

The task and future of New Testament Studies

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In the light of various new tendencies in New Testament Studies, this article charts out the task for future students and researchers in the field. Within the frame of newer socio-cognitive discourse studies, it builds on the semiotic foundation that controlled interpretation of the ancient Greek text as a complex sign-system enabling the community of professional readers to construct meaning fitting the text. Such interpretations need to simulate the interpretation process within the original epistemic community. The article aims to reassess the role of exegesis in Testament Studies and a redesign of its sub-disciplines.

Contribution: The article makes an original contribution to realign the hermeneutical task to interpret the text in the New Testament with socio-cognitive discourse studies. It follows trends in reception studies in distinguishing semantic interpretation from the various uses of such consensual text and conforms to interpretation of the New Testament in the realm of faculties of theology and within academic and public discourse.

Keywords: Text hermeneutics; semiosis; interpretation; task and design of New Testament Studies; history of emerging Christianity.

New Testament Studies

New Testament Studies is an academic discipline taught at theological faculties and seminaries around the world.¹ It developed in the last quarter of the 18th century as a special branch of Biblical Theology.² However, what is the New Testament?

What is the New Testament?

The questions of how old the 27 writings are that are included in the New Testament, and from when on the 'New Testament' itself exists as a collection of 27 books, must be answered in a differentiated way. Even though the term 'New Testament'³ was already used by Origen in the late 2nd century alongside the term 'Old Testament', the collection of the 27 writings in the New Testament was not completed until the 4th century AD. Only with the post-Constantinian full Bibles (e.g. κ , A, B) were they included in the 'New Testament'.⁴

The individual writings were written between 50 and 150 AD., the compilation of the collected Pauline Epistles, the four Gospels, and Catholic Epistles with Acts to form a *New Testament* alongside the Old, did not come to a conclusion until the 4th century (see Schmid & Schröter 2019). In the Western Church, the *Latin Vulgata* replaced the Greek New Testament. Because of Erasmus' publication of a Greek *Novum Testamentum*, with his own accompanying Latin translation in 1519 (De Jonge 2019), the New Testament has been studied in its original language, Greek. Today we know the subject matter of New Testament Studies as the blue *Novum Testamentum Graece*.

1. Article read on 17th May 2023 at the ceremony marking the 122th anniversary of the founding of the Presbyterian University and Theological Seminar, Seoul Korea.

2. Biblical Theology strived to liberate exegesis from servitude to Dogmatic Theology. It was divided between Old and New Testament Theology to cope with the increasing specialised requirements to study and teach the 27 writings of the New Testament to students of theology (see Merk 1972:143–202). In the formative period of the subject, scholars taught New Testament Studies and another theological subject, often the history of the early church. Separate chairs for the study of the New Testament were installed, only since the last quarter of the 19th century.

3. The term *καινή διαθήκη* [New Covenant/Testament] goes back to Jeremiah 31:31 (38:31 LXX). In the letters of Paul, Hebrews and the Gospel according to Luke, it denotes the new covenant that came with Jesus Christ. This lineage is continued in the 2nd century in the writings of the Apologists and maintained until Origen (c. 185/186 – c. 253/254), as is evident from his commentary on John, written around 232. However, Origen also refers to 'the books of the new covenant' (Comm. Jo. 1.32.228). By this he means the Gospels and the Epistles.

4. Before that, Paul's letters were collected by the end of the 1st century, the four Gospels during the 2nd century. The Catholic letters were collected after that. The papyrological evidence suggests that for a long period, the Apocalypse was transmitted alone (P^{115}) and the Acts of the Apostles either alone or at the end of the Gospels (P^{45}) or before the Catholic Epistles (P^{74}).

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We should therefore place the texts that are in the blue *Novum Testamentum Graece* in two different historical contexts: firstly, as individual writings in their contexts of origin; and secondly, in their context of reception as part of the Christian canon. The academic discipline New Testament Studies can thus be assigned to two epochs of classical studies. As the beginning of Christian literature in early imperial period (the first and first half of the 2nd century) or as the 'New Testament' in late antiquity (the second half of the 4th century).

What exactly is the subject matter of New Testament Studies?

If we look at the *individual* writings, we concentrate on the formative phase of Christianity in the early Roman imperial period. The only access we have to emerging Christianity of the 1st and 2nd centuries is of a textual nature and has to be based primarily on the 27 writings in the New Testament, because they are the oldest sources. Of course, these documents have to be studied critically. For example, were all the letters that claim to be written by Paul, really authored by the historical Paul? In the cases of 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, Colossians and the Pastoral Epistles, this is highly disputed among scholars.

If we look at the 'New Testament' as part of the Christian canon, the focus falls on the importance attributed to this *collection* in the history of the church in late antiquity. In terms of the history of scholarship, there is no getting around the fact that as a single discipline, the subject of the New Testament Studies only exists because these 27 writings have been considered part of the binding Christian canon since the middle of the 4th century – albeit with fuzziness around the edges. Again, study the canon means to study it critically. It is a hermeneutical challenge to decide what lies at the centre of the messages in the New Testament and what is peripheral or even contradicts the core of Christian proclamation.

The *educational task* of New Testament studies is therefore twofold: With the necessary critical reflection when studying documents from the past, it should introduce students to the 27 writings in the New Testament in their respective historical contexts of communication, *and* to the same 27 writings within the context of the twofold canon of the church of the 4th century.

What lies behind the New Testament?

Where does the *Novum Testamentum Graece* come from?

The simple answer is, the Greek New Testament is edited by an ecumenical team of scholars and is based on texts that really come from antiquity.⁵ Anyone who studies the New Testament deals with ancient texts in Greek. She and/or he

5. Using papyri from the 2nd century and on uncial codices from the 4th century, the edition is prepared for print at the 'Institut für Neutestamentliche Textforschung' in Münster in Germany, at least in the blue Nestle-Aland 28th edition. This text edition 'made in Germany' forms the basis of the work of all exegetes and is the text that has been translated into hundreds of languages worldwide.

must understand how the modern editions of these texts relate to the ancient papyrus and vellum documents, and which decision the editors have taken on their behalf. In terms of its subject matter, New Testament Studies belong to Greek philology and is part of *historical discourse studies*. As a historical discipline, it is part of classical studies. This is also how the subject originated. New Testament Studies remains primarily a historical-philological task, to interpret the Greek texts in the New Testament. This leads to an important consequence for the subject and those who teach it.

The future: The most basic task for a protestant institution of theology is to ensure that students are trained to read and understand the Bible. Proper education in the biblical languages is the foundation of this task. Anyone who isolates New Testament Studies from the study of Greek and the ability to read the texts in the New Testament alongside other texts of the Greek literature of the early imperial period, brings the foundation of exegesis crashing down. Only an institution where a good understanding of the ancient Greek language is taught and required, can fulfil its *educational task*; only there does exegesis have a future.

The historical questions and its limits

This historical question that New Testament Studies asks concern the individual 27 writings in the context of the history of the origin of Christianity. They lead right through the blue New Testament and ask what lies behind it, why it is there at all. The writings that are collected in the New Testament are, to use Gustav Droysen's words, 'remnants' from the past. One could possibly add the first Epistle of Clement and some other writings, for example the Didache, from the so-called Apostolic Fathers, but even this will not change the fact that these writings are what we have left from the early Christian past. There is nothing else archaeological or iconographic from the first two centuries of Christianity. However, there are these ancient writings here and now before our eyes: twenty-seven of them! They enable us to tell the story of nascent and emerging Christianity. But only parts of it. They also *limit* what we can tell.

The fact that the 'remains' from the past constitute what is *left* of the beginnings of Christianity but not completely what it has been – for the history of the founding of the churches in, for example, Rome and Alexandria, which lies in darkness, shows us that there was much more than what is left to us. The fact that the collection of writings in the New Testament is a remainder, entails that we can only tell the story of the emerging Christianity *partly and fragmentary*. Given the sources, there are many things we would like to tell, but cannot tell. Our academic discipline would do well to admit more often that we do not know. It would be even better to remain silent about what we cannot know rather than to speculate.

The future: If New Testament Studies is to have a future, it should concentrate on what can be researched systematically and be verified intersubjectively based on those early texts

the centuries have left us.⁶ It is the *task of those educating* future exegetes to teach students to be humble about what we can know about the beginnings of Christianity and to train them in sound methodology to keep their research questions and answers strictly *within* the boundaries of what the ancient texts allow.

The historical context of the meaning of the New Testament

Nevertheless, not only the existence and scope and sources limit our narratives about the rise of Christianity. They are, as I have emphasised several times, literary sources written by someone from a distant past to instruct a readership or audience in a specific situation to act in a certain way. Paul, for example, wrote the first ever Christian letter in 49 AD not to us, but to console and instruct the church in Thessalonica. All the writings in the New Testament arose from a particular communication context of almost 2000 years ago. To answer our historical questions about the text adequately, we have to interpret the whole text in the context of the (re-)constructed communication events of that time. Here lies the prerequisite for making history out of the remains from the past. Only the exegesis of the texts in their entirety opens up the possibility of placing them 'back' in their communicative contexts. Only after this, we can combine them in such a way that they can be used to tell stories about the beginnings of Christianity. The nature of the documents in the New Testament requires that those teaching and studying at university level, develop the ability to interpret the Greek texts in the New Testament as part of the world from which these text came to us.

Historical-philological interpretation as the hermeneutical task of New Testament Studies

Scholars of the New Testament are all first and foremost textual or literary scholars and religious philologists with a text-hermeneutical task to study documents from the ancient world. However, how should we approach it?

The presuppositions of the hermeneutical task

Why do we concern ourselves at all with the writings included in the New Testament in the Christian canon? There are at least two important reasons. Firstly, as already said, they are the only sources that can provide information about the initial development of Christianity, for there are no other such early texts. Secondly, we believe that these writings contain the essentials of the message of earliest Christianity. Either way, we do not focus our attention primarily on *describing* these texts by word, phrase, sentence, period, paragraph, pericope, section of text and overall text, but to *interpret* them. This means to formulate the message and the intention of the texts. This is carried out, because exegetes believe that these texts express important aspects

⁶Too often, scholars run riot in the formation of wild hypotheses. Martin Hengel once called New Testament Studies 'eine Vermutungswissenschaft'. The problem is that hunches are not the result of rational scholarship, but products of imagination.

of the identity formation of Christianity and should continue to play such a role. New Testament Studies have a hermeneutical task.⁷

The interpretation of a text

The interpretation of a text is a reconstruction by the reader of the textualised thoughts of the author, that is the interpretation of the whole text. The interpretation of a text, like that of the individual word, is evoked by the text. However, the interpretation is *not in* the text but emerges *in the mind* of the interpreter. The interpretation is a *mental construct*, a conception of a real reader. As such, it is always something subjective, whose scientific verifiability depends, among other things, on the extent to which that what the reader reconstructs can be verified by other competent readers with reference to the same text and the standard rules of language (the lexicon, grammar, text types). The crucial question is: Can an interpretation rightly claim to be an *adequate* reconstruction of the *intentio operis* (Eco 1991), the intention of the work? One can only determine in retrospect that the result, the interpretation reconstructed from the text, is in accordance with the text and with the language in which it was formulated.⁸ Interpreters 'should take into account the current beliefs and knowledge of the recipient, and thus a Common Ground'. (Van Dijk 2014:318). It is obvious that what is reconstructed is dependent on the text to be interpreted. The text itself has the capacity to set limits to what is interpreted, but only if other interpreters point out the limits and transgressions of an interpretation with reference to the text itself. Exegesis has to clarify how interpretation and text relate to each other. If it cannot do this, it can hardly make a scholarly claim.

Here lies the reason why the foundation of New Testament scholarship is the continual exegesis of individual texts and the never-ending dialogue between peers about the adequate interpretations of these texts and their legitimate use. I am firmly convinced that the interpretation of the texts in their entirety is and remains the foundation of New Testament scholarship. The *educational task* is to teach students to construct the content and intention of the writings of the New Testament and to mediate it to the Christian community. Simultaneously it is of outmost importance that exegetes should discuss their interpretation not only with students, but also with peers, with those from the past and the present. This is necessary, because the community of interpreters provides the check and balances that keep exegesis a scholarly endeavour that has a place at the university.

Many fashionable questions that come from 'cultural studies', 'anti-imperial interpretation', 'post-colonial studies' or public discourses should be subordinated to the task of constructing the intention of the particular literary work. The questions

⁷In my opinion, the desideratum for a concise text theoretically underpinned textual hermeneutics, or as one can also say, a critique of exegetical reason, still exists. In the following section, I will only be able to sketch the outlines of such an enterprise.

⁸As the combined application of lexicographical, grammatical and discourse rules cannot be regulated for each individual case, interpretation ultimately remains an art.

that lead to answers that have a long-term value, those that advance the understanding of the subject-matter of New Testament Studies in such a way that it will have a future, arise from a minute engagement with the Greek texts in their (re-)constructed literary and communicative contexts.

Texts as complex networks of written signs (semiotic foundation)

Since the 1980s, the emergence of cognitive discourse analysis (Van Dijk & Kintsch 1983) has confirmed Schleiermacher's (1808–1819) view that one has to consider two sides in the processing of linguistic signs. On the one hand, the relations between the linguistic signs are woven together to form a text. On the other hand, the reconstruction of such relations by the readers or listeners of linguistic utterances.

I will not go into detail here (see WUNT 448:3–18), but note that it is crucial to provide how grammar succeeds at the expressive level, and by 'grammar' I mean everything from word formation theory to textual grammar, how it succeeds to evoke a coherent understanding of the semantic meaning of the complex sign, a coherent design of the worlds with their actors, things and events to which this sign complex refers, and to suggest an idea of the intentions of the text in the reader and listener. Schleiermacher's grammatical and technical (or psychological) interpretation was ground-breaking here. With recourse to modern text and cognitive science, the event of understanding by means of texts can be understood from its text-grammatical, semantic, and text-pragmatic side. Here we are dealing with the foundations of our discipline, which must be understood if we want to explain why one interpretation is text-appropriate and another is falsifiable.

While processing the text signals, the interpreters establish relationships between signs that enable them to form constructions of meaning on a mental level. Cognitive textual scholarship is of use to exegetes as anatomy is to physicians.

Historical textual scholarship within the framework of textual hermeneutics

There is a decisive difference between medical doctors and textual scholars. Our texts are remains from antiquity and are more comparable to mummies. We have to assign the signs woven into the fabric of a text to things and actions in a world that is past, which no longer exists. We had no choice, but to *construct* this world out of other remains from antiquity. Anyone who studies the beginnings of our subject since Desiderius Erasmus and Hugo Grotius, from Johan Jacob Wettstein to Georg F. Heinrici, will see how, stone by stone, modern conceptions of past ancient worlds have emerged. Some of these edifices of thought in the miniature worlds of classical studies were misplaced or wrongly constructed and had to be torn down.

Several roads were wrongly laid out, such as the one that was supposed to lead to the evasive apocalyptic Son of Man in early Judaism or began at a pre-Christian gnosis, which turned out to be post-Christian. We should always be aware

that modern scholars of antiquity created the cultural encyclopaedia of Graeco-Roman antiquity and the lexicon of ancient Greek, which we use to ascribe meaning to an expression, to relate a phrase to a person, object, event or idea in the distant worlds we study. We have inherited this encyclopaedia of the ancient world from our predecessors and are expected to revise, add to, and correct it. How this can be performed has been shown by Galilee research since Zvi Gal with the great efforts of Eric Meyer, Jonathan Reed, Sean Freyne, and more recently Mordechai Aviam.

Nevertheless, without these constructs, which have to take into account all possible remnants from time and space that affect our texts, we are not able to decode the sign system of the text. The exegesis of the text in the New Testament is part of the classical studies, but the way in which the accumulated knowledge of the 'Altertumswissenschaften' is applied to the interpretation of the text as complex system of signs in order to make sense of it and to extract communicative intentions, must take place in a process of controlled semiosis.⁹

The meaning we ascribe to the word as a sign, or the thing or event we associate with it, remain dependent on our concepts and constructs. In semantics, we can only save ourselves from the schemata of our own language if we consciously separate between the language to be interpreted and the language of interpretation, and understand that both languages carry concepts that do not coincide. In constructing the worlds addressed in the texts, we remain dependent on the encyclopaedia of antiquity we use. However, it is not antiquity itself. Antiquity, alas, has passed away, disappeared, gone, and with it Jesus, the apostles, Paul and the other early Christians. All we can do is interpret the text in the light of the best construct of the distant world from whence it came. Simulating the 'epistemic community' (Van Dijk 2014) from whence the text came, we must keep in mind that most the authors of the writings included into the New Testament were Jewish and all of them wrote in Greek. For this reason the translation of the Hebrew Law, Prophets and Writings into Greek in the so-called Septuagint and other Jewish writings from the Hellenistic-Roman times, especially those in Greek, are of paramount importance in constructing the ancient context of communication in which the first Christian writings originated.

Future progress of New Testament Studies is inextricably connected to its interdisciplinary connections to the developments in, for example, the lexicography of Hellenistic Greek and knowledge about life, especially in Jewish circles, in the Roman Provinces of the eastern Mediterranean.¹⁰ It is when we improve the linguistic and cultural encyclopaedia against which we assign meaning to the texts of the New Testament and control selection from that image of the distant world in which Christianity originated that we have a

9. However, when one looks from the angle of the study of Roman provincial history at the literary images offered by the so-called imperial or anti-imperial interpretation of early Christian texts about of Roman administration and regency in the provinces of Syrio-Palistine, Galatia and Asia, one is often stunned.

10. Here great progress has been made recently. See Huttner (2013), Breytenbach and Zimmermann (2018), Pilhofer (2018), Deligiannakis (2022), Breytenbach and Tzavella (2023), Mitchell (2023), Ogereau (2023), Huttner (in press).

chance to have more light and see better than the generations of very able and diligent scholars preceding us. We have to *educate* our students to respect the New Testament as a collection of writings from a *distant world* that was very different from ours. Only when we respect its otherworldliness, we will be able to love it for what it is and stop to colonise it with our expectations.

Exegesis and its use

With regard to the role of exegesis, a distinction must be made between exegesis itself, that is interpretation, and the use of exegetical results. In this framework, I would like to recall the distinction introduced by Umberto Eco (1991) between the interpretation of a text and its use.

Exegesis as interpretation

The first and main aim of exegesis of the New Testament is and remains – to repeat – to create a hypothesis about the contents and intention of the respective literary work.

One has to interpret the respective text as a complex system of signs with its own structure and as part of an intended communication event. In exegesis as the interpretation of a linguistically structured text, the exegete formulates his and/or her view of the *sensus literalis* of the text. He and/or she forms a hypothesis about the *intentio operis*. Only this interpretation enables a legitimate (e.g. theological) ‘use’ of the text. Scholars of the New Testament capture their interpretations in translations into modern languages, motivated, and defended them in the numerous commentary series. With this, they fulfil the most fundamental task of New Testament Studies to provide the basis of Christian teaching and preaching, because the scholarly interpretation of the text is the benchmark for its use. Theological students should be educated to apply such benchmarks and to cooperate with institutions that translate the Bible and engage in disseminating biblical texts into popular culture.

Use of exegesis

If one recognises that exegesis is primarily about the interpretation of the text (see the aforementioned), the question arises as to the possible *use of interpretation*. In my view, the use of the results of exegesis is to be differentiated in three ways: intra-disciplinary, intra-faculty, and in the church as well as in the public.

Intra-disciplinary use of exegesis for the history(s) of Christian beginnings

Within the exegetical discipline itself, the interpretation of texts is used to construct, for example, a literary and religious history of early Christianity. To unfold this cannot be the task here. However, this much should be said:

The results of exegesis can be chronologically integrated into a history of early Christian literature. As an alternative to this hybrid design for an introduction to the New Testament, such a history of early Christian literature is possible, for

which the basic outlines have been worked out since the beginning of the 20th century (see WUNT 448:45). Based on the results of exegesis, such a history of the literature of emerging Christianity should start with the literary forms of the traditions from and about Jesus of Nazareth, treat all the other literary forms in the New Testament, and finally the writings themselves as entire texts. It has however, to be expanded to include the Apostolic Fathers, the first Christian apologists and non-canonical writings that can be dated before the end of the 2nd century. The use of the results of exegesis to construct a *history* of early Christianity has become *en vogue* again (Koch 2014). For the first 100 years, it primarily relies on the exegesis of writings in the New Testament, but it has to follow the available literary and epigraphical evidence to tell the story of the Christian communities up to the end of the 2nd century. Such a history, literary history or history of early Christian religion (see WUNT 448:47–78) apply the results of exegesis in the historical realm. However, such historical sub-disciplines do not illustrate that New Testament Studies is anchored (and financed!) as part of a *theological* faculty.

The use of exegesis in the theological faculty of a university

It is the use of exegetical results beyond the own subject, which gives New Testament scholarship its place in the Faculty of Theology, in the university, and in civil society.

Intra-faculty interpretation is used in conjunction with the other theological disciplines. New Testament exegesis becomes a theological discipline by selecting texts to guide theology to give orientation for theological decision. This guiding interest is the basis on which the texts are selected, interpreted, and then used in the faculty. Such use can result in an interest-led outline of an aspect of the history of early Christianity, for example the Christian interpretation of key passages from the Law, Prophets and Psalms (Hahn 2005:38–142), the separation from Judaism (Schröter, Edsall & Verheyden 2021), or a specific topic, for example the conceptions in the New Testament about God (Zimmermann 2007), about salvation (Du Toit, Gerber & Zimmermann 2019), about the church (Roloff 1993) or about ethics (Konrad 2022), or even in a theology of the New Testament. The *opus magnum* of Ferdinand Hahn (2005) is a great example of the latter (on this see WUNT 448:173–190). In the second volume of his *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, he proceeded hermeneutically and constructed one theology of the New Testament on the basis of the canonical writings of the New Testament. He thereby made the results of New Testament Studies as a whole functional for the other disciplines within the theological faculty.

Such ‘big’ books, and they are few and far between, are those that are important to theology as a whole. Because of over specialisation New Testament Studies is even more fragmented. This hampers its future role in theology severely. Comprehensive monographs that give an erudite overview over a whole sub-discipline of New Testament Studies enhance the importance of the subject considerably. It is the

task of New Testament Studies within a theological seminary to seek co-operation with the other theological disciplines: not only in research and publication but also first and foremost in teaching. To illustrate the unity and interdependence of the theological disciplines in teaching is one of the most daunting tasks in theological education. At the same time, it is a yardstick for successful theological education.

Inter-faculty: Other disciplines at the university, especially those in the so-called humanities, have a particular interest in the 'Wirkungsgeschichte' of the New Testament. The new developing branch of reception studies opens up new interdisciplinary fields of research about the impact of the New Testament (Hoegen-Rohls 2023). The use of texts from the New Testament in politics, art, literature and even film can be discussed in relation to their literal and historical interpretation presented by exegesis. To make students fit to engage in projects on the reception of the New Testament, be it in art, literature, music or in film, will enhance their chances on the job market considerably.

History of the reception of exegesis in the public sphere

The results of exegesis are requested and received in the church public and in the general social discourse. The reconstructed meaning and the intention of the biblical text allows and restricts its use in the public square and the use presupposes knowledge of and engagement in the society in which the exegete and other users of their interpretations live and teach (e.g. see ed. Alkier 2023; WUNT 448 79–88). Because of this situatedness, I will have to leave this to my readers and peers to develop that in their own interpretative communities.

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