Second Criticality—
An Interdisciplinary Approach to the New Testament and its Contexts

(Introduction and Chapter from *Paul N. Anderson, From Crisis to Christ: A Contextual Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2014)

By Paul N. Anderson
George Fox University
Newberg, Oregon
May 2015

In my just-released introduction to the New Testament published by Abingdon[1] I find myself trying to make several contributions that make this something of a new and serviceable approach. First, I proceed in canonical order, dividing the book into three parts (the Gospels and Jesus, Acts and the writings of Paul, General Letters and Revelation) beginning each chapter with laying out from three to six crises or background issues that help the reader appreciate the contexts in which the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were written. Nearly sixty crises and contextual issues are outlined overall, and I feel this grounded approach to the New Testament writings helps today's readers better understand and interpret the writings regarding crises and contexts—both ancient and contemporary. Each chapter then proceeds to an overview of the literary features of each text, its message, and a brief section helping today's readers engage the text meaningfully. And, the fourteen chapters work well within a semester-long course, graduate or undergraduate.

A second distinctive feature of this book is that rather than belaboring the secondary literature and the multiplicity of approaches to important issues taken by scholars, references to theories are given in general terms, and readers are encouraged to do their own sleuthing into the primary and secondary literature. In support of that venture, relevant biblical texts behind the various interpretive riddles are displayed clearly, giving readers an inductive impression of the issues involved, inviting them to make judgments for themselves based on their own inquiries. Readers then are availed a host of resources to make use of at the end of the book, and the text of the Common English Bible is employed—distinctive for its clarity and accessibility. As a separate posting on the *Bible and Interpretation* website, I've been given permission to post my chapter on The Gospel of Mark .

A third distinctive marker of this text reflects my own attempts to engage the New Testament and its issues with energy and verve. In addition to a robust introduction to the background of the New Testament and hermeneutical approaches to it, I have added four excurses, which address particular issues: "A Bi-Optic Hypothesis—A Theory of Gospel Relations," "The Historical Quest for Jesus," "Paul's Background and Contemporary Religions and Philosophies," and "The Christological Hymns of the New Testament." Little new ground is ploughed in the latter two, but the first two excurses build on new paradigms I have attempted to contribute to the field as a Johannine scholar, and I appreciate the editors' encouragement to craft this text the ways I deem

[1] Paul N. Anderson, *From Crisis to Christ: A Contextual Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2014); I thank the editors for the permission to publish this segment from the foreword (pp. x-xii). The book if dedicated to Bruce Metzger, whose exemplary introduction to the New Testament it succeeds.

the issues should be addressed.[2] The result is that John's Gospel is placed alongside the others as making literary and historic contributions to our understandings of Jesus and early Christianity—as well as theological ones—the sort of thing a contextual approach *should* advance.

Readers interested in the larger sets of discussions, of course, should read the extensive secondary literature on these matters, including some of my own engagements if they desire,[3] but this introductory approach simply describes the general issues that scholars address, posing the most plausible ways forward, in my judgment. In doing so, my approach to such critical issues as authorship, dating, and audience is analytical but chaste. Having cut my scholarly teeth on the Johannine riddles and multiple critical means of addressing them, I must say that I am less than enthralled with "assured results of critical scholarship" on important matters ((http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/and358012.shtml). Often flawed judgments are based on silence or default inferences, and the questioning of a view is seen wrongly as having overturned it. Positivism of verification is seldom accompanied by positivism of falsification (and vice versa), so scholars too easily err on claiming to know what cannot be possible to their critical peril.[4] As a result, I have named the interdisciplinary approach that I and other scholars have come to use, seeking to identify and employ the best of critical and traditional scholarship critically. Here I stand, I can do no other; I call this approach "second criticality."

From the Foreword of *From Crisis to Christ*:

> Biblical studies in the modern era have faced an ongoing struggle between traditional readings of the New Testament and critical challenges, and one of the primary issues of discussion has been the question of history. This is understandable. When measures of truth came to be argued in terms of "fact" and "historicity" in the scientific era, and when biblical authority came to be debated in those terms, a number of problems ensued, often

---

[2] Many of these essays have been posted on my academia.edu site (https://georgefox.academia.edu/PaulAnderson, and some of my book-length projects are listed in the following note.

[3] In addition to over four dozen published essays on Johannine themes, interested readers may consult my books on the Johannine writings: *Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles*, Early Christianity and its Literature (co-edited with R. Alan Culpepper; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014); *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel; An Introduction to John* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2011); *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Its Unity and Disunity in the Light of John 6*, WUNT 2:78 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1996; third printing with a new introduction and epilogue, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010); *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 2: Aspects of Historicity in the Fourth Gospel*, Symposium Series 49/Early Christianity and its Literature 1 (co-edited with Felix Just, S.J. and Tom Thatcher, Atlanta: SBL Press; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2009); *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 1: Critical Appraisals of Critical Views*, Symposium Series 44 (co-edited with Felix Just, S.J. and Tom Thatcher, Atlanta: SBL Press; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2007); *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus: Modern Foundations Reconsidered*, Library of New Testament Studies Series 321 (London: T&T Clark, 2006); *Navigating the Living Waters of the Gospel of John–On Wading with Children and Swimming with Elephants* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Pamphlet #352, 2000).

[4] Having gathered all of Bultmann's evidence regarding sources underlying the Gospel of John and plying it out within John 6 (where we should have four of his five major sources displayed), the distribution came out random (cf. Anderson, *Christology*, pp. 72-136). Further, claims that John must have depended on the Synoptics do not account for the facts that 85% of John that has no Synoptic corollaries, and that none of the instances in the other 15% is identical to the Synoptics, verbatim. Between John 6 and Mark 6 and 8 (the feeding of the 5,000, sea crossing, discussion, and Peter's confession) 45 similarities can be identified, but *none* of them is identical (Anderson, *Christology*, pp. 97-104). Therefore, inferences that John's is a derivative tradition have no basis in fact. An overview of a century or more in the developing history of Johannine scholarship is also availed in my foreword to the new printing of Rudolf Bultmann's *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, The Johannine Monograph Series 1 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014, pp. i-xxviii).

causing the central meanings of scripture to be lost. As the saying goes, when all one has is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Therefore, appeals to certainty regarding authorship, dates, and composition have been paramount in New Testament scholarship, and introductory texts must navigate those waters effectively.

Traditionalistic approaches to the New Testament have tended to assert particular interpretations, supporting them with appeals to divine dictation or supernatural claims. Such appeals to certainty might work for a while within an insular faith community, but when subjected to external scrutiny, many claims are found lacking. For instance, attempts to harmonize differences between the Gospels have led to somewhat speculative reconstructions of Jesus's ministry, when some presentations of it were crafted for thematic and narrative reasons rather than chronological ones. And while the New Testament concludes with the warning that any who add or detract from "this book" will be afflicted with plagues and forfeit eternal life, this is not a defense of the canonized New Testament or any of its translations (e.g., Latin Vulgate or the King James Version of the Bible). Rather, the warning was addressing the audiences of Revelation as the scroll was circulated and read among the churches, calling hearers to heed the message and not to water it down. Traditionalistic scholars have also tended to bolster their interpretations on the basis of authorship, although the names of authors were not included in most original manuscripts but were added later. These sorts of operations have understandably led to critical challenges, and rightly so.

Critical challenges of traditional views have thus been the mainstay of New Testament scholarship over the last century or two, and often the work of critical scholarship ("critical" means analytical—using reasoned judgment based on evidence rather than dogma) has sought to provide alternatives to traditional views. Identifying literary relationships between the first three Gospels, for instance, helped scholars understand why there were so many word-for-word similarities (especially between Mark and Matthew) as well as differences. And analyses of the larger set of contemporary writings—Christian, Jewish, and Greco-Roman—have allowed scholars to make considered judgments with greater contextual awareness. In nineteenth-century German and French scholarship, knowledge of dialogues with Gnostics and with Jews in the second century CE led some scholars to push the composition of many New Testament writings into the mid-second century. This also made it easier to view reports of signs and wonders as incorporations of contemporary folklore rather than history-connected memory, although most scholars nowadays see the canonical texts as written within the first century, either by members of the apostolic generation or their followers. Authorship and composition issues thus have been central to critical scholarship, sometimes moving fallaciously from "not necessarily" to "necessarily not."

Second naïveté is a term introduced by Paul Ricoeur, describing the capacity to come back to an earlier understanding in the light of critical scrutiny. As this applies to biblical authority, the question is not "*Is* the Bible true?" but "*How* is the Bible true?" Where theology and meaning may have been the measures of the New Testament's value in previous centuries, they may still be appreciated, even if its historicity is unconfirmed by external verification or if some of the particulars vary between accounts. As Hans Küng

put it, "Truth is beyond mere facticity." Therefore, second naiveté allows one to come back to existential meanings of scripture, even if modern critical analyses might call into question particular views of history, authorship, or composition. After all, the early church included these twenty-seven books as inspired and authoritative, and their canonical authority stands regardless of who wrote them or when. Therefore, how the New Testament speaks to readers personally and existentially—individually or in community—is itself a worthy interpretive venture. Is this last consideration, though, the endpoint in seeking to interpret the New Testament adequately?

What I might call *second criticality* also deserves a place within the scientific investigation of the New Testament, as not all critical approaches to interpretation are equally compelling—either in theory or in practice. Some even disagree with each other. Therefore, simply questioning a traditional view is not to overturn it, and upon this fallacy many hermeneutical schemes founder, and critically so. Further, just because a claim is traditional, that does not mean it is wrong or suspect. Diverse critical approaches to interpretation also differ in what they contribute, and an issue is often best perceived through multiple lenses, not just one. Therefore, critical analysis deserves to be applied to critical studies as well as traditional ones, and second criticality allows one to do so programmatically and in interdisciplinary ways. The goal of this approach, however, is neither to confirm nor to disconfirm a traditional or a critical claim, nor is it to establish one methodology over all others. Rather, the goal is to seek the truth about an issue, drawing in the strongest methodologies that are best suited for the particular task at hand. It also keeps in mind that even "scientific" approaches to objectivity may themselves be distortive, as subjective engagement is required for making any sort of aesthetic, historical, or hermeneutical judgment, which is essential for interpreting any text.

Therefore, this introduction to the New Testament will endeavor to build upon the strongest of traditional views and critical methodologies, seeking to apply the best of objective judgments to subjective inferences of meaning and their applications. In that sense, some first- and second-century views will only be abandoned when critical scholarship has compellingly overturned them, not just questioned them. And, gradations of certainty will also be referenced, as all judgments fall within a continuum of plausibility.[5] This more nuanced approach to critical analysis has also led me to propose several new ways forward in seeking to address several of the New Testament's most enduring theological, historical, and literary riddles, convincing me that second criticality is needed now more than ever in biblical studies. There is truth in both traditional and critical scholarship, and in all judgments probing discernment is required.

[5] Given that 0 percent and 100 percent degrees of probability are elusive, the following gradations are workable: 1–15 percent—probably not, with some certainty; 16–30 percent—unlikely; 31–45 percent—questionable; 46–55 percent—possible, but hard to decide either way; 56–70 percent—plausible; 71–85 percent—likely; 86–99 percent—probably, with some certainty.