

ALLIANCE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Final Exam

Submitted to Dr. Thomas Lyons,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the completion of

NT503

Reading the New Testament

by

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Question 1

Why is it important to understand historical-critical issues, such as authorship, recipients, and dating (even if we cannot determine these details definitively)?

It is important to understand historical-critical issues because students of the Word must be aware of the particular context(s) of the author and their audience if any semblance of the original meaning and intent is to be gleaned from the available texts. Scholars utilize historical criticism as a means to “reconstruct the events that transpired” amongst the peoples and places of the New Testament.¹ Of the three historical-critical issues listed in the prompt, the determination of the dating of the text is most important, as it provides a framework for placing the events of the text into a real time in history.

Revelation provides a prime example of a Biblical text where the dating can effectively impact both exegesis and hermeneutics. Take, for example, the dominant scholarly theory which dates Revelation’s composition to the reign of Domitian in the late first-century.² If this theory is accurate, then the events depicted in Revelation may very well have one-to-one historical parallels describing real people and real persecution of Christians which were taking or had recently taken place, rather than describing an eschatological persecution of the Church yet future. Even if we cannot know the dating with certainty, approaching the text from a historical-critical perspective provides a means to evaluate the legitimacy of various interpretations of the texts.

Question 2

¹ Mark Allen Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2018), 213-216.

² *Ibid.*, 936-9.

Present a well-reasoned argument for your ministry context as to what is significant for people's faith and interpretation of a Gospel for spiritual growth about the phenomenon that the Church has 4 canonical gospels?

The Church has four canonical gospels at her disposal. Each of these Gospels represents the perspectives, intents, and theologies of their respective authors and editors. Each Gospel provides its own perception or 'portrait' of Jesus, His identity, and His purposes: Matthew presents Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, Mark announces His kingdom, Luke emphasizes His works, and John reveals His divinity.³ These four distinct, yet similar representations of Christ bare significance upon the ministry of chaplaincy I am working towards.

People are as diverse as the Gospels, each with their own intents and purposes. As a chaplain, I will need to be able to discern the specific needs of each individual. I will need to answer questions such as: What is this person truly in need of? Which Gospel presentation of Jesus will penetrate this individual's heart-- the Messiah, the King, the Laborer, or the Eternal One? There is also a personal aspect to this Gospel diversity in the life of the chaplain. In the same way Paul writes, "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some" (1 Cor 9:22)⁴, there is an expectation of being able to step into the various perspectives and contexts of those being ministered to for effective healing to take place. It is in this way that the four Gospels represent the chaplaincy ministry.

Question 3a

³ Arthur G. Patzia, *The Making of the New Testament: Origin, Collection, Text & Canon, 2nd Edition* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 78-9.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *English Standard Version*. (The Holy Bible: English Standard Version, IL: Crossway Bibles of Good News Publishers, 2001).

When reading the letters of Paul, one must consider the relationship between the Church's context (the recipients) and the argument Paul makes in a specific letter. Explain the reason why this is an essential step in reading Paul's different letters with competence.

The majority of Paul's epistles are written to the Churches of various locations of early Christian world. Amy-Jill Levine and Mark Brettler warn against the dangers of generalizing the epistles of the early church: "When reconstructing the history of the earliest years of the assemblies gathered in the name of Jesus, it is important not to generalize from one Epistle to the community as a whole...Epistles generally are case specific or 'occasional' rather than specific treatises."⁵ Because of the occasional nature of Paul's Church letters, context is key to understanding the original meaning of these Pauline epistles. Context, as seen in the example of the Galatian church below, reveals not only the purpose of the author, but the circumstances of the audience which prompted the letter's writing.

Question 3b

⁵ Amy-Jill Levine and Mark Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament, 2nd Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 282.

Focusing on Galatians, discuss the relationship between the context and the theological points emphasized. Be sure to be specific about the context and explain why these theological issues best addressed them.

The epistles of Paul are occasional documents, written to a particular audience for a particular purpose. An interpretation of Galatians by Shaye J. D. Cohen highlights several key elements present in the text, including: 1) the institution of circumcision by Jewish Christians upon Gentile believers, 2) the questioning of Paul's apostolic authority, and 3) the soteriological distinction between the works of the Law versus faith in Christ.⁶ These three issues point to the context of Paul's letter to the Galatians: a Judaizing faction had entered the churches of Galatia in Asia Minor, possibly because of its proximity to Jerusalem (Gal 3:1). In his letter to the Galatians, Paul responds to each of these issues. He calls out the Galatians for abandoning their faith in Christ and (Gal 1:6, 5:1-15), qualifies the legitimacy of his ministry and the Gospel he preaches (Gal 1:11-2:10), and spends the majority of the letter contending for faith in Christ, rather than the works of the Law and circumcision in particular (Gal 2:15-5:15). Paul's response to the events occurring in the Galatian Church demonstrate a dedication to what he believed to be central to the Christian faith: a steadfast faith in Christ, whose atonement via the Cross was sufficient for salvation, and the transmission of this Truth through a Gospel which was from the lips of God, not from man.

Question 4a

⁶ Amy-Jill Levine and Mark Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament, 2nd Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 373.

Is diversity a problem for interpretation, or do you see a value to these different voices for the proclamation and ministry of the contemporary Church? Explain.

Diversity is not a problem for interpretation. In fact, the opposite seems to be true. Diversity in interpretation drives perspective and differences in perspectives drive critical analysis of those perspectives. In this respect, competing interpretations sharpen understanding and convictions in the way the writer of Proverbs proclaims that “iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another (Pro 27:17). The diversity of the four Gospels discussed in Question 2 also highlights the value of a diversity of perspectives. The word of God is living and active; it cuts to the heart of the individual and shows them who they are in Christ and what they truly need (Heb 4:12). This will look different for each person, but fortunately the Word itself provides a variety of perspectives, from a variety of peoples, from a variety of times and places.

Question 4b

Describe what steps you would take if an interpretation on a passage of Scripture was not the same as yours, and what you would do if a commentary or denomination challenged what you have always understood.

This scenario has occurred several times throughout my Christian walk. The first step is to verify that Scripture passage being referenced actually says what both or either party claims it to be saying. I grew up Roman Catholic and had a very superficial theology. When I came to the Lord as an adult and began to read Scripture, I began to realize that much of what I was taught had no Scriptural basis. In more recent years, the Fundamentalist perspectives I had been trained in I have found to be similarly lacking. As a result, my views have changed as I learn more about the Scriptures and independently invest into developing my own theology.

If the disagreement moves beyond the first step, then the next step would be to employ various methods of text criticism and historical criticism to determine what possible range of interpretations the text can reasonably sustain. If both interpretations have similar academic support, then the next step would be to see how the interpretation fits into the larger whole of the Grand Narrative of Scripture as a whole. At this point, if the argument is not resolved, the difference is likely the result of differences in hermeneutics, rather than interpretation of what the text does or does not say. Ultimately, I would be willing to reject my held position if adequate evidence against my position is presented and the opposing position is shown to be superior in both explanatory power and scope for the interpretation of the passage in question.

Bibliography

Brettler, Mark Zwi and Levine, Amy-Jill. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament, 2nd Edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Patzia, Arthur G. *The Making of the New Testament: Origin, Collection, Text & Canon, 2nd Edition*. Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2011.

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