodological debates. We also agree that there is no consensus on a way forward in biblical scholarship as a discipline. However, we are not sure that consensus is necessary or possible – nor is consensus a goal of ours in this book. We do, though, want to engage the problem, if we want to call it that, in New Testament studies – even the current problem that poses historical criticism as the enemy or opponent – as part of a core issue that has been a part of the discipline for quite some time. To this end we would underscore that what we call "historical criticism" and "New Testament studies" constitute fundamentally contested and contestable disciplinary spaces. Contrary to what critics

might contend, the methods and ideologies embodied by historical criticism have contributed to its inhabiting a site where basic dissension over aims, goals, audiences, and assumptions continues.[12] Again, we would not disagree that there are some aspects of historical criticism that may not be worth rehearsing in a contemporary context. That said, there are many different trajectories for historical criticism, including the trajectories embodied by those who would characterize themselves as its most trenchant critics and detractors in this very moment. Our task, then, is not to say historical criticism is "right" or "wrong." Rather, in this book we aim to encourage critical thinking as well as foster more, not less, dialogue about the categories we use and stories we tell about who we are, what we do, and why we do it.

Introducing De-Introducing the New Testament

As scholars of the New Testament, we are interested in thinking about the material conditions that make our field possible as a disciplinary configuration, as well as the modes by which the various categories and methods of the discipline are rendered natural, inevitable, and universal. In other words, we are interested in how the study of the New Testament works on an ideological level. For us, the study of the New Testament, at least in its historical and literary trajectories, might indeed be a gateway to understanding the ancient world. However, in our view the study of the ancient world is best understood as a way to configure and articulate our relationship with that world in the present. The New Testament, then, serves as a particularly rich site for the conceptualization, delineation, and naturalization of discourses of power. Thus, the study of the New Testament affords an opportunity to think through and with such discourses.

The study of the New Testament, like many of the texts themselves, is occasional. By this we mean that it is located in space and time, and as such its procedures and outlook reflect the realities of those moments. It is also the case that the field is rhetorical, that is, it narrates and naturalizes a certain version of reality as well. We are interested in the stories that the field tells, as well as the stories one can tell about the field. There is no unmediated access to these texts, contexts, or histories of interpretation – since reading and interpreting are human activities we cannot ignore the fully human dimensions of biblical scholarship. In so far as the study of the New Testament serves as a mediator of sorts, then, we are interested in exploring what effects that has on the way the field is conceptualized and performed. We contend that we still need to ask historical questions about "our" texts. However, the terms on which we do history writing need to be examined over and over again.

Moreover, introductory courses and textbooks in New Testament studies are primarily pedagogical in nature, that is to say, such environments and practices have embedded in them teaching aims that make specific assumptions about the material, teachers, and students. In our view as professors, education is ultimately about making this world visible through interrogating that which is thought to be natural, universal, and stable. In our estimation, education, broadly conceived, is *not* about helping people think in certain ways or with certain frameworks that we happen to prefer or otherwise find agreeable. We are far less interested in students adopting our, or any other, framework than we are in an acknowledgment that every perspective has a framework, including our own in this book. We are less interested in introducing our discipline than we are in revealing the operating assumptions and questions behind it. Less a "method" on its own and more a set of practices, "de-introducing" as we seek to conduct it herein turns our attention away from the ordinary procedures of introducing the New Testament, which is usually done through introducing the professional study of the canonical texts in their ancient historical contexts with some attention to the history of interpretation, particularly in the form of the texts as Christian scriptures. The "historical" mode of introducing the New Testament is configured as a straightforward, unadulterated, and unmediated encounter that inducts the student into a means of understanding the ancient texts, in their original ancient contexts, as a collection of documents, ordered chronologically or canonically, that do not "mean" the same things in the ancient world as they might in the modern one. The meta-questions about methods and categories are left aside for a more "official" story of the field itself with very little, if any, explanation.

Given the above-mentioned contours of the field as far as "introducing" is concerned, as a part of our "de-introducing" project in this book we intend to look underneath the traditional ways in which the field is "introduced." Our exploration will extend beyond the classroom to critically engage the conceptual framework of the field as a whole. To be sure, introductory textbooks provide a window onto the landscape of the field in a given time and place. *De-Introducing the New Testament* is thus a means of engaging biblical scholarship through identifying and appraising its "order of things." In our view this project has not only scholarly but also educational and pedagogical dimensions. We are concerned with and invested in how, and why, we should study and teach the New Testament, and to what ends. As a modern project, "de-introducing" is about pulling back the proverbial curtain on the field, so far as we are able to do that. We aim to empower our readers to engage the field not through specialization, but through thinking critically about some of the basic categories involved in studying the New Testament – or, frankly, any set of texts or traditions. Much of New Testament scholarship

has been invested in narrowing the range of focus and relegating meta-questions to highly specialized conversations among "peers." We contend that one does not have to be a New Testament scholar to think about categories or methodology, nor does one need to be an expert to pose new questions about old material. We aim to help cultivate critical thinking skills by turning to what we feel are some of the live and unsettled issues in our discipline, regardless of how "natural" these issues seem to be in the stories that are often told about the field.

Implicit in the practice of "de-introducing" the New Testament is defamiliarization, or the process of being able to describe, as if for the first time, what it is that we take most for granted in a given situation. Defamiliarization is a dialectical engagement between the strange and the familiar, and includes attempts to bring the strange things closer and seeing whether and how those strange things can become familiar. Such "estrangement," as literary critic Viktor Shklovsky would have it,[13] is done partly through a rereading and redescription of that which seems to be too familiar or cliché, in this case the ordinary way of introducing the study of the New Testament and the basic categories of the field itself. The defamiliarization process is not dependent upon the object as such – it is dependent on what we, as viewers and readers, do with objects, on what, and really how, we are willing to see.

As students of the New Testament, and as teachers in the liberal arts tradition, an integral part of our job is to observe what we have not noticed before, and especially to identify strange things about that which is most familiar to us. It is imperative that we make robust connections between different materials, perspectives, and life-situations. To be a student of the liberal arts is to see what we think we already recognize in renewed ways, to perceive beyond what is assumed or what we think we know. Thus, we must dig wider and deeper than what seems natural or what we take for granted about the study of the New Testament in order to ask more robust questions of these materials and ourselves. To engage in "de-introducing" the New Testament, then, is to attempt to revisit the familiar and see it as if we had never before encountered it.

In this book we will seek to "de-introduce" the New Testament through engagement with four interrelated sites that, in our view, seem "natural" in the field. Our interest in seeing these sites anew, and thus in exploring and problematizing these themes in the discipline, is methodological. We aim to use a defamiliarizing understanding of the field in order to engender sustained reflection on methodological questions. We are interested in doing so not because we are invested in "deconstruction" per se. Rather, we maintain that studying the New Testament might start with the ancient world, but only through modern means. Any engagement of the ancient past is

about how we might relate to that past in the service of understanding the present and making a different future.

In Chapter 1, "The Order of New Testament Things: Questioning Methods and Meanings," we lay the groundwork for "de-introducing" the New Testament by setting up larger questions about how the discipline works, articulating some guiding principles that are operative in scholarly work and re-presented in the process of "introducing" the New Testament. To this end we will contend with how we classify, categorize, consolidate, and convey the "order of things" as part of an overarching narrative of the discipline. Herein we will include attention to modern concepts often taken for granted in the study of the New Testament texts and traditions, such as origins and development; consistency and coherence; stability, definability, and simplicity; genetic connections and interrelations; difference, distinctiveness, and identity; and truth, fiction, and reliability. In raising these issues, it is our goal to understand how, methodologically speaking, we might better assess the assumptions and logic of the disciplinary work that shapes our introductory senses.

Having sketched a framework and set of questions about the discipline, in Chapter 2, "Foregrounding New Testament Backgrounds: Contextualizing Interpretation," we turn to using those categories to appraise how we situate the texts of the New Testament in relation to its Jewish and Greco-Roman milieus or backgrounds. The main question we explore in this chapter is why, and to what ends, scholars have long reified a commitment to exploring Christian origins and the development of Christianity through, and against, ancient backgrounds or "worlds." We outline, in broad strokes, the tension between "Jewish" and "Greco-Roman" backgrounds for early Christianity, how some of these trajectories are being followed in modern scholarship, and what difference this primary problem makes in the imagination of the guild as well as its mechanisms of knowledge production.

The imagination of the guild and its mechanisms of knowledge production is also a key theme in Chapter 3, "Objects, Objectives, and Objectivities: Material and Visual Culture and New Testament Studies." Taking up questions posed by the role of archaeology and material culture in the study of the New Testament, Christian origins, and early Christianity, in this chapter we explore the location, examination, and haunting presence of objects and material culture in modern scholarship. We examine particular assumptions mapped onto objects about the ancient world – assumptions that generate its naturalness, stability, coherence, and genealogical link to the present. Material culture is one of the most sensational and least transparent areas in modern biblical scholarship. While objects are hailed as providing "proof" for the historicity of the New Testament, they also reflect modern stories about ancient Christianity and its texts. We also raise questions about how

our narratives about the relationships among people, texts, and objects, in the past and in the present, involve several operating presuppositions regarding the relationships between ancient texts and material culture as performed in the field. These are understood in part by deployments of objects as both illustrations for texts and external validation of their veracity and interpretive priority.

We turn our attention from texts and objects to people in Chapter 4, "Brand(ish)ing Biblical Scholars(hip): New Testament Studies and Neoliberal Subjectivity." How people understand what it is that "New Testament scholars" do with texts, contexts, and histories of interpretation is our main concern therein. The persona and performance of scholars matter a great deal, and in this chapter we engage the politics and procedures of constructing ourselves as "brands," as a means of managing and performing individual and social identities under neoliberalism. In our view, this is a critical aspect of New Testament studies as it is construed in our late-capitalist economic context. Branding functions as the means of producing what we call a neoliberal subjectivity, and is an important, if under-recognized, part of the contemporary methodological landscape of the field. While in other chapters we focus on various aspects of methodological predilection, in this chapter we focus on the New Testament scholar him/herself. Ultimately, we would suggest that scholarly persona comprises a critical component of "method" overall.

We extend our analysis of the persona and performance of the New Testament scholar in "Back to the Future: Concluding Observations on History, Method, and Theory in New Testament Studies." In this final chapter, we examine the role of the biblical critic in contemporary discourse, as well as the various issues at stake in that role and what difference it makes to think creatively and expansively about methodological issues. As we emphasize throughout this book, it is our position that any discussion of the New Testament is not innocently about the ancient texts or their contexts, or their histories of interpretation and deployment, but is also, or rather primarily, about the relationships we have with those texts – by inheritance, accident, or choice. We would include relationships we want to overcome as well as those we want to cultivate in that assessment. The New Testament, and indeed the Bible as a whole, is not only about relationships, it also is a site where relationships are negotiated. Method is thus ultimately about us.

The study of the New Testament, which foregrounds the reality that no one is neutral in relation to the texts and traditions under consideration, presents us with the opportunity to make a substantial contribution to history writing, both with respect to the ancient world and religion and also to intellectual history, philosophy, and the humanities as a whole. This kind of broad critical engagement is, in our view, the promise of New Testament

scholarship and intellectual activity more broadly. By thinking critically about the human condition and human experience with the material thought to be most sacrosanct, most beyond question, most taken for granted as "the way it was" and "the way it is" and "the way it ought to be," we have the power to interrupt dominant narratives, to question our ways of knowing, and to imagine something else altogether. Put another way, we have the power to both write a "tag" on Lady Justice – and simultaneously honor her as a critical iconic element of the neighborhood landscape. This book, we hope, will contribute to conversations about the field and its potential, and we dearly hope our readers will be empowered to think critically and expansively through de-introducing the New Testament with us.

Notes

1. For a development of this perspective on historical criticism and a tracing of its influence in feminist and gender-critical biblical scholarship, which is often thought to radically oppose the procedures and claims of historical criticism, see Davina C. Lopez and Todd Penner, "Historical-Critical Approaches," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies* (ed. J. M. O'Brien; Oxford Encyclopedias of the Bible; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 327–336.
2. John J. Collins, *The Bible After Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005), 4.
3. For a summary of the tension between historical and literary approaches to the New Testament, see Lynn M. Poland, *Literary Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics: A Critique of Formalist Approaches* (American Academy of Religion Academy Series 48; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985); Stephen D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Moore, *The Bible In Theory: Critical and Post-Critical Essays* (Resources for Biblical Study 57; Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010); and Anna Runesson, *Exegesis in the Making: Postcolonialism and New Testament Studies* (Biblical Interpretation Series 103; Leiden: Brill, 2011), especially 56–59.
4. Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 102–103.
5. Roy Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Theology and Historical-Critical Method from Spinoza to Käsemann* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 11. The tensions between "historical" and "theological" readings of the New Testament, and the Bible as a whole, are long-standing, particularly in the United States where the legacy of the fundamentalist-modernist debates endures and the rise of evangelicalism has had an impact on scholarship. For a contemporary "middle way" between what is perceived as the two oppositional "poles" of historical criticism and faith-based interpretation, see Christopher M. Hays and Christopher B. Ansberry, eds., *Evangelical Faith and the Challenge of Historical Criticism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic Press, 2013).

6. Harrisville and Sundberg, *Bible in Modern Culture,* 13–14.
7. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 12. This argument is developed more fully, and recently, in Schüssler Fiorenza, *Democratizing Biblical Studies: Toward an Emancipatory Educational Space* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009).
8. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Democratizing Biblical Studies*, 90–91.
9. Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah, “Catching the Post or How I Became an Accidental Theorist,” in *Shaping a Global Theological Mind* (ed. D. C. Marks; Abingdon, Oxon.: Ashgate, 2008), 176–185: 168.
10. Sugirtharajah, “Catching the Post,” 169.
11. Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 74–78.
12. For a reflection on this point, see Mary Ann Tolbert, “Writing History, Writing Culture, Writing Ourselves,” in *Soundings in Cultural Criticism: Perspectives on Culture, Power, and Identity in the New Testament* (ed. F. Lozada, Jr., and G. Carey; Soundings Series; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 17–30.
13. Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Device (1925),” in *Theory of Prose* (trans. B. Sher; Champaign, Il.: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 1–14.