

Fashions, Fallacies and Future Prospects in New Testament Studies¹

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I have always been interested in the history of my field, and one of the compensations of being forty years this side of receiving one's PhD is to have experienced a decent-size slice of that history.² In addition to witnessing some more significant figures and developments, there are others that have had a much shorter "shelf-life", some approaches and emphases now obviously fashions that came and then were superseded by others. There are also some ideas and assumptions that, though widely influential for a good while, were shown subsequently to be fallacies. In this discussion, I note a few of these fashions and fallacies, not to poke fun or in a spirit of *Schadenfreude*, but as salutary reminders that the field of NT studies is not immune from faddism, and from ideas that, though fallacious, can obtain a hold.

It is an interesting question why fashions can so quickly catch fire (though they often burn out as quickly) and why some ideas that can now be seen to be fallacious held wide credibility for a while, sometimes a good while. Perhaps by trying to analyse these phenomena we might be enabled better to engage approaches and emphases of our own time more critically. In that vein, later in this paper I note some currently widely-echoed notions that may be either passing fashions or that may come to be seen as fallacies.

Fashions and Fallacies

Fashions are trends that may arise quickly and disappear (or decline markedly) equally quickly. It is their temporary and limited time-span of interest and attention given to them that makes them what I mean by "fashions." Indeed, it is in the interests of various industries to ensure that fashions go out of fashion, so that subsequent versions of their products can be marketed more effectively. Think of Nehru jackets, or bell-bottom trousers, or hoola-hoops, or cars with big fins. There are also what we may regard as academic fashions. I have in mind approaches and emphases that may be touted in a way that makes it seem behind the times not to take them up. The other key feature of academic fashions is that, as with

¹ An earlier version of this essay was given as the Graham Stanton Lecture in the annual meeting of the British New Testament Society (28-30 September, 2013, St. Andrews). I thank respondents at that event, and also James Carleton-Paget subsequently, for comments and suggestions that I have attempted to take on board in the present version.

² Indicative of my interest, Larry W. Hurtado, "New Testament Studies in the Twentieth Century," *Religion* 39 (2009): 43-57.

clothing fashions, they do not last, but are superseded or become passé rather soon. Because of their short shelf-life we need not tarry long over fashions, and one illustration will perhaps suffice.

Those who have been in NT studies for a couple of decades will perhaps remember “structuralist” exegesis. It first came to my attention in a little book by Daniel Patte, *What is Structuralist Exegesis?*, published in 1976.³ Patte’s book reflected an interest in appropriating some earlier theoretical developments in *les sciences humaines*, and especially literary studies.⁴ As a then recently-minted PhD, I felt duty-bound to acquaint myself with this approach, but found it very difficult to grasp confidently, and, I have to say, hardly worth the effort. The learning curve was steep, with a whole conceptual galaxy to absorb, and an accompanying lexicon of specialist terminology (jargon). But, more off-putting still, the results of structuralist exegesis seemed rather bland and unimpressive. I recall trudging through a forty-page structuralist exegesis of the parable of the Good Samaritan (although I cannot now recall the publication details), the conclusion of which was the announcement that the discussion had shown that the point of the parable is the importance of neighbourliness, a judgment that in my view hardly required the effort expended to arrive at it.

But more to the point here, although handbooks and student guides on NT exegesis continue to include references to and descriptions of structuralist exegesis, it appears to have peaked some time ago in NT studies and is no longer the “now” fashion that it was for Patte in 1976.⁵ This for two reasons. First, “structuralism” simply suffered the fate of fashions, which is to be superseded by subsequent fashions, in this case, “poststructuralism” and “deconstructionism.”⁶ Indeed, already in 1975 (ironically for the date of Patte’s book), Roland Barthes (sometimes credited with the founding publication of structuralism in his book, *S/Z*, in 1953) asked, “Who is still a structuralist?”⁷

³ Daniel Patte, *What Is Structuralist Exegesis?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).

⁴ Largely an import from France, structuralism’s impact on English-speaking (especially American) scholarship is often traced to an international symposium held in Johns Hopkins University in 1966, at which, however, it was already clear that the approach was on the verge of “deconstruction.” Papers and discussions from that symposium were published: *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*, eds. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970; reprint ed., 2007).

⁵ But for a more enthusiastic view, see David Jobling, “Structuralism and Deconstruction,” *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John H. Hayes (2 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 2:509-14, esp. 509-12.

⁶ The heyday of structuralism in France was actually the 1950-1960s. See François Dosse, *Histoire du structuralisme, I. Le champ du signe, 1945-1966* (Paris: Éditions Découverte, 1991 ; ET, Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

⁷ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes* (ET, New York/London: Macmillan, 1977 [French 1975]), 117.

The Google N-Gram search facility is a fascinating way to chart the ebb and flow of words and phrases across many thousands of books stored by Google published from 1800 down to ca. 2008. A search for “structuralist exegesis” shows it first appearing in English-language publications around 1968, peaking in 1987, and plummeting thereafter. As for “poststructuralism,” this term first shows up in English-language books in the mid-1950s, began to acquire some salience from the late 1970s, and likewise had peaked by 1998, suffering a rapid decline in references thereafter.⁸

But a second reason that neither structuralist exegesis nor poststructuralism was ever anything other than a fashion taken up by a few devotees is that it hardly (or at least rarely) was demonstrated that either approach had anything terribly important to offer by way of opening texts up in new and interesting ways. As already indicated, my own sense was that structuralist exegesis seemed to require a lot of effort for very little payoff. Indeed, in light of the impression (valid it seems) often given of an antipathy to historical inquiry (at least as traditionally conceived), and a reduction of everything (texts, music, whatever) to supposedly timeless, universal rules, there appeared to be little that structuralism could offer to anyone interested in the particularities of texts, persons or periods.⁹ That is structuralism seemed more to do with generalizing about how language (or texts or culture) supposedly works generally as a system (as is particularly the emphasis in “structural linguistics” or anthropology), and so was less helpful in engaging specific instances of the language or contents of particular texts or other historical phenomena.¹⁰

A similar complaint can be made about poststructuralism, as candidly and memorably put by Stephen Moore in his introduction to a volume of *Semeia* devoted to the approach:

The state of biblical studies today? It remains the state of Missouri, the “Show-Me State” as any Missouri license plate will tell you. By and large, deconstruction and the other forms of poststructuralism, migrating into Missouri

⁸ The N-Gram search facility URL is: <http://books.google.com/ngrams>. Interestingly, in French publications, references to poststructuralism went up and down over this same period and have not suffered the same generally rapid decline. I found it interesting to perform searches on other terms, such as “form criticism,” “redaction criticism,” and “historical Jesus.”

⁹ See the discussion of structuralism in Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 42-62.

¹⁰ In commenting on an earlier draft of this essay, Carey Newman pointed me to the explicit reference to basic notions from structural linguistics in J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 16, in which Beker offers an analysis of the interactions of the “deep structure” of Paul’s thought (“the Christ-event in its meaning for the apocalyptic consummation of history”) with the “surface structure” (“the contingent interpretation of Paul’s Christian apocalyptic into a particular situation”). This example seems to me, however, a rather limited/basic use of structuralism (in Beker’s case the simple distinction between more fundamental beliefs and their contingent expressions), and Beker does not characterize his work as “structuralist exegesis” of Paul.

from as far east as France, have yet to meet the “Show Me”/“So What?” objection, to show that they have anything to contribute to the local economy: to produce readings of the biblical texts.¹¹

In short, structuralism and the other highly theoretical approaches that so quickly succeeded it all seemed not to have much to offer in the way of substantial insights into the texts of the NT, whether concerning the historical phenomena reflected in them or any contemporary meaning for today. So, for those not heavily invested in these approaches, they appear to have been temporary fashions.¹²

Even so, we may learn something from them. Most importantly, for any new approach or method to justify itself in NT studies, there should be clear indication that it will produce some new insights, some further understanding of the texts that form the centre of our discipline.¹³ And the more a given approach requires an extra effort to become acquainted with it, the more that should be clear. Born and reared in Missouri myself, I support the “Show me” demand.

Had we the time or inclination, we could consider other developments that can be considered fashions. Marxist exegesis might so serve, although, an N-Gram search shows it also to have had an interesting pattern. It appears in English publications initially in the late 1930s, rising sharply in the 1950s and then quickly declining sharply, rising again in the 1960s and reaching a high-point in the early 1980s, and then sometime after the mid-1980s suffering a precipitous decline in frequency of occurrences.

Fallacies

I turn now to consider some other approaches and ideas that had much more impact and much more “staying power,” but were subsequently shown to be erroneous. These ideas are much more important to consider precisely because they won such wide acceptance and over a goodly period of time. These were not passing fashions. They were firmly held and

¹¹ Stephen D. Moore, “Introduction,” *Semeia* 54 (1991): 1-2, citing p. 1. Missouri is known as the “Show me” state, deriving from a speech given in 1899 by Willard Duncan Vandiver, a member of the House of Representatives (U.S. Congress) from the State of Missouri, which included the statement, “I come from a country that raises corn and cotton, cockleburs and Democrats, and frothy eloquence neither convinces nor satisfies me. I’m from Missouri, and you have got to show me.”

¹² Something similar, I think, can be said of “postmodern” interpretation, which also exhibits a similar rising and falling pattern in the N-Gram viewer. But for an advocate, see, e.g., Fred W. Burnett, “Postmodern Biblical Exegesis: The Eve of Historical Criticism,” *Semeia* 51 (1990): 51-80.

¹³ I take the view that the “centre” of NT studies is not any given approach or emphasis but simply the body of texts that comprise the NT. There is, of course, a great variety of questions and approaches that can shape how these texts are engaged, and, for historical study of them and the religious phenomena that they reflect, a large body of other texts and phenomena as well.

confidently asserted widely, in some quarters treated as solid truth, but are now clearly seen to have been fallacious.

The Pre-Christian Gnostic Redeemer

One notion that comes to mind in this category is the claim that there was a pre-Christian gnostic redeemer myth. That is, supposedly, in the pre-Christian setting there was the belief in some circles that there was a heavenly figure, who descended or would descend to earth to convey esoteric truths that would be embraced by an elect, and who then ascended or would ascend back to his heavenly state.¹⁴ This notion also obviously involved the conviction that there was a pre-Christian Gnosticism in which this gnostic redeemer myth was developed and meaningful.

The notion of a pre-Christian gnostic redeemer myth originated in the work of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* of the early twentieth century, and was promoted especially in Richard Reitzenstein's 1921 book, *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium*.¹⁵ In the texts of the Mandaeans (also known as Sabbaeans), a curious sect that arose in Mesopotamia (in part of what is now Iraq), Reitzenstein believed that he had found the origins of beliefs that came to be central parts of Christianity.¹⁶ Though these texts date from the seventh century CE and later, and it is now widely thought that the Mandaeans probably originated no earlier than sometime in/after the (late) first century CE, Reitzenstein took the Mandaeans and their texts as the key expression of a pre-Christian Gnosticism.¹⁷ Moreover, he also posited that these texts demonstrated a pre-Christian gnostic redeemer myth from which the sort of christology that we find in the NT, particularly in the Gospel of John, derived. His colleagues in the *Schule*, e.g., Wilhelm Bousset affirmed a similar view.¹⁸

¹⁴ The classic summary-statement of this supposed pre-Christian myth was given by Rudolf Bultmann in his article on the Gospel of John in *RGG* vol. 3 (1959), col. 84. An English translation is given in Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 180. Cf. the more recent treatment of John by Harold Attridge, "John, Gospel of," *RPP* 7:11-17, who considers only the Qumran and Nag Hammadi texts as reflecting possible parallels with John.

¹⁵ Richard Reitzenstein, *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium* (Bonn: Marcus & Weber, 1921). For a recent summary of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, see, e.g., William Baird, *History of New Testament Research, Volume Two: From Jonathan Edwards to Rudolf Bultmann* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 238-53.

¹⁶ For a brief account of Mandaean religion, see Jack Finegan, *Myth and Mystery: An Introduction to the Pagan Religions of the Biblical World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 259-81. For more recent and fuller treatments, see Edmondo Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics* (trans. Charles Hindley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, *The Mandaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). As Finegan notes (264-65), "Sabaeans" (probably Mandaeans) are included among the "people of the book" in the Qur'an (5.68-69; cf. also 2:62; 22:17), the sect must have been functioning when Islam came to Mesopotamia in ca. the seventh century CE.

¹⁷ E.g., Marjella Franzmann, "Mandaeans," *RPP* 8:21-22, "Scholarly consensus supports a possible Mandaean origin in a syncretistic Jewish baptizing sect in the Syro-Palestinian area east of the Jordan, in the religious environment of [the Gospel of] John . . . or *Odes of Solomon* . . . influenced by Gnostic and Iranian ideas" (21).

¹⁸ Wilhelm Bousset, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1907), esp. 215-17.

The NT scholar who was most effective thereafter, however, in promoting the idea of a pre-Christian gnostic redeemer was surely Rudolf Bultmann, who along with his students and other followers made this notion well known in NT studies over several decades. Indeed, Edwin Yamauchi wrote, “It was Bultmann who distilled the classic model of the Gnostic Redeemer myth from the works of Bousset, Lidzbarski, and Reitzenstein.”¹⁹ Especially in Bultmann’s analysis of the Gospel of John, he invoked the idea of the pre-Christian Gnostic Redeemer that was taken up and applied to Jesus.²⁰ Following Bultmann’s lead, other scholars such as Ernst Käsemann and Kurt Rudolph in Germany, and Helmut Koester and James M. Robinson in the USA promoted this notion enthusiastically and confidently.²¹

There were earlier objections to this notion, but in the landmark study by Carsten Colpe the idea of a pre-Christian Gnostic redeemer was decisively refuted.²² As Colpe noted, and as observed by others as well, there are in fact no pre-Christian sources reflecting the idea of

¹⁹ Edwin Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (London: Tyndale Press, 1973), 24. Yamauchi summarizes the main features of Bultmann’s pre-Christian gnostic redeemer (ibid., 29-30). Wayne Meeks wrote that Bultmann “never appears to doubt that the ‘redeemer myth’ in all its essential parts existed long before the Hellenistic Age” (*The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology*, NovTSup 14 [Leiden: Brill, 1967], 8).

²⁰ E.g., Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (ET, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955), 40-43; id., *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (ET, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975; German original ed. 1940), 24-31. In an earlier article, Bultmann first made his case for the influence of this pre-Christian gnostic redeemer myth on the Gospel of John: “Die Bedeutung der neuerschlossenen mandäischen und manichäischen Quellen für das Verständnis des Johannesevangeliums,” *ZNW* 24 (1925): 100-46.

²¹ E.g., Kurt Rudolph, *Die Mandäer* (2 vols., Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960-61), 1:101; id., *Gnosis* (trans. R. McL. Wilson; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983; German 1977), 118-32. On James M. Robinson’s role in promoting Bultmann in the American scene, see William Baird, *History of New Testament Research, Volume Three: From C.H. Dodd to Hans Dieter Betz* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 168-79. Though granting that we must give up the idea of a pre-Christian gnostic redeemer myth, Helmut Koester continues to urge the idea that gnostic-type Christianity was early and influenced the Gospel of John: “The History-of-Religions School, Gnosis, and the Gospel of John,” *Studia Theologica* 40 (1986): 115-35. See also his curiously confident claim, “Further work with the Gnostic documents from Nag Hammadi will most likely confirm Bultmann’s hypothesis of the existence of a pre-Christian Jewish Gnosticism. Thus his most controversial hypothesis about the history-of-religions background of the New Testament will be confirmed,” Helmut Koester, “Early Christianity From the Perspective of the History of Religions: Rudolf Bultmann’s Contribution,” in his collection of essays, *Paul and His World: Interpreting the New Testament in Its Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 277 (267-78), originally published in *Bultmann, Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Edward C. Hobbs (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 59-74. This expression of Koester’s faith is touching, but I fear is doomed to disappointment.

²² Carsten Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule: Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösermythus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1961). Shortly thereafter appeared another study reaching essentially similar conclusions: Hans-Martin Schenke, *Der Gott ‘Mensch’ in der Gnosis: Ein religionsgeschichtlicher Beitrag zur Diskussion über die paulinische Anschauung von der Kirche als Leib Christi* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962). More generally, on the relationship of Mandaeans to early gnostic circles/ideas, see Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Gnostic Ethics and Mandaean Origins* (HTS 24; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970). Among earlier critics, see esp. C. H. Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 120-30; and Gilles Quispel, “Der gnostische Anthropos und die jüdische Tradition,” *Eranos Jahrbuch* 22 (1953): 195-234.

a “Gnostic Redeemer.” To cite the words of Stephen Neill in his very engaging history of modern NT studies,

The idea that such a belief existed in pre-Christian times is simply a hypothesis and rests on nothing more than highly precarious inference backwards from a number of documents which themselves are known to be of considerably later origin.²³

More recently, Christoph Marksches has referred to “the collapse of the central thesis” of the older *Schule*, “the so-called myth of the ‘redeemed redeemer’,” and he characterized this construct as built “on very shaky ground.”²⁴ In the most recent volume of his extensive history of NT research, William Baird wrote,

As to the gnostic redeemer, the hypothesis of a fully developed, universally recognized pre-Christian myth of the redeemed redeemer as conceived by Reitzenstein and adopted by Bultmann has been exposed as a scholarly fabrication.²⁵

As observed by Robin McLaughlin Wilson several decades ago, the full gnostic-redeemer myth developed much later than the origins of Christianity, not before Manicheism, and it was “the climax and culmination of a long process of development, not its original starting-point.”²⁶ Indeed, it now appears that the powerful christological claims reflected in the NT were part of the influences drawn upon and adapted in the development of a “gnostic redeemer” idea.

The basic problem for the notion of a *pre-Christian* gnostic redeemer myth always was that there never really was any evidence for it: nothing, *nichts, nada, rien!* It is amazing, therefore, to note how the idea was embraced and promoted so confidently, and across sixty years or more. It is truly one of the more spectacular fallacies of the field of NT studies. So, why did excellent minds such as Bousset, Bultmann and others fasten upon the idea and cherish it so?

In approaching briefly an answer to this question, the first thing to note is the historical/cultural situation in which the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* emerged. As shown

²³ Neill and Wright, *Interpretation*, 193. Similarly, R. M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (rev. ed., New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 69, in commenting on the Johannine prologue, wrote, “And there is no reason to suppose that it reflects an earlier Gnostic doctrine about the descent of a redeemer, especially since there is no evidence that such a doctrine existed.”

²⁴ Christoph Marksches, *Gnosis: An Introduction* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 24-25.

²⁵ William Baird, *History of New Testament Research, Volume Three: From C.H. Dodd to Rudolf Bultmann* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 206.

²⁶ R McL. Wilson, *Gnosis and the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; Oxford: Blackwell, 1968), 28.

in Suzanne Marchand’s brilliant study of German orientalism, the scholars of the *Schule* were keen to emphasize “oriental” sources of major Christian ideas and rituals as a crucial move in their larger aim of reforming German Christianity.²⁷ They wished to rid German Christianity of what they regarded as primitive features such as doctrines of incarnation, Trinity, atonement and sacraments in favour of ethicizing emphases deriving from the “Old Liberalism” of the time (e.g., Ritschl, Harnack, et al.).²⁸ This they sought to accomplish with the larger aim of promoting a form of Christianity that could be embraced by, and could help to edify and promote the moral revitalization of, the German *Volk* of the modern period. So, positing that christological doctrines such as Jesus’ incarnation and heavenly ascent were derived from “pagan” and “oriental” religious traditions served to dis-credit these doctrines as primitive and accidents of history, no longer required or even meaningful to a “modern” form of German Christianity. Lehmkuhler has pointed out similarly a clear theological purpose served in the historical claims of the *Schule*.²⁹ Moreover, as Susannah Heschel observed in her critical analysis of German NT scholarship in (and in the years leading to) the Nazi period, although Bousset and other key figures were not themselves Nazis, some scholars used a history-of-religion emphasis to distance Jesus and early Christianity from ancient Judaism, and, she alleged, “over time History of Religions became identified with the German Christian movement” (the movement that supported the “Nazification” of Germany).³⁰ In colourful language, she posited that the *Schule* concocted “a kind of witch’s brew of religious notions from India, Persia, Greece—but not from Jews,” Judaism providing only “an eschatological valence . . . but little more.”³¹

To be sure, the scholars whose views I am discussing were sincere in their historical claims, but these claims also nicely served their religious and cultural agenda of a

²⁷ Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), esp. 212-91.

²⁸ Hendrikus Boers, “Religionsgeschichtliche Schule,” *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John H. Hays (2 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 2:385 (383-87), noted that the theological stance of the scholars who comprised the *Schule* “was not basically different from Ritschl, including his emphasis on Christianity as fundamentally a religion of ethical values.” Yet only a few paragraphs later Boers strangely claimed that for Bousset, “Nothing was at stake theologically for him . . .” (386).

²⁹ Karsten Lehmkuhler, *Kultus und Theologie: Dogmatik und Exegese in der religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996).

³⁰ Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 225. For her further discussion of the matter, see 225–32. See also the lengthy engagement with Heschel’s book by Robert Morgan, “Susannah Heschel’s Aryan Grundmann,” *JSNT* 32 (2010): 431-94. But Morgan’s critique is directed more at Heschel’s representation of the German Christian movement and certain individuals in it, as well as alleging a failure to distinguish adequately between “anti-Judaism” and “anti-Semitism.” Morgan does not discuss the *Schule*. (I am grateful to James Carleton-Paget for this reference, as well as other comments on an earlier version of this essay.)

³¹ Heschel, *Aryan Jesus*, 59.

modernization of German Christianity. They were “convenient” historical claims. I repeat that I am by no means suggesting insincerity. But I do suggest that the “convenience” of these claims that in many traditional essentials the NT was simply adapting from myths and rituals of pre-Christian orientalising Hellenism likely helped to dispose the scholars of the Göttingen *Schule* to embrace them more readily. Only thus, I think, can we account for the readiness of patently good scholars to endorse views that required such manipulation of the data to serve as evidence for them.

As for Bultmann, though he hardly aligned himself theologically with Ritschlian Liberalism or the aims of the *Schule* for German Christianity, he was in his own way intensely concerned to formulate Christian faith in terms that could be embraced by what he took to be “modern” people. He certainly accepted the historical views of the *Schule*, and he, too, found them convenient for his own theological programme of a radical Christian faith of existentialist coloring that refused any historical bases to justify it.³²

In short, it appears that the notions of a pre-Christian Gnosticism and a pre-Christian gnostic redeemer myth were formulated and promoted, not because there was ever compelling evidence that demanded these notions, but in large part because they were attractive for particular theological/cultural aims. These notions fitted well with pre-disposing views that much of classical Christian doctrines and rituals was a somewhat embarrassing body of vestigial remains of a primitive stage of Christianity that was best dispensed with in favour of a more appropriate faith for modern times. To recognize this is not necessarily to validate the traditional Christian doctrines and rituals in question. That would be a theological question. My point here is simply to observe the theological and cultural concerns that appear to have been involved in shaping the outlook of the *Schule*.

The Son of Man

I turn now to another example of a fallacy that endured as a widely-touted scholarly truth for many decades: The claim that in pre-Christian Jewish tradition there was a well-known belief about a heavenly figure, distinguished from the notion of a Davidic Messiah and, importantly, bearing the title “the Son of Man.”³³ This notion is actually related to the one that we have been discussing, this Jewish “Son of Man” figure supposedly “a Jewish

³² There are, of course, numerous expositions and critiques of Bultmann’s theological stance, including the memorable discussion in Neill and Wright, *Interpretation*, 237-51. In a forthcoming volume, *Beyond Bultmann*, ed. Bruce Longenecker, I offer my own analysis of some of Bultmann’s theological positions: L. W. Hurtado, “Bultmann on ‘Christology and Soteriology’.”

³³ In the following discussion, I use “the Son of Man” (capitalized, as a title) when referring to the notion under criticism. I use “(the) son of man” in reference to the actual expressions in Greek, Aramaic or Hebrew.

variant” of an “oriental, cosmological, eschatological myth of Anthropos,” aka “*Urmensch*”. But this “Son of Man” claim deserves treatment on its own. As espoused by scholars such as Bousset, Reitzenstein and others subsequently, the Jewish conception of a Son of Man figure, and the use of the title “the Son of Man” to designate this figure, were prominent features of the pre-Christian Jewish context of Jesus and earliest Christian circles.

To introduce discussion of “the Son of Man” is, of course, to enter a thorny thicket of scholarly hypotheses and disputation that continues to this day. In 1972, Hendrikus Boers wrote, “No single topic received as much attention in the journal literature of the past fifteen years as the question concerning the origin of the Synoptic Son of Man tradition,” and in 2008 Mogens Müller referred to “an explosion in secondary literature” on the topic in the second half of the twentieth century.³⁴ Still today, many of the questions remain debated, especially concerning the use of the expression in the Gospels. For example, did the fixed Greek expression ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου derive from some Aramaic expression used self-referentially by Jesus, or was it created and ascribed to him in early Christian circles? If deriving from an Aramaic expression used by Jesus, was this the indefinite form, “*bar ʿnosh*” or the definite form, “*bar ʿnasha*”? Whichever Jesus may have used, did he mean to refer to himself as simply a “bloke” or did the expression have a particularizing force connoting some sense of special personal mission and significance? If the latter, was the expression specifically intended as an allusion to the human-like figure of Daniel 7:13-14, in all cases, some cases, or not at all? But these questions cannot be engaged here.³⁵

The question that I address here, however, is now rather more firmly settled. For it is clear to everyone familiar with the data that there is in fact no evidence of a coherent pre-Christian Jewish version of some supposedly ubiquitous “Anthropos” myth, and, more particularly, no evidence that the expression “the Son of Man” ever served as a fixed title for any such figure in second-temple Jewish tradition.³⁶

³⁴ Hendrikus Boers, “Where Christology is Real: A Survey of Recent Research on New Testament Christology,” *Int* 26 (1972): 300-27, citing 302; Mogens Müller, *The Expression ‘Son of Man’ and the Development of Christology: A History of Interpretation* (London: Equinox, 2008), 265.

³⁵ For recent reviews of issues and scholarly views, see Delbert Burkett, *The Son of Man Debate: A History and Evaluation*, SNTSMS, no. 107 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Müller, *Expression*. In a previous publication, I have offered my own judgments on several of these issues: “Summary and Concluding Observations,” in *Who is This Son of Man? The Latest Scholarship on a Puzzling Expression of the Historical Jesus*, eds. Larry W. Hurtado and Paul L. Owen (LNTS 390; London: T&T Clark, 2011), 159-77.

³⁶ For an effective critique of earlier assertions of a coherent “Adam tradition” in ancient Jewish tradition, see John R. Levison, *Portraits of Adam in Early Judaism*, JSPSup 1 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988).

In the early *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, however, and again via Bultmann for many others thereafter, these claims were taken as facts.³⁷ The origin of the idea that in various Jewish texts such as Daniel 7:13-14 we see an adaptation of an Oriental “Anthropos” myth has been ascribed to Hermann Gunkel’s 1895 book, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit*.³⁸ In Bousset’s view, who accepted this idea completely, the expression “the Son of Man” represented the key christological title of the “Primitive Palestinian Community” of Jewish Christians, and comprised the claim that Jesus fulfilled the expectation of “a transcendent Messiah” who would come from heaven soon, all hope of him being an earthly, Davidic Messiah having been shattered in his crucifixion.³⁹ Bousset also sharply distinguished this kerygma of his “Primitive Palestinian Community” from the sort of christological beliefs that Paul supposedly inherited from the putative “Gentile Christian Primitive Community” into which, Bousset claimed, Paul was immersed after his conversion.⁴⁰ To underscore the matter, Bousset posited that the earliest christological claim was that Jesus was “the Son of Man,” the transcendent figure supposedly expected widely in ancient Jewish tradition.⁴¹

Among other scholars as well for several decades, not only those of the Bultmann school, indeed among many scholars who disagreed sharply on other matters, the basic notion that “the Son of Man” was a familiar title for a figure well-established in Jewish expectation and adapted from a Primordial Man myth was taken for granted.⁴² There were dissenters, to be sure, e.g., Lietzmann, Wellhausen, Dalman and S. R. Driver, among German scholars, and in English-speaking circles T. W. Manson and others.⁴³ Among those most influential in promoting the idea, however, there is the famous work by Rudolf Otto, *Reich Gottes und Menschensohn* (1933, English translation 1943) and, perhaps even more, Sigmund

³⁷ See the review of scholarly work by members of the *Schule* and others in Müller, *Expression*, 233-62.

³⁸ So, e.g., Müller, *Expression*, 237-38.

³⁹ Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* (ET, Nashville: Abingdon, 1970 ; from the German 5th ed., 1964; orig. German ed. 1913), 31-68. In this essay I cite the English translation.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 119-52.

⁴¹ In an article published several decades ago I underscored several serious fallacies in Bousset’s classic study, *Kyrios Christos*: Larry W. Hurtado, “New Testament Christology: A Critique of Bousset’s Influence,” *TS* 40 (1979): 306-17. However, in Georg Strecker, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (ed. F. W. Horn; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1996; ET, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000), 296-98, Bousset’s view of the kerygma of “Urgemeinde” is echoed without apparent awareness of its dubiety.

⁴² See the review of scholarship in Müller, *Expression*, 247-64. Müller (346) also cites Erik Sjöberg, Johannes Munck, Walter Schmithals, Oscar Cullmann, Heinz-Edward Tödt, Hans-Friedrich Weiss, Ferdinand Hahn, and Frederick H. Borsch as “adherents” of the hypothesis.

⁴³ See the review of previous scholars (with special reference to English-speaking ones) on the matter with bibliographical references in William Horbury, *Messianism among Jews and Christians: Biblical and Historical Studies* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 125-28 (125-55). Horbury cites the review of earlier scholars by Nathaniel Schmidt, “Son of Man,” *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, eds. T. K. Cheyne and J. Sutherland (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1914), cols. 4705-4740.

Mowinckel's *He that Cometh* (1954).⁴⁴ Indeed, in his valuable survey of "Son of Man" research, Mogens Müller judged that "an *opinion communis* in scholarship had almost been established" that the Gospel expression "the Son of Man" derived from this supposed pre-Christian Jewish concept and usage of the expression as a familiar title.⁴⁵

The point of this for NT studies of the time was what it meant for the use of the expression in the Gospels. On the premise that the expression was a well-known title for a clearly-defined redeemer-figure of heavenly origins, some scholars, e.g., the influential study by H. E. Tödt, argued that Jesus could not have used the expression self-referentially, and so must have referred to another, future figure who would fulfil this role. The Gospels, so he contended, thus reflect a subsequent re-interpretation of the expression, ascribing the status of "the Son of Man" to Jesus.⁴⁶

But the ground began to shift markedly in the late 1960s and with increasing speed thereafter. Early among those who challenged the then-prevailing notion was Norman Perrin in 1966.⁴⁷ Shortly afterward, Ragnar Leivestad published a lengthy article referring to the notion of a pre-Christian apocalyptic Son of Man as "ein theologisches Phantom," and followed this in 1971 with an essay presenting his argument in English entitled, "Exit the Apocalyptic Son of Man."⁴⁸ In his own study of "son of man" traditions in the Gospels, Douglas Hare referred to Leivestad's 1971 article as for him "the decisive turning point in modern study of 'the Son of man'."⁴⁹ Though taking varying views on how to interpret the "son of man" sayings in the Gospels, many other scholars as well, probably the majority, now agree that there was no fixed pre-Christian expectation of a particular figure called "the Son of Man."⁵⁰

To be sure, texts such as *11QMelchizedek* show that ancient Jewish traditions included speculations about this or that heavenly figure (in this case, likely an angelic being)

⁴⁴ Rudolf Otto, *The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man*, rev. ed. ed. (London: Lutterworth, 1943; German 1st ed., 1933), e.g., 193-94; Sigmund Mowinckel, *He That Cometh* (trans. G W. Anderson; New York/Nashville: Abingdon, Press, 1954). Mowinckel's treatment of "The Son of Man" comprises pp. 346-450, and see esp. 431-32.

⁴⁵ Müller, *Expression*, 264.

⁴⁶ H.E. Tödt, *The Son of Man in the Synoptic Tradition* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965; German 1959), e.g., 40-46, 343-44.

⁴⁷ Norman Perrin, "The Son of Man in Ancient Judaism and the Primitive Christianity: A Suggestion," *BR* 11 (1966): 17-28, esp. 26.

⁴⁸ Ragnar Leivestad, "Der apokalyptische Menschensohn ein theologisches Phantom," *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute* 6 (1968): 49-105; *id.*, "Exit the Apocalyptic Son of Man," *NTS* 18 (1971): 243-67. Leivestad's stance is all the more significant because he had been a student of Mowinckel. Müller, *Expression*, 357, gives a helpful summary of Leivestad's argument.

⁴⁹ Douglas R. A. Hare, *The Son of Man Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1990), x.

⁵⁰ E.g., Delbert Burkett, *The Son of Man Debate: A History and Evaluation*, SNTSMS, no. 107 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 120.

who would play a crucial role in eschatological redemption. Moreover, various scholars point to texts such as the *Similitudes (or Parables) of 1 Enoch* as indicative that these speculations could include notions about this or that human worthy acquiring a heavenly/angelic-like status and featuring centrally in God's final triumph.⁵¹ But for the purpose of this essay the point is that none of these figures, including the messianic figure referred to in *1 Enoch* variously as "Messiah" (*masih*, 48:10; 52:4), "Righteous One" (*šādeq*, 38:2; 53:6) and, more typically, "Chosen/Elect One" (sixteen times) of the *Similitudes*, bears the title "the Son of Man."⁵²

There are in fact several Ethiopic expressions, used collectively fourteen times, in the *Similitudes* that are typically translated into English as "son of man," but this diversity of Ethiopic expressions means that we do not have a *fixed title*.⁵³ Indeed, this variety of expressions in the Ethiopic translation also suggests that there was either a corresponding variety of expressions used in the Greek or Aramaic *Vorlage*, or, if one expression was used, that the Ethiopic translators did not perceive it to be a fixed title that needed to be rendered with a corresponding fixed expression.⁵⁴

To be sure, the reading/use of Daniel, including particularly Daniel 7, seems to be reflected in the *Similitudes* and some other second-temple texts (although, curiously, apparently not in the Qumran texts), and the human-like being of Daniel 7:13-14 seems to

⁵¹ I have discussed such exalted figures as one of the types of what I refer to as "principal agent" traditions in ancient Jewish tradition, in which some figure is portrayed as uniquely the agent of divine power and purposes: *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; London: SCM, 1988; 2nd ed. Edinburgh/London: T&T Clark, 1998), esp. 51-69.

⁵² This was shown a few decades ago by Maurice Casey, *Son of Man: The Interpretation and Influence of Daniel 7* (London: SPCK, 1979), 99-112.

⁵³ I am not myself an expert in Ethiopic language and literature, and so I depend here on the expertise of others. The fixed expression "Elect/Chosen One" (*xeruy*) appears in 38:6; 40:5; 45:3, 4; 49:2, 4; 51:3, 5; 52:6, 9; 53:6; 55:4; 61:5, 8, 10; 62:1. The various expressions typically rendered "son of man" are *walda sab* ("son of humankind," 46:2, 3, 4; 48:2), *walda be'si* ("son of a man/male," 62:5; 69:29), *walda 'eg'āla 'emma-heyāw* ("son of the offspring of the mother of the living," 62:6, 9, 14; 63:11; 69:26, 27; 70:1; 71:17. On the various expressions designating the messianic figure in the *Similitudes/Parables*, see now Darrell D. Hannah, "The Elect Son of Man of the *Parables of Enoch*," in *Who is This Son of Man?*, eds. Larry W. Hurtado and Paul L. Owen (LNTS 390; London: T&T Clark, 2011), 130-58, esp. 143: "it hardly needs to be emphasized that in the *Parables* 'son of man' is not used as a title comparable to 'Messiah' or even the 'elect One'." But cf. Helge S. Kvanvig, "The Son of Man in the Parables of Enoch," in *Enoch and the Messiah Son of Man: Revisiting the Book of Parables*, ed. Gabriele Boccaccini (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 179-215; and also Matthew Black, *The Book of Enoch or 1 Enoch* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 206-7.

⁵⁴ By contrast, in the Ethiopic Bible, the fixed Greek expression used in the Gospels is consistently translated *walda 'eg'āla 'emma-heyāw*, as is also the case for the uses of "son of man" in Rev 1:13; 14:14; Dan 7:13; 8:17, and the many instances of the vocative form of the expression in Ezekiel. So, Hannah, "The Elect Son of Man," 140. Hannah (141) judges that in the *Similitudes* all three Ethiopic expressions likely render a common Greek expression, υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου (or perhaps ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, although I think the latter less likely myself), with a putative Hebrew or Aramaic original text having, respectively, בן אדם or בר אנש(א) and אדם בן.

have been taken sometimes as a messianic figure.⁵⁵ But this figure is not simply a variant-form of some supposed Primordial-Man tradition, and the Daniel figure was not (per the extant evidence) referred to with the fixed title “the Son of Man” prior to the NT. As John Collins wrote,

The notion that the Son of Man was a variant of a widespread myth of the Primordial Man has been laid to rest with no regrets. It is also now granted that ‘Son of Man’ was not a title in common usage.⁵⁶

Although he urges that second-temple Jewish writings show various speculations about a heavenly saviour-king, and that Daniel 7:10-14 was drawn upon in some of these texts, Collins consents to the judgment that there was no “Son of Man concept.”⁵⁷ To cite Casey’s summary-judgment offered after a detailed analysis of the evidence, “Thus, the Son of man concept in Judaism is a product of modern scholarship.”⁵⁸ In the vivid phrasing of Leivestad, the “apocalyptic Son of Man” was always a phantom, who has now made his “exit”. Despite the zealous efforts of some to posit his re-entry, I think we must grant, adapting a phrase from popular culture, that this particular Elvis has well and truly “left the building,” and he will not be back!⁵⁹

So, once again, we have a notion that was confidently, even fervently, asserted over many decades, and was taken as established fact and the basis for wide-ranging claims about ancient Jewish tradition and, more to the point here, about Jesus and the NT, and yet has been shown rather clearly to have been fallacious, lacking sufficient corroborating evidence for it. My purpose in drawing attention to this, however, is not to gloat, but to see what we can learn

⁵⁵ “It is beyond doubt that the *Similitudes of Enoch* allude to Dan 7:9-10, 13-14,” pointing to *1 Enoch* 46:1 as the clearest allusion. So, John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 177. On Qumran, e.g., Casey, *Son of Man*, 112-16. In David L. Washburn, *A Catalogue of biblical Passages in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), there are no citations of, or allusions to, Dan. 7:13-14 listed.

⁵⁶ Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 174, and see his full discussion of data, 173-94,

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 189. Cf., however, Horbury (“Messianic Associations”), who, pressing the claim that Dan. 7:13-14 was read messianically, proposes that “key words in such messianically interpreted passages were subject to a tendency towards titularity, and ‘son of man’ was significant enough to have been affected in this way.” He contends, therefore that “‘the son of man’ had become one of the words and phrases which could readily be understood as a reference to the messiah,” and so, “In that sense, it can be called a messianic title” (151). But, unfortunately for Horbury’s claims, there is no evidence for them! That is, there are no examples in pre-Christian evidence of the expression “(the) son of man” being used as a messianic title. The prominence and fixity of the expression in the Gospels requires explanation, and cannot itself be used to posit a supposed pre-Christian usage to explain the Gospel usage.

⁵⁸ Casey, *Son of Man*, 139.

⁵⁹ I allude to the title of an article by Barnabas Lindars, “Re-Enter the Apocalyptic Son of Man,” *NTS* 22 (1975-76): 52-72. Lindars subsequently assented, however, to the basic case made by Leivestad. See Müller, *Expression*, 363-74, for a review of various attempts to salvage a pre-Christian “apocalyptic son of man” concept.

from what we have noted. We should again ask how such a notion seemed so credible for so long to so many reasonable scholars.

To help account for the curious success of the fallacies that we are considering my own proposal is this: In the effort to take a historical approach to the NT texts and the phenomena that they reflect, many scholars seem to have thought simplistically that this meant showing that key beliefs, rituals and other matters were derived from prior “pre-Christian” sources. That is, there seems to me to have been a reluctance to ascribe much creativity or innovation to early Christian circles, the implicit view being that to do so was to fail to give a “historical” account of earliest Christianity.

I suggest further that this premise in turn led scholars to search for any kind of putative analogy that could serve as indication of the sources of the phenomena of early Christianity. As the case with the “pre-Christian gnostic redeemer myth,” even if the proffered analogies were attested only in sources much later than the NT (centuries later in some cases), these sources were nevertheless used to construct the supposed originating traditions drawn upon in the NT writings. This was particularly characteristic of the work of the *Schule*, but was by no means restricted to these scholars. Both the anachronistic use of evidence and the facile treatment of supposed “parallels” have been all too frequent in the history of NT scholarship. Sandmel’s classic essay, “Parallellomania,” should remain required reading in the field.⁶⁰

But also, in the case of the supposed “pre-Christian apocalyptic Son of man,” we see an associated error in method that resulted from the fallacious premise that “historical” explanation required positing a predecessor-source for things in the NT. This additional error was essentially that if something is attested as important in the NT, this itself can be taken as evidence that this belief, ritual or whatever was already there (and probably already important) in the historical context in which the NT writings emerged. So, for example, it was often assumed that the prominence of the expression “the Son of man” in the Gospels must mean that the same expression, and a concept involving a figure shaped largely out of christological claims in the Gospels, were already formed and important in the ancient Jewish tradition, the Gospels seen as simply reflecting the early Christian claim that Jesus is “the Son of man” of a supposedly prior and wide Jewish expectation. In short, the data of the NT writings were used to posit the pre-Christian traditions that were in turn used to account for the data of the NT writings! The circularity of the process should have been obvious.

⁶⁰ Samuel Sandmel, “Parallellomania,” *JBL* 81 (1962): 1-13.

Now, of course, it is entirely cogent to take the phenomena and texts of earliest Christianity as products of historical forces of their time, and to presume that there were many connections with the cultural and religious contexts in which earliest Christianity erupted. A historical approach to earliest Christianity, thus, rightly involves diligent exploration of that context for analogies, precedents, and possible sources for things reflected in NT writings. As a contributor to what has sometimes been termed “a new *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*,” I certainly support this work.⁶¹

But any such effort must respect the chronology of sources, and differences and developments as well as similarities.⁶² A genuine “historical” approach should allow for change and innovation as well as indebtedness and derivation in the study of ancient religion. We should seek to be cured of any allergic response to recognizing that there are features of earliest Christianity that appear to comprise significant adaptations and “mutations,” even novel innovations. Certainly, any positing of innovation or creativity should be supported by evidence, just as any positing of borrowing and influence.

So, in pausing to reflect on the examples of major fallacies considered here, let us take from them lessons in historical method. These include testing our premises and preconceptions, and rigorously allowing our views to be shaped by the evidence (and/or lack thereof), rather than manipulating the evidence to fit our presumptions.

Futures in NT Studies

I turn finally toward the futures of NT studies. I refer here advisedly to “futures” in the plural, and not to “a” or “the” future of NT studies, for I doubt that one could posit any unified future direction or emphasis. As I observed in a commissioned article published a few years ago on NT studies in the 20th century, it can be read as a story of diversification, in the people who work in NT studies, the places (both institutionally and geographically) where the field is pursued, and the approaches and emphases taken.⁶³ Very important in this diversification is the variety of academic settings in which NT studies is pursued. So, barring

⁶¹ The term “new *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*” first appeared in Martin Hengel’s endorsement of my book, *One God, One Lord* (on the back cover of the 1988 edition).

⁶² For a salutary emphasis on chronological matters, see Martin Hengel, “Christology and New Testament Chronology,” in *Between Jesus and Paul* (London: SCM, 1983), 30-47. The German original: “Christologie und neutestamentliche Chronologie,” in *Neues Testament und Geschichte: Historisches Geschehen und Deutung im Neuen Testament, Festschrift Oscar Cullmann*, ed. H. Baltensweiler & B. Reicke. Zürich/Tübingen, 1972, pp. 43-67.

⁶³ Hurtado, “New Testament Studies in the Twentieth Century.” In the final volume of his massive *History of New Testament Research*, sub-titled *Volume Three: From C.H. Dodd to Hans Dieter Betz* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), William Baird likewise refers to “the multitude of new methods that emerged in the last half of the [twentieth] century” (1), and “the increasingly international character of NT research” (2).

some major change, such as the collapse of NT studies as a field of study in universities, this diversity is almost certainly a safe prediction for the future. When NT studies was essentially a discipline within seminaries and in faculties of Theology in which the primary task was the preparation of candidates for ordained ministry, and the key dialogue partners were others primarily concerned with Christian theology, there was far greater cohesion. It was in such a situation that an articulate figure such as Bultmann (with his strong theological concern) could come to dominate the field as he did. But this is no more, in my opinion. So the “futures” in the title of this paper signals my sense that there will continue to be multiple directions, approaches, interests and emphases.

But I also use the plural “futures” as a *double entendre*, alluding to the world of finance and efforts to anticipate what may prove wise or sound investments. In this sense, therefore, I will indulge in a bit of appraisal of some current and anticipated approaches and emphases in the field with a view to estimating some that might turn out to be temporary fashions or even fallacies, and some that might offer more promise. This will be an unavoidably selective exercise. Also, I intend no offence in any critical opinions that follow.

Let us begin with the considerable energies devoted to *Q*, especially in the later decades of the 20th century. In the “Epilogue” that concludes his three-volume history of NT research, William Baird probably judged matters correctly: “While the majority [of NT scholars] remain convinced of the existence of the Q document(s), most did not believe a hypothetical document could sustain the sort of precise analysis the Q scholars advanced.”⁶⁴ Baird alludes here in particular to those Q scholars who have postulated a multi-stage literary history of Q and a complex social and theological history to the supposed group(s) in which Q was composed and redacted. As Baird noted, most NT scholars continue to agree that some form of a “two document hypothesis” remains credible and probably the most cogent way of accounting for the differences and shared material among the Synoptic Gospels. Also, most are grateful for the efforts made to identify “Q material”, and accept at least the basics of the proposed contents of the text(s) that “Q” designates, such as set out in Kloppenborg’s useful *Q Parallels* book.⁶⁵ The massive *Critical Edition of Q*, although perhaps not receiving the same level of confidence in all the judgments offered in it, has also largely been welcomed.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Baird, *History of New Testament Research, Volume Three*, 691.

⁶⁵ John S. Kloppenborg, *Q Parallels: Synopsis, Critical Notes & Concordance* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1988).

⁶⁶ James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann and John S. Kloppenborg, eds., *The Critical Edition of Q* (Leuven/Minneapolis: Peeters/Fortress Press, 2000). A simplified version appeared subsequently: See also J.

But the same cannot be said for some of the other work by some of those so deeply involved in Q studies. Kloppenborg's proposed three-stage "literary evolution" of Q, for example, seems to me to have won only limited endorsement, and among most other NT scholars is treated with hesitation at best, and by many as unpersuasive.⁶⁷ Even less successful in garnering assent is Kloppenborg's attempt to elaborate a complex social and theological history of the supposed "Q community" in which Q was putatively composed and redacted across a few decades.⁶⁸ In his review of Kloppenborg's work, Baird's comments are probably indicative of a wider view of the matter among NT scholars. Granting Kloppenborg's irenic spirit and attention to detail, and the "mountain of research" on which Kloppenborg builds his proposal, nevertheless, Baird judged,

Those who have not been initiated into the mysteries of Q may be wary of what appears to be overinterpretation. A lost document that is hypothesized on the basis [of] two independent uses of it, about which there is debate as to its exact content and scope, and is then subjected to an analysis that can predicate three stages of development related to three different social groups and adhering to three different theologies seems top-heavy.⁶⁹

In summary, in the view of most NT scholars, the elaborate assertions about Q referred to by Baird seem to over-reach in method, and I suspect that this wider scholarly response is unlikely to change.

More broadly, how well founded is the common notion that behind early Christian texts there typically are defined "communities," on the basis of which notion scholars then confidently use texts (real or hypothetical) to construct (or invent?) these communities and their social and religious histories? Is this process perhaps a current fallacy, at least in the sometimes over-confident application of it? Some years ago now, Richard Bauckham and several other scholars expressed some misgivings about attributing individual "communities" to each of the Gospels.⁷⁰ Their critique may be stronger with reference to some texts than others. For example, many (perhaps most) NT scholars remain convinced that the Gospel of

S. Kloppenborg et al., *The Sayings Gospel Q in Greek and English with Parallels from the Gospels of Mark and Thomas* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001).

⁶⁷ John S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

⁶⁸ Among his numerous publications in which he proposes a history of a Q community, see, e.g., John S. Kloppenborg, "Literary Convention, Self-Evidence and the Social History of the Q People," *Semeia* 55 (1992): 77-102, and esp. John S. Kloppenborg Verbin, *Excavating Q: The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

⁶⁹ Baird, *History*, 382. See pp. 380-82 for Baird's discussion of Kloppenborg's work.

⁷⁰ Richard J. Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

John likely originated in/out of a particular circle of early Christians, and Bauckham's argument has not gone unchallenged.⁷¹

It would probably be unwise, therefore, to apply woodenly the notion that the Gospels and other unprovenanced writings were *not* connected with particular circles. But the caution raised by Bauckham is neither idiosyncratic nor groundless, and there are good reasons for avoiding the assumption that early Christian texts must always represent particular groups. Several decades ago now, referring specifically to “gnosticizing” texts, Frederik Wisse also warned about presuming too readily that early Christian texts reflect discrete circles or types of early Christianity.⁷² Wisse proposed cogently that in the early period a number of Christian texts likely arose simply as efforts to articulate and circulate particular religious ideas by individuals; and he urged that “we need clear internal or supportive external evidence to conclude that the position defended or attacked is shared by a larger group or community.”⁷³ This seems to me good advice, which, if followed, may well help us to avoid the insufficiently critical application of what should probably be recognized as a fallacious premise.

To take a more positive tone, however, it is a safe bet that intense historical investigation of the NT writings (along with other early Christian texts) will continue, and, indeed, will likely remain the most characteristic type of scholarly work in NT studies. To avoid the sort of fallacies noted earlier, however, it will be important to examine critically the assumptions and premises that we bring to this effort. For to practice a critical approach means primarily to be self-critical, aware that not only our conscious biases but also our attitudes and our insufficiently acknowledged aims and dispositions (whether naively positive or negative) toward the subject of historical inquiry can affect that inquiry significantly.

It is also likely that “reception history” will have a future in NT studies. Indicative of this, there is now a refereed online journal devoted to the subject, *Relegere*, based in New Zealand.⁷⁴ A few years ago, John Lyons published a stimulating article on the potential of

⁷¹ Cf. e.g., D. C. Sim, “The Gospels for All Christians?,” *JSNT* 84 (2001): 3-17; Margaret Mitchell, “Patristic Counter-Evidence to the Claim That ‘the Gospels Were Written for All Christians’,” *NTS* 51 (2005): 36-79.

⁷² Frederik Wisse, “The Use of Early Christian Literature As Evidence for Inner Diversity and Conflict,” in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity*, ed. Charles W. Hedrick and Robert Hodgson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 177-90; and similarly *id.*, Frederik Wisse, “Prolegomena to the Study of the New Testament and Gnosis,” in *The New Testament and Gnosis: Essays in Honour of Robert McL. Wilson*, eds. A. H. B. Logan and A. J. M. Wedderburn (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983), 138-45.

⁷³ Wisse, “The Use of Early Christian Literature,” 179.

⁷⁴ *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception*. <http://www.relegere.org/index.php/relegere>.

this approach.⁷⁵ It should be of great interest in the field to note how the NT writings were transmitted, read and used, perhaps especially in early centuries. Certainly, in my view the historical period that NT studies focuses on should include at least the first three centuries CE, and “NT studies” should take in the period and processes beyond the composition of the NT writings and the originating situations to which they were severally addressed. This will perhaps mean that the field might regain something of the chronological breadth that once characterized it. In the work of great NT scholars of the 19th century, figures such as Harnack and Zahn, for example, NT studies included tracing the historical process by which NT writings came to be regarded as scripture and subsequently came to form our familiar NT canon.

One of the commendable developments in the field over the last several decades is an increasing internationalization, with scholars in various countries outside of Europe and North America developing expertise and making contributions. One expression of this is “postcolonialist” interpretation of NT writings.⁷⁶ To be sure, the (largely Western-based) intellectuals credited with developing “postcolonialism” (e.g., Edward Saïd) lodged a cogent critique of the unexamined attitudes reflected in various areas of “Western” intellectual endeavour, from which we can all learn.⁷⁷ But, based on my own experience with postgraduate students from various countries and cultures, I doubt that postcolonialist interpretation of the NT will prove to be the typical, or at least dominant, approach taken by scholars in “non-Western” settings. Most of these emerging scholars identify themselves strongly as Christian and associate with churches in their home countries, and for them NT writings continue to be regarded as scriptures. So, they tend to approach them looking for critically-based ways of finding in the NT models and instruction for reflecting on Christian faith and practice today, with particular application to their own cultural settings. This suggests that the internationalization in NT studies will likely further stimulate a renewed interest in theological exegesis.

After all, the common divide between biblical studies and theology in “Western” scholarship that is sometimes celebrated and sometimes lamented is to some significant degree reflective of the issues and struggles specific to European cultural and intellectual

⁷⁵ William John Lyons, “Hope for a Troubled Discipline? Contributions to New Testament Studies From Reception History,” *JSNT* 33, no. 2 (2010): 207-20.

⁷⁶ E.g., Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele, eds., *Her Master’s Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005); Christopher D. Stanley, ed., *The Postcolonial Apostle: Paul in Postcolonial Eyes* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011).

⁷⁷ Although not always so, the Wikipedia entry on “Postcolonialism” happens to be reliably informative as an introduction: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postcolonialism>.

history.⁷⁸ I would like to think that these struggles may be of relevance more widely, but it would be an imperialist notion to imagine that NT studies must be practiced hereafter on the model that emerged in European scholarship influenced by such developments as the “Enlightenment” critique of the cultural hegemony of institutional Christianity. In other cultures where this hegemony was never in place, perhaps NT scholarship will not take the same sort of reactive direction. Even among those of us shaped by these European developments there are voices calling for a renewal of interest in approaches to the NT that include attention to the theological import of these texts.⁷⁹ So, this may well be one of the “futures” of NT scholarship.

These musings are necessarily limited and selective, and others will no doubt offer observations additional to or even critical of mine. This is to be welcomed. But, if NT studies is to continue as a viable field, I suggest that the future approaches taken will have to demonstrate that they offer something substantial, something “value-added” to the study of the fascinating texts that comprise our NT and the remarkable religious developments that they reflect. Trying out this or that new speculation, or appropriating this or that methodological development in some other field will (and should) continue to be part of the ensuing discussion. But, I repeat, to amount to something more than a passing fashion, our approaches will have to be both well-founded and substantial in what they produce. And to avoid the sort of serious fallacies that we have noted, we will have to exercise both committed scholarly effort and self-reflective critique.

One final thought. The NT writings are certainly significant and worthy of attention simply as crucial texts of a noteworthy Roman-era religious movement. But we should not forget that the major reason that positions in NT studies arose and that NT studies remains a justifiably discrete field in modern academia is that these texts continue to be important in the largest religious affiliation in the world. We would ignore or despise that at our peril. This does not by any means prohibit a critical engagement with these texts, but I do think that an appreciation of them, whether from a confessional or non-confessional stance will remain

⁷⁸ See, e.g., the discussion of “The Decisive Stimuli” for the emergence of a “critical” approach to NT studies in Werner G. Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems* (trans. S. McLean Gilmour and H. C. Kee; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 40-61, who highlights the early influence of English Deism.

⁷⁹ To cite a few publications from UK-based scholars, e.g., Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997); Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006). Cf. the critical response to Watson by Christopher Rowland, “An Open Letter to Francis Watson on *Text, Church and World*,” *SJT* 48(1995): 507-17; and Watson’s reply, “A Response to Professor Rowland,” *SJT* 48(1995): 518-20. Among Continental scholars, see now Jens Schröter, *From Jesus to the New Testament: Early Christian Theology and the Origin of the New Testament Canon* (trans. Wayne Coppins; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013), esp. 9-32.

important. If we take account of this and the lessons learned from the fallacies reviewed here, we have reason to think that the “futures” of NT studies will be promising and productive.