

THE CRAFT OF HISTORY AND  
THE STUDY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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Beth M. Sheppard

Society of Biblical Literature  
Atlanta

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For Andy



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## ABBREVIATIONS

ANF	<i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325.</i> Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. 10 vols. 1885–1887.
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung.</i> Part 2, <i>Principat.</i> Edited by Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972–.
Ant. rom	Dionysius of Halicarnassensis, <i>Antiquitates romanae</i>
BDAG	Danker, F. W., W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature.</i> 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
BMW	The Bible in the Modern World
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
ChrCent	<i>Christian Century</i>
ERT	<i>Evangelical Review of Theology</i>
ExpTim	<i>Expository Times</i>
Geogr.	Strabo, <i>Geography</i>
HeyJ	<i>Heythrop Journal</i>
Hist.	Herodotus, <i>Histories</i>
HTS	Harvard Theological Studies
JPsychohist	<i>Journal of Psychohistory</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JCH	<i>Journal of Contemporary History</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JR	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
JRASup	Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplement Series
JRelS	<i>Journal of Religious Studies</i>
JRS	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
JSH	<i>Journal of Social History</i>
JSJSup	Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>

JSOT	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
<i>J.W.</i>	Josephus, <i>Jewish War</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
LLA	Library of the Liberal Arts
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	Novum Testamentum Supplements
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>PEQ</i>	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i>
<i>PRSt</i>	<i>Perspectives in Religious Studies</i>
PTMS	Princeton Theological Monograph Series
<i>ResQ</i>	<i>Restoration Quarterly</i>
<i>RHR</i>	<i>Radical History Review</i>
<i>Sat.</i>	Juvenal, <i>Satirae</i>
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLRBS	Society of Biblical Literature Resources for Biblical Study
SBTS	Sources for Biblical and Theological Study
SNTSMS	Society of New Testament Studies Monograph Series
STDJ	Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. 10 Vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976.
<i>TS</i>	<i>Theological Studies</i>
<i>WW</i>	<i>World and Word</i>

## INTRODUCTION

History is the arena in which we explore the past. But not every historian will come to the same conclusions or find the same insights about a single episode that happened days, decades, or centuries ago. This is similar to a phenomenon in New Testament studies where interpreters who examine the same passage often have very different observations to make about it. Take the Last Supper, for example. When it comes to the final meal that Jesus shares with his disciples prior to his crucifixion, John's Gospel contains the most detail and stretches from chapter 13 through chapter 17. This part of the Gospel is known as the farewell discourse—or, more aptly, “discourses,” since there are several topics of conversation that Jesus broaches with his disciples. On the surface, this extended farewell contains a number of poignant scenes, such as Jesus washing the disciple's feet, Jesus revealing that Judas would betray him, Jesus telling the disciples that he will be leaving them but will assign the Paraclete to remain in his stead, and Jesus praying to his Father on behalf of those who believe him.

So what have a few New Testament scholars who have an affinity for history been thinking about these passages? For his part, Robert Fortna is interested in determining what aspects of the Last Supper stem from an underlying tradition that the evangelist had at his disposal when pulling together the final version of the Gospel. To this end, he describes a source that included the events that lead up to Jesus' crucifixion, which he labels PQ, or the Passion Source. Fortna concludes, though, that chapter 13 has been rewritten by the author of the Fourth Gospel so extensively that it is impossible to separate out the strands that the evangelist himself contributed from those of this Passion Source.<sup>1</sup>

Instead of focusing on the history of how the Gospel was written, Ben Witherington goes in a different direction. He compares the Last Supper

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1. Robert T. Fortna, *The Fourth Gospel and Its Predecessor* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 149.

with a Greco-Roman banquet. These meals often closed with a symposium, or period of training, entertainment, and dialogue. At points in his exposition of the meal and conversation as it is recorded by the author of the Fourth Gospel, Witherington includes mundane details about daily life in the first century. For example, when it comes to the image of Jesus as the vine (15:1–11), he notes that the vine was a prized plant because grapes could be grown inexpensively. Further, wine was a source of nourishment and strength for Mediterranean residents, who needed a reliable source of drink and sustenance in a climate that alternated between rainy seasons and summer droughts.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of the symposium also captures the attention of Bruce J. Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh. But they don't share Witherington's take on that institution. Rather than being fascinated with everyday details of meals and food in general, they are particularly attentive to the dynamics of group interactions and social norms. Thus they go so far as to include a sketch of banquet seating arrangements in their effort to illustrate which positions at a table were the most honorable and would be assigned to the persons of highest rank.<sup>3</sup> Their interest in group behavior is also apparent in their particular interpretation of the metaphor of the vine and the branches. They highlight the fact that the metaphor of a main vine with offshoots is used to encourage solidarity and foster close interpersonal bonds between Jesus' core group members. They also note that the stronger the bonds within a group might be, the greater its security from outsiders.<sup>4</sup>

Rather than focusing attention on nature of the banquet or the details of group interactions, Sandra Schneiders heads off on another new track when she launches an inquiry into the identity of a single guest at the meal, the Beloved Disciple (13:23). The key question that informs Schneiders's study is the query, "What if the Beloved Disciple happened to be female?"<sup>5</sup> This question allows Schneiders to highlight the vital role that women

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2. Ben Witherington III, *John's Wisdom* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 232–33, 257.

3. Bruce J. Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 220.

4. *Ibid.*, 233–34.

5. Sandra M. Schneiders, "Because of the Woman's Testimony...: Reexamining the Issue of Authorship in the Fourth Gospel," *NTS* 44 (1998): 527: "I do not think that the really crucial Beloved Disciple passages, particularly the scene at the Last Supper... absolutely require an exclusively male identification of the figure."

play in the Gospel and in the history of early Christianity, even though no woman is explicitly mentioned as being present in John's version of the Last Supper.

So Fortna, Witherington, Malina and Rohrbaugh, and Schneiders present four very different views of a single section of John's Gospel. Why are these authors' insights so dissimilar? In part it is because they have used widely divergent methods in how they go about doing the business of New Testament interpretation—methods rooted in the discipline of history. A method is the set of theories, philosophical presuppositions, and generally accepted techniques upon which a scholar relies when interpreting a text or pursuing study of an individual or event from the past. The choice of method helps define what questions are asked, how evidence is treated when seeking to answer inquiries, and many other issues related to a given project.

To clarify, in the example of the Last Supper, the focus on the history of the formation of the Gospel text that was demonstrated by Fortna was a project driven by philological concerns about the authenticity and history of how the text came to be. For his part, Witherington's fascination with the details of the growing season of grapes puts him in sympathy with ethnohistorians, who assert that "ordinary things" from the past deserve as much attention as leaders, movers and shakers, wars, and other prominent aspects of the past.

Instead of focusing on everyday life, like growing grapes, a concern for group dynamics along with social norms and status aligns Malina and Rohrbaugh with the social historians. And, finally, Schneiders's desire to look beyond what the text actually says to discern what voices, groups, and factions are not prominent in the written records but nonetheless contributed to the growth of Christianity is similar to the techniques used by revisionist historians. So even though these scholars are New Testament interpreters, the methods that they are applying when delving into the Last Supper have their correlates in the methods used by historians who are studying subjects as diverse as the Middle Ages, world politics, or the U.S. Civil War.

We live in an era when the borders between disciplines are ever more permeable. Interdisciplinary studies programs in colleges and universities have been in vogue now for decades. Yet there is still much that we might learn from exchanges with those in the discipline of history.

For dialogue to be profitable, interlocutors must have a common vocabulary and at least a basic familiarity with the overarching conven-

tions of each other's discipline. The initial chapters of this book provide a general introduction to the theoretical aspects of the field of history. In chapter 1, for instance, basic definitions for terms such as *historiography* and *philosophy of history* are offered. Philosophical concerns extend into chapter 2, which gives overviews of the role and nature of time, the various areas in which selectivity plays a part in historical projects, and the importance and nature of sources. Chapter 3 delves deeper into the theoretical aspects of the discipline of history and addresses issues such as how history should be used and the differences between analytical and speculative history. This section of the book is rounded out with a discussion of some of the primary stumbling blocks and fallacies to which historical studies are susceptible.

With the fifth chapter, gears shift a bit and we embark on a history of writing history. This subtle turn in orientation is still firmly rooted in the theoretical portion of the book, despite the fact that material will be presented in roughly chronological sequence. There is one caveat, though. Some methods that got their impetus in the early part of the twentieth century are still alive and well in the academy, and thus their ongoing application will be traced into the present time. In any event, as time progresses there are new approaches and even revivals of older styles of scholarship. This should not be surprising, given the ever-changing approaches that are wheeled out in our own field. After all, in biblical studies it is no secret that there are methods of interpretation that previous generations employed but that are no longer in vogue in modern times. For instance, the Peshet mode of interpretation, such as that used at Qumran, and allegorical interpretations, such as those employed in the Middle Ages and involving the fourfold interpretation of scripture, are no longer in fashion. Likewise, the field of professional history has not been static in its application of methods to the study of the past. So chapter 5 provides a survey of the main techniques employed by Western historians from ancient times to the early twentieth century. It begins with both ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman historiographies and culminates with an approach known as historicism, which was still prevalent at the beginning of the last century and lingered in biblical scholarship through the middle of the last century. A few words about a method known as New Historicism are also introduced.

The bulk of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century gave rise to an explosion of historical methodologies. Marxist history, the *Annales* School, and other approaches came into existence and

are still flourishing in the field. Chapter 6 introduces these and other tactics in the historian's methodological kit.

By the middle of the twentieth century, however, postmodernism rocked nearly every academic discipline, history included. The seventh chapter describes methods that developed when researchers sought to approach materials using different viewpoints and lenses, such as revisionist history, postcolonialism, and even imaginative history.

Methods, however, remain vaguely abstract without some examples that assist an historian to execute his or her project. The last three chapters of the book demonstrate the application of some of the theoretical aspects presented in the early chapters when employed in the analysis of biblical texts. The three studies—one on clothing in Luke, one on the Samaritan woman, and the final one focused on Paul's body analogy in 1 Corinthians—between them draw inspiration from three different types of history: economic, administrative or legal, and medical. While this trio of studies would be broadly described as social history, they might more precisely be identified as inspired by the work of the history of private life or cultural history, a methodological focus where minor details of everyday life are as interesting and as worthy of study as the political or military interests that are usually associated with events of historical significance. Beyond that, one study represents a revisionist slant in methodology and another incorporates a paragraph or two involving simplistic quantification methodology. One other point must be made about these essays. They all take seriously the Romanization of the provinces during the imperial period. It is important to say a word about this because only in the past few decades have Roman influences on the New Testament gained increasing attention. What is at heart here are a number of paradigm shifts that are affecting the way New Testament scholarship is executed.

History, by its nature, is about context. Events and people live not in solitary isolation but within the realities of larger movements, philosophies, wars, inventions, and so forth. Scholarship itself even follows trends and patterns. During the last half of the twentieth century, for instance, there were several significant works in the field of biblical studies that pointed out that Christianity was birthed in a Jewish milieu.<sup>6</sup> Although

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6. Back in 2003, Gregory Riley expressed this clearly when he talked about an "Israel-alone" model of understanding Christianity, a model in which more attention was paid to Jewish antecedents of Christianity than those of the Greco-Roman world (*The River of God: A New History of Christian Origins* [San Francisco: Harper, 2003],

today we can easily concede that Jesus is addressed by the Jewish title *rabbi*, that he traveled to Jerusalem to observe and participate in Jewish festivals, and that the first disciples perceived of themselves both as Jewish and followers of Christ, at some periods in the history of biblical interpretation emphasizing the Jewishness of the New Testament would have been shocking. There was indeed an era in which scholars were preoccupied with the “uniqueness” and “specialness” of Christianity and consequently did not address the significance of the Jewish background of the New Testament. Similarly, until very recently there hadn’t been much work done on how Roman culture impacted the way lives were lived in biblical times. Archeological discoveries of Roman settlements in Israel and new understandings of the role that an imperial power plays in colonized lands, however, are creating a burgeoning interest in Roman backgrounds of the New Testament. To put it another way, newer understandings of the process of Romanization reveal that the influences of an imperial power permeate every level of culture. Therefore “Roman” aspects are just as intertwined as Jewish, ancient Near Eastern, and others in the cultural heritage of the New Testament. The three essays represent this understanding.

Indeed, the potential for historical investigations of New Testament texts is both varied and inexhaustible. It is likely that biblical scholars, by making use of the full palette of methods and tools of the discipline of history and delving into the Roman contexts in which early Christianity was birthed, will enrich our understanding of the Bible for decades to come.

Before diving into the first or theoretical portion of the book, I would like to take the liberty of making a few comments. First, a work such as this that attempts to do justice to two disciplines often fails to satisfy specialist practitioners in both. At points where this presentation seems overly simplistic or, even worse, reductionist, the readers should be aware that this treatment is only meant to provide the preliminary scaffolding for a bridge that spans the two fields. Thus the reader is heartily encouraged to use the bibliography and footnotes to find avenues and resources for pursuing the subject further.

Second, writing is merely a portion of a conversation put on paper. Given that, much is owed to those who have been unseen partners in the discussion and those who have provided the support and space to allow

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5). See also Beth M. Sheppard, “The Rise of Rome: The Emergence of a New Mode for Exploring the Fourth Gospel,” *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 57 (2003): 175–87.

this portion of the dialogue to come to fruition. To this end, I would like to thank President Phil Amerson and Vice President for Academic Affairs Lallene Rector of Garrett-Evangelical for granting me a sabbatical during the spring of 2011 to complete the manuscript. Tom Thatcher, the series editor, whom I first met several years ago at a Society of Biblical Literature conference, has always been a supportive colleague. Thank you very much for the encouragement, not to mention your close reading of the text and assistance in clarifying the nature of the readership for this book. Your help was invaluable, and this is a much better work due to your wisdom and insight. Conferences such as those offered by SBL and ATLA also provided me venues in which to give portions of this manuscript a trial run. I truly valued the feedback that I received at the individual sessions at which sections of chapters 6, 8, 9, and 10 were read. Kathleen Kordesh was very brave when she agreed to take on reading an early draft of this manuscript for obvious typos and making certain that I adhered to SBL's style requirements. She is a saint who literally corrected the same "full stop or comma?" issue in hundreds of footnotes and never complained about my inability to just learn the convention. Loren Hagen, who is one of the most well-read persons I know, graciously loaned me his personal copy of Dray—for more than a year! Thank you so much. This work would have had a totally different flavor without the books that you loaned to me. I would also like to express my deepest appreciation to Newland Smith, who came out of retirement to serve as interim library director during my absence and the other new members of the Garrett-Evangelical library staff—Portia, Lucy, Beth N., and J. Lauren—who took on extra duties while I was away and have been very encouraging throughout the project.

Finally, Andy. It has been almost twenty years now since our first conversations about historiography back when we were in England. Thank you for those discussions and all of the others in the intervening years. This book is for you.