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## What if it were True? Why Study the New Testament

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### Abstract

This article argues for a renewal of the discipline of New Testament studies through a focus on the question of truth. To make the argument, the article first engages a recent essay that is highly critical of mainstream NT scholarship and subsequently works with the thought of Søren Kierkegaard, Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond and Hans-Georg Gadamer to pursue the interpreter's implications in the NT's assertions of truth. The article also briefly exegetes five passages from the NT to illustrate the way the NT makes claims that require judgements about truth. Along the way, the article also engages contemporary NT scholars who argue vociferously against 'theological' readings of the NT and others who argue for their inherent necessity.

**Keywords:** New Testament; truth; theology/theological; method; Gadamer; Cavell; Diamond; Kierkegaard; Protectionist; John; Romans; Galatians; Mark; Revelation

How hard I find it to see what is *right in front of my eyes*!<sup>1</sup>

An anxious desire for interposition, for explicative-evaluative mediation between ourselves and the primary, permeates our condition.<sup>2</sup>

### I. The Problem

In 2005 the widely respected NT scholar Wayne Meeks published his SNTS presidential address, 'Why Study the New Testament?' Among the many reasons Meeks offered, there was a conspicuous absence: we should study the NT because it might tell the truth about God.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995) 39e (emphasis original).

<sup>2</sup> G. Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 39.

<sup>3</sup> W. A. Meeks, 'Why Study the New Testament?', *NTS* 51 (2005) 155–70. Meeks gives five reasons why the NT 'must' be studied. The first is religious/sociological (part of the foundation of Christian communities), the second is aesthetic/intellectual (pervasive influence in art, literature and thought), and the last three are moral (it has been abused as often as used; we damage ourselves and others when we lose sight of our situation in the stream of history; we should be future-oriented because we don't have the last word). In some ways, these reasons are just fine as far as they go – partly because they are so unobjectionable – but under scrutiny one can see that they are simply assertions about the importance of things whose importance is just another assertion. We may agree or we may not. Who's to compel us? This layering of assertion on top of another assertion as if on a foundation and not just another layer of assertion is a common way of writing when you want to find something to hang your convictions on but don't want to use words like 'truth' or 'God' or 'theology' (Meeks admonishes us to jettison the language of biblical and NT theology).

Nowhere is modernity's effect on the interpretation of the NT more evident than in the fact that we can manage to read the NT and avoid acknowledging the question it puts about truth. Of course, we have learned all sorts of interesting things by focusing on matters other than the main question the NT directly puts to its readers. Indeed, the signal contribution of modern study of the NT behind which we are unlikely to go is the delineation of the historical conditions under which the texts came to be and in which they made their sense. All our thinking in the West is now historical in one way or another, after all, and it is thus unsurprising that we have tasted – and quite enjoyed – the fruit borne of over two centuries of historical labour.<sup>4</sup>

But no matter how much information we amass, there remains a vast difference between learning some interesting things or playing various methodological games and facing the ever-present challenge posed by the NT. Søren Kierkegaard, whose treasure trove of insights into the NT is far too seldom searched by NT scholars, saw clearly what was at stake in the difference when he said that losing sight of the main thing is not simply opting for a different way of doing things, as if one could just say, 'I'm not interested in *that*; I'm interested in *this*' and move on. Losing focus, rather, changes the terms of our understanding altogether, of what 'serious' reading of the NT actually is.<sup>5</sup>

'[E]very blessed day', said Kierkegaard, 'there comes out an interpretation more learned than the last, more acute, more elegant, more profound, more ingenious, more wonderful, more charming, and more wonderfully charming ... indeed criticism itself has become a literature so prolix that it is impossible to attain a survey of the criticism.' And, yet, the sheer amount was not the main trouble in itself. It was rather that the torrent of scholarly works resulted in a monumental shift in consciousness and concentration: 'at the same time the point of view for determining what seriousness is was altered, and to be busy about interpretation became real seriousness'.<sup>6</sup> The problem, Kierkegaard argued, was that our attention was swept away from the NT by a surge of scholarship, and we came to think that what it is to be serious as a NT scholar is to be serious about NT scholarship.

The flood has only risen since Kierkegaard's day. The temptation to believe that being a serious scholar is being serious about scholarship is greater than it has ever been. '[B]ook engenders book, essay breeds essay, article spawns article.'<sup>7</sup> And never have we been more unable to see the field of NT criticism as a whole. Even the most learned among us work only in relatively well-defined areas, pursuing our questions and issuing our proposals almost entirely to the neglect of those whose research falls outside our particular ambit. Is there a way to recover our seriousness about the main thing, the NT itself

<sup>4</sup> Even those who want to use history to get free of it – genealogists, for example – do their work by history (see Nietzsche's *The Use and Abuse of History*). Try as we might, we cannot think on this side of the historical turn without the historical turn. We all now know, and cannot not know, that the NT documents have particular histories of composition, destination, purpose and so on. All supposedly non- or a-historical reflection gets its critical launch angle from what has come before it, what it finds unsatisfying in that 'before', and thus situates itself historically as yet one more mode of human reflection. All complications of 'objective' historiography just mean the 'objective' part is complicated. The historical part – that we turn to the past for reflection of any sort – remains firmly in place, even for those who think they have left it behind. In the end, this dependence on history is a feature of our humanity – we are finite creatures who emerge 'after' what has come 'before' and cannot do without what has come before – and it will inflect our thinking one way or the other regardless of our theoretical attempts to embrace or reject particular forms of historiography.

<sup>5</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination* in *For Self-Examination, and Judge for Yourselves!* (trans. W. Lowrie; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944) 58–9. A more recent translation of *For Self-Examination* – but less elegant in this particular passage – is *For Self-Examination/Judge for Yourselves!* (trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 33–4.

<sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, 58–9.

<sup>7</sup> Steiner, *Real Presences*, 39. He finishes the sentence: 'the primary text is only the remote font of autonomous exegetic proliferation'.

and the questions it puts to its readers? Can we swim out of the flood and ‘go upstream, to the living streams of “first being”’?<sup>8</sup> I think so.

Naturally, I recognise this article’s participation in the problem it names. But, of course, there is no other way to do it.<sup>9</sup> In what follows, I thus argue something rather simple but with far-reaching consequences not only for our discipline’s focus and energy expenditure but also for the way that we conceive of what we are doing and what ‘serious’ study of the NT entails. To make this argument I will first engage a recent article as a representative of ‘not-theology’, a long-running but ultimately incoherent position within modernity about how to read the NT with critical seriousness. I will then turn to the problem of ‘deflection’ and to Hans-Georg Gadamer to help us comprehend why questions of truth are inherent to understanding the NT, discuss the sort of truth at which the NT aims as lived truth, and conclude with a concise recommendation for renewal within our discipline.

## 2. Being Serious ... or Not

In a recent article entitled “‘Let’s Take the Text Seriously’: The Protectionist *Doxa* of Mainstream New Testament Studies’, Stephen Young argues against one kind of seriousness and for another.<sup>10</sup> Young’s article contains some caricatures of the work he seeks to criticise, but he nevertheless raises a crucial question: what is it to be serious about the texts of the NT?

Young’s constructive answer is hard to discern amidst the jargonese, but his negative case is easier to spot. And it is this: despite their admonitions to take the texts seriously, those who interpret the NT in line with its claims are not serious. They are ‘protectionist’, out to ‘protect’ the NT from the truly serious critics who interrogate both the NT and its ‘confused’ interpreters. The Protectionists reason theologically with the NT texts, privilege the ‘insider’ perspectives of those texts, ignore ‘etic’ interpretations and ‘invalidate’ serious criticism that wishes to ‘historicise’ the ancient materials.<sup>11</sup>

According to Young, Protectionist John Barclay, for example, is confused because he argues, in broad terms, that there are theological claims in Paul’s letters that cannot be reduced to an anthropological base.<sup>12</sup> The origin of Christian identity ultimately lies beyond the human horizon and, precisely because it comes from the God who is simultaneously the God of Israel and the only God of the cosmos, is able to hold together both a universalism and a commitment to Israel’s particularity; such ‘irreducibly theological’ understanding is not simply one more socio-psychological take on Israel/race/ethnicity. To make it so is not to offer an ‘etic’ interpretation but to contest the reasonableness and truth of the theological claim by transforming the ‘emic’ reasoning into ‘mythological ideology’.<sup>13</sup>

Though ‘presumably unintended’, says Young, Barclay’s logic here exhibits a fencing-off strategy in which the only perspective that is taken seriously is that of Paul himself. Never mind that Barclay’s driving point is hardly what Young describes; the main thing is

<sup>8</sup> Steiner, *Real Presences*, 40.

<sup>9</sup> Even the Bible itself is often commentary on commentary, the Chronicler’s on Kings and Samuel, Luke’s on Isaiah, or Matthew’s on Mark, or 1 John on the Gospel of John, for that matter. Still, part of the point of returning regularly to the primary texts is surely to *return* to the primary texts.

<sup>10</sup> S. L. Young, “‘Let’s Take the Text Seriously’: The Protectionist *Doxa* of Mainstream New Testament Studies’, *MTSR* (2019) 1–36.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Young, “‘Let’s Take the Text Seriously’”, 3, 11–13.

<sup>12</sup> For Young’s treatment of Barclay, see Young, “‘Let’s Take the Text Seriously’”, 13–18.

<sup>13</sup> J. M. G. Barclay, ‘An Identity Received from God: The Theological Configuration of Paul’s Kinship Discourse’, *EC* 8 (2017) 354–72, at 372.

(apparently) that Barclay's focus on 'emic' language somehow traps him inside a pattern of thought he cannot exit. Barclay's captivity is so profound, in fact, that he cannot detect his problem because he literally cannot think in terms other than Paul's (or at least the scholarly elucidation of Paul's). Barclay is entirely inscribed within the boundary of what Young, taking a term from Pierre Bourdieu, calls *doxa*: the thinkable. Barclay's thought is imprisoned within 'the commonsense that shapes what is and is not thinkable, the questions that seem obvious, or the self-evident or taken-for-granted categories that govern available discourses in a field'.<sup>14</sup> J. Louis Martyn, N. T. Wright, Volker Rabens and I are the other mainstream scholarly examples of oblivious Protectionists whose work evidences 'no concern to defend' its intellectual moves and substitutes 'description – or repetition – for analysis'.<sup>15</sup> Blithely unaware of what we cannot think – the *unthinkable* – the Protectionists 'prohibit inquiry that could transgress or think beyond emic theories'.<sup>16</sup>

Young's non-sequiturs notwithstanding – surely Protectionist blindness would not *ipso facto* 'prohibit' or 'invalidate' inquiry from other quarters – the question of whether we know what we are doing or are merely trapped within the noetic boundaries of hermeneutical ignorance touches on a fundamental matter endemic to serious study of the NT. The best way to see it is to begin with some questions. What if, contrary to Young's assertions, we know quite well what we are doing and do it in order to press a particular point, a point about the language of the NT and the inherent claim to the truth about God embedded in that language? And what if this point leads to a second, a point about the inherent positions of interpretative languages that interface with the NT's language and how that interface is best construed?

My *One True Life* book that Young discusses, for example, displays considerable awareness of the emic/etic distinction. In fact, I argue explicitly and at length that this distinction is conceptually far too clunky to cope with the complexities generated by the grammar of invitation and rejection, claim and conflict, that pervade both the Christian and Roman Stoic sources. The nature and telos of the 'emic' language of these traditions discloses 'etic' language as something other than what it claims to be: etic is not 'outside' or observational in some sort of existentially protected sense; contrary to interpreters who claim that their 'etic' analyses have no bearing on truth, etic language is instead just one more evaluative judgement about the truth of the traditions it claims to study. I thus reject the distinction as a way to think productively about interpreting the texts of religious/philosophical traditions of the sort that Christianity and Stoicism are – traditions that claim truth for their way of being. I may be wrong in what I argue (and/or in many other things), but the problem posed by the emic/etic distinction is not *unthinkable* to me. Quite to the contrary, the point is that I think very differently about it in relation to questions of truth, and in a way that challenges the sort of inquiry represented by Young.

Young's essay is styled as avant-garde, but in reality he simply sings a familiar old tune with some different words. Had Bruce Lincoln, for example, decided to write with a

<sup>14</sup> Young, "Let's Take the Text Seriously", 3.

<sup>15</sup> Young, "Let's Take the Text Seriously", 3.

<sup>16</sup> Young, "Let's Take the Text Seriously", 6. In Young's view, we do offer some arguments, but they are only 'further protectionist arguments'. There is a real question about whether Young has interpreted Bourdieu correctly. I think not, or at least not entirely, for the rather simple reason that his explanation of Bourdieu stands in tension with his analysis of Protectionist scholarly work on his own terms. For Bourdieu, *doxa* is a level of assumption that is deeper than reflection; at this level one cannot reflect upon what is assumed, at least not until some fundamental conditions that go beyond scholarly paradigms change (of society, of culture etc.). Young's use of Bourdieu does not show (a) an awareness of this problem, and/or (b) that the conditions have changed so that we can now see the 'protectionist' assumptions that undergird NT studies that we were earlier unable to see.

smattering of Bourdieu's terms, he would not have needed to change the notes. Nor would Russell McCutcheon for that matter, whose 1997 essay sounds remarkably like something Young wants to voice over: the need to 'historicise', to be 'transgressive' in our questioning, to steer free of religious commitments in our analyses, and so forth.<sup>17</sup> Farther back, William Wrede would have seen much with which to agree, as would, more recently, Heikki Räisänen. Though there are obvious differences between these scholars and their many disciples, they share a significant commitment that binds them together: the commitment to what Paul Griffiths once cleverly called 'not-theology'.<sup>18</sup>

The advocates of not-theology zealously proclaim the possibility of theology-free interpretation and assert (or intimate) the inadmissibility of theological reasoning within scholarly discourse.<sup>19</sup> They use words such as 'critical' or 'history' or, in Young's case, 'protectionist' that are supposed to sound more analytically serious than the theological vocabularies of either the ancient sources or their current readers. Perhaps the rhetorical move is also intended to intimidate or frighten the confused theological counterparts out of the scholarly debate. Such words are, however, little more than 'charms' waved around to ward off exactly the kind of rigorous questioning of presuppositions that the not-theologians allegedly mean to invite.<sup>20</sup> They tell us nothing about the things that must be true for not-theology to be a viable way to think (such as, for example, that God does not exist, or that God, if he exists, is unnecessary to take account of in matters of truth, or that interpreters have the ability to bracket God out of their thinking, or that anthropology and theology are epistemically competitive arenas, and so on). In fact, no arguments for not-theology are given at all. The assertions of Young, Lincoln *et al.*, when it comes to what we should and should not do, are little more than the proclamation of preference, an academic's kind of homiletical self-expression.<sup>21</sup> They also evidence a

<sup>17</sup> See R. McCutcheon, 'A Default of Critical Intelligence: The Scholar of Religion as Public Intellectual', *JAAR* 65 (1997) 443–68, which presages his book *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescriving the Public Study of Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> P. J. Griffiths, 'On the Future of the Study of Religion in the Academy', *JAAR* 74 (2006) 66–74.

<sup>19</sup> See e.g. Young's approval of Bruce Lincoln's comment: 'when one permits those whom one studies to define the terms in which they will be understood ... one has ceased to function as historian or scholar' (Young, 'Let's Take the Text Seriously', 3, citing B. Lincoln, 'Theses on Method', *MTR* 8 (1996) 225–7). A representative work within NT studies of this widespread position is Heikki Räisänen's *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme* (London: SCM, 1990). Räisänen attempts some nuance in his article 'A Religious Studies Alternative to New Testament Theology: Reflections on a Controversial Enterprise', *The Bible among Scriptures and Other Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck: 2017) 15–29, which explains his overall sense of his work. But the basic idea that not-theology is a viable way to think is simply restated. For an excellent treatment of this question in relation to reading strategies that explicitly presuppose faith, see R. B. Hays, 'Reading the Bible with the Eyes of Faith: The Practice of Theological Exegesis', *JTI* 1 (2007) 5–21. Hays discusses Meeks, Räisänen, Michael Fox and Hector Avalos.

<sup>20</sup> 'Charms' is Griffiths's apt word ('On the Future,' 73).

<sup>21</sup> The programme of the not-theologians, while veiled in the language of 'historicising' and so forth, often functions as a mask behind which various moralisms and exhortations are smuggled in – all presented as self-evident, thrown out to their audience without any justification. Though he derides the 'mainstream' Protectionists for their way of reading, Young, for example, makes a convenient exception to his claim that Protectionist interpretation is problematical. As it turns out, there are some Protectionists whose protecting work is actually to be lauded ('dominated Protectionists'). Why? For the moral end that the work serves: 'One should not leverage examples of dominated-protectionism to legitimate protectionism in biblical studies since the latter reproduces the privilege of long-privileged texts and functions within a larger disciplinary apparatus of domination ... there remains an important place for promoting scholarship with modestly empiricist, socially "realist," and critical orientations since sexist, colonial, and other dominations are social realities that require non-protective interrogation and resistance' (9–10). It apparently does not bother Young that by calling it Protectionist he admits that the hermeneutical moves of this type of Protectionist are formally no different from the mainstream type of Protectionist scholarship, which would, of course, suggest that the approved Protectionists are just as confused as the mainstream since the former commit the exact same formal intellectual

particular interpretative posture, one that is common among their ilk and constitutive of those who think the question of truth emanating from that which they study somehow avoids reaching them. In short, while claiming to be serious about studying, what the not-theologians actually display is a posture of deflection.

### 3. Deflection: Truth and Method; Knowing and Acknowledging

The term 'deflection' derives from the thought of philosopher Stanley Cavell and applies to the significant difference between what we know to be true and what we acknowledge as truth. We may know another person is in pain, for example, but that is not the same thing as acknowledging that fact. We may keep silent or, if we are academics, become mired in philosophical questions about how we really know that we know another person is in pain. Either way, the truth of the case – a truth that we know, viz. someone is in pain – is deflected rather than acknowledged.<sup>22</sup> Recently Cora Diamond developed Cavell's notion in relation to the work of thinking in particular. Diamond argued that deflection is a particular existential posture that results from converting things that call us fundamentally into question or resist our thinking into intellectual 'issues'. The texts, lectures and novel (in Diamond's chief example) cease to be what they clearly are – their confrontation with us over the truth of our embodied life and time-bound existence is deflected – as we turn them into contributions to this or that individual question, or as we subsume them into wider methodological reflections or ethical deliberations as examples of X or Y. We deflect when we move 'from the appreciation, or attempt at appreciation, of a difficulty of reality to a philosophical or moral problem apparently in the vicinity'.<sup>23</sup> Deflection, that is, is the posture of defensive reading, a way in which intellectual skills and habits are used as an existential prophylactic to shield us from texts that question us with the possibility of their truth in the midst of our lives.<sup>24</sup>

To name the reading style of the not-theology advocates as deflection may at first seem somewhat strange or even hyperbolic. Why, after all, can't not-theology simply be just another way of interpreting ancient texts? The answer has to do with the way it attempts to inhabit the space between knowing and acknowledging – it knows what it refuses to acknowledge – and turns from the question of truth to the issue of method.

To the extent that NT scholars have invoked Gadamer, they have often assumed that he argued for the 'fusion of horizons' as the central goal of hermeneutics and that to achieve

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errors as the latter. Young tries to avoid this problem by naming the difference 'structural' and by moral exhortation/preaching, but his basic grammar gives the game away. What matters to Young is (a) to exhort his readers to embrace the moral ends he likes (I say 'likes' because no justification is given for his preferences – with the result that the exhortations appear purely as a matter of taste), and (b) probably not to be heard as criticising the sort of current moral commitments you simply can't criticise if you want acceptance and employment at an American university. Young is for all that sort of thing, even if it is Protectionist on his own definition (and therefore 'confused'). His basic typology seems to be: evangelical Protectionist (confused and bad); mainstream Protectionist (confused and confused); 'dominated' protectionist (confused and good). McCutcheon, to take another example of a modern academic moralist, thinks we should be public intellectuals; Lincoln that we owe something to society, and so on. Whether one agrees with Young or McCutcheon or Lincoln, or some combination thereof, is beside the point. They all exhort as if they have made arguments or have a moral or metaphysical background against which such positions are self-evidently compelling to all people.

<sup>22</sup> S. Cavell, 'Knowing and Acknowledging', *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002<sup>2</sup>) 220–45.

<sup>23</sup> C. Diamond, 'The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,' *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 1 (2003) 1–26, at 12.

<sup>24</sup> Diamond also says that deflection occurs when we face things too difficult to think. But I take her 'to think' to mean too difficult to deal with. For surely there is some thinking of the problem that makes it known to us that it is the sort of thing we find too difficult to think.



this ‘fusion’ was exactly the point of their historical labour.<sup>25</sup> Gadamer’s argument, however, was not about a particular method of inquiry but about the entirety of the human experience of understanding (*Erfahrung*).<sup>26</sup> He explicitly rejected accounts of his work that described it in terms of ‘method’ and insisted instead on the dialectical nature of question/answer and the claim to truth as ingredient to all understanding.<sup>27</sup> All statements/propositions/declarations (*Aussagen*) encountered in a text, thought Gadamer, presuppose questions, and understanding is the experience of being asked those questions. Furthermore, those questions are by their nature as questions put to the interpreter as questions of truth, questions that demanded one answer or another. The point is that interpretation is not something we can objectify methodologically but is rather a dialogical confrontation with truth.<sup>28</sup> As he puts it near the end of *Truth and Method*:

The whole value of hermeneutical experience – like the significance of history for human knowledge in general – [consists] in the fact that here we are not simply filing things in pigeonholes but that what we encounter in a tradition says something to us. Understanding, then, does not consist in a technical virtuosity of ‘understanding’ everything written. Rather, it is a genuine experience (*Erfahrung*) – i.e., an encounter with something that asserts itself as truth.<sup>29</sup>

According to Gadamer, readers of an ancient text are thus put in the position – whether wittingly or not – of having to decide on the truth of that which confronts them: ‘the written word makes the argued reader the arbiter of its claim to truth ...What [the reader] understands is always more than an unfamiliar opinion: it is always possible truth.’<sup>30</sup>

Confronting truth in the form of a question that demands an answer does not mean that the answer an interpreter gives is a foregone conclusion, even if the question itself – in its *Situationshorizont* – comes from a text whose situation implied a particular answer.<sup>31</sup> But, for Gadamer, the idea that we could understand a text and avoid its question-putting force is incoherent. Understanding and dialogue with the text are one and the same thing.<sup>32</sup> Exactly to the degree that we understand a text, we know that it

<sup>25</sup> As if one has a modern horizon and an ancient horizon and the scholar’s job is to merge them. This is a misunderstanding of Gadamer. To take only one small example, see his remarks in the afterword to H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1996<sup>2</sup>) 576–7 (e.g., ‘working out the historical horizon of a text is always already a fusion of horizons’, 577; cf. xxxiv in the Forward to the second edition). There are of course exceptions within NT studies. See e.g. J. L. Martyn’s use of Gadamer to critique Troels Engberg-Pedersen’s *Paul and the Stoics* (‘De-apocalypticizing Paul: An Essay Focused on *Paul and the Stoics* by Troels Engberg-Pedersen’, *JSNT* 86 (2002) 61–102, at 68–9); or, with an insightful attempt to put Gadamer in conversation with J. G. Hamann, J. A. Linebaugh, ‘Relational Hermeneutics and Comparison as Conversation’, *The New Testament in Comparison: Validity, Method, and Purpose in Comparing Traditions* (ed. J. Barclay and B. G. White; LNTS; London: T & T Clark, 2020) 143–58, esp. 147.

<sup>26</sup> *Erfahrung* names for Gadamer something like ‘the entirety of the human experience of understanding’, not an isolated aspect of that understanding (as if there were such a thing as experience qua experience).

<sup>27</sup> Gadamer is clear that the question/answer dialectic does not mean that there can be only one question. There are often questions (plural); but the hermeneutical point remains exactly the same.

<sup>28</sup> Hence the title of his most famous work.

<sup>29</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 489.

<sup>30</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 394.

<sup>31</sup> On the point about *Situationshorizont* and e.g. the role of historical research, see briefly his ‘Was ist Wahrheit?’, *Kleine Schriften*, vol. 1 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1967) 47–58, esp. 55.

<sup>32</sup> To understand something at all is to be able to understand it as *said* to oneself (otherwise it is just gibberish and we do not understand it: *Truth and Method*, 442). This is the truth that language reveals to us: exactly to the extent that we understand it at all, we understand it as said to us, as spoken to us, as in dialogue with us (cf. 446). Cf. Donald Marshall’s concise remark on Gadamer’s view: ‘If we understand a text that has come down to us from the past, then that understanding has the character of a dialogue’ (D. G. Marshall, ‘On Dialogue: To its Cultural

offers more than an ‘unfamiliar opinion’; we know it questions us with the possibility of truth.<sup>33</sup>

The advocates of not-theology pretend this isn’t so. They catalogue as ‘unfamiliar opinions’ the questions of truth the NT puts to its readers and insist on the seriousness of method instead. In short, where the NT ‘asserts itself as truth’ and requires an answer, the not-theologians simply try to avoid the question and change the subject. This is deflection: the realisation that the NT puts questions of truth with the simultaneous attempt to avoid acknowledging them.

We could pick any number of compositions and/or verses from the NT to illustrate the point, but for the sake of space we will mention only five. These have been selected because they are indicative of the wider theological grammar of the NT, i.e. they are not isolated verses of this or that unusual moment within the NT but are instances of regular, large-scale patterns across multiple texts and time periods.<sup>34</sup>

(1) John 3.15–17: the Son of Man will be lifted up ‘so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. For God so loved the cosmos that he gave his only begotten Son so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but will have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the cosmos in order that the cosmos might be judged but in order that the cosmos might be saved through him.’ No three verses can summarise the complexity of John’s Gospel, of course, but these three get about as close as possible.<sup>35</sup> The point for the present article is that the questions that go with the truth-assertion are crystal clear and, significantly, do not disappear even when the text is ‘historicised’. That is, within the horizon of John’s Gospel, the truth claim applies to any and all – the correlation of God and cosmos is universal – and no amount of first-century reading can reduce this claim.<sup>36</sup> To understand the text is to understand that it asks whether or not overcoming death depends on a response to the Son of God – and that it asks this question to any and all of its readers.<sup>37</sup> There is no moment in human history at which

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Despisers’, *Gadamer’s Repercussions: Reconsidering Philosophical Hermeneutics* (ed. B. Kajewski; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) 123–44, at 130).

<sup>33</sup> This would be the case even for what we initially see as fantastical, reject as false, and so forth. The very fact that we reject something as false or outrageous, for example, tells us that we understand its implicit claim to be possible truth.

<sup>34</sup> To say it only slightly differently: they are focal instances of larger narratives – whether explicit or implicit – in which they are found and that give them the sense they have. On the indispensability of narrative for word-meaning, see C. K. Rowe, ‘Making Friends and Comparing Lives’, *The New Testament in Comparison: Validity, Method, and Purpose in Comparing Traditions*, 23–40, esp. 24–8, and ‘A Response to Friend-Critics’, *ibid.*, 125–41, esp. 132–4 (LNTS; London: T&T Clark, 2020).

<sup>35</sup> These verses have been overused in popular evangelism, but such overuse does not make it any less true that they summarise well the Gospel’s main themes. In fact, the popularity may have something to do with an intuitive grasp of their overall importance.

<sup>36</sup> The idea that we cannot understand a text until we know its historical occasion is, as Gadamer shows, far too simplistic an account of historical understanding. For Gadamer, ‘occasionality’ is not a barrier to understanding but a part of all understanding. We understand the text in some ways upon the first reading, and as a result are impelled to look for a particular occasion, which when found helps us to understand more of the text, which then enriches our sense of the occasion of the text, and so forth. But, note, Gadamer does not think that this is a linear process or a step-wise one: it is schematised like that so that he can draw our attention to the various features of the work of understanding, but the actual working out of a particular occasion of a text – and the hermeneutics that allow us to name this as what is going on – is simply a part of the whole experience of understanding. Put differently, the dialectic that is the relation between part and whole includes the working out of the occasion of the text as part of the interplay of part/whole. Put differently still, the *Vorverständnis* that goes with us whenever we read and interpret will always include occasionality. See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, esp. 497.

<sup>37</sup> There are other questions here, too, of course. Is there a God? What about death? Who’s the Son? What’s belief? and so on. The multiplicity of crucial questions only highlights the fact that there are questions embedded in understanding.



the death of any reader of John would cease to be on that reader's horizon. The Gospel asserts that there is a way to deal with our impending death, and exactly to the degree that we understand the Gospel's claim do we understand that we have been asked the question about our death.

(2) Romans 10.9: 'If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.' While all NT scholars would affirm that this text was meant for the Roman Christians as a word on target, it is equally clear that only if we deflect the 'you' could we fail to realise that the text puts the question to all 'you-s' who have come since Paul penned the epistle. Any time Romans is understood, the text asserts that what it says here is true.<sup>38</sup> One could, of course, extract this verse from Romans and assign it a different meaning, but there is no case in which Romans could be the text of *Romans* where this assertion would not be meant as true. Contextualising the sentence in first-century Rome or arguing about the meaning of 'saved' in the ancient world does nothing whatsoever to blunt or alter its truth claim for other readers. For all readers, it is there for you. The meant is the meaning; the assertion of truth comes precisely as we understand what is said.<sup>39</sup>

(3) Galatians 4.4–6: 'When the fullness of time came, God sent forth his son, born of a woman, born under the law, so that he might deliver/redeem those under the law so that we might receive adoption/sonship.' The central argument in Galatians is conducted along the axis of time/age (Lou Martyn was right about this, among other things). The fundamental problem in Galatia is that the 'teachers' have missed the significance of Christ's death and resurrection for the shift of the ages and have gotten the time wrong; those Christians who follow them are attempting to live in the wrong time. The question that comes to the readers of the letter is, in what time do you live? Is time itself affected by Jesus Christ? How do we mark time so that we know what to do because we know when we are living? Is it true that we can or need to know what time it is in the cosmos? Again, exactly to the degree that we can understand these questions, we understand that Galatians presupposes them and asserts the truth of a particular answer. Precisely to the degree that we can articulate the argument of the letter to the Galatians do we show that we have already understood the questions it asks.<sup>40</sup> Insisting that these are not questions that confront current readers of Galatians is akin to insisting that they are not questions at all (and is a simultaneous admission that we have not understood the letter).

(4) Mark 8.27–9 (Matt 16.13–16 / Luke 9.18–20): 'And Jesus asked his disciples, "who do the people say that I am?" And they said to him, "John the Baptist, and others Elijah, and others that you're one of the prophets." And he answered them, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered, "You are the Messiah.'" In the synoptic accounts, Jesus puts the central question directly. It is the question that funds the dramatic tension in the gospel literature and reverberates throughout the early Christian sources: who is Jesus? Of

<sup>38</sup> An easy way to see this is to try imagining a case where Paul would not think this is true. There is no such case.

<sup>39</sup> This does not mean that there would be no differences in how we fill out the picture: how we understand salvation, for example, would naturally be construed differently in different epochs or places. But – and here's the point – in none of these construals would the claim Paul makes be taken to express Paul's opinion of the matter which he could just as easily take as leave.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Gadamer's perceptive remark that in questioning what we are to believe, we reveal that our questioning 'arrives too late', that is, post-understanding: 'Someone who understands is always already drawn into an event through which meaning asserts itself ... When we understand a text, what is meaningful in it captivates us just as the beautiful captivates us. It has asserted itself and captivated us before we can come to ourselves and be in a position to test the claim to meaning that it makes ... In understanding we are drawn into an event of truth and arrive, as it were, too late, if we want to know what we are supposed to believe' (*Truth and Method*, 490).

course, the reader of Mark (and Matt and Luke) can answer this question in light of the story: according to the narrative, Peter gets Jesus' identity right. But that is obviously just another way to ask the main question: is the narrative right to present Jesus this way – as the Jewish Messiah? Is that who he was – in fact no less than in claim? The assertion of the truth here cannot be missed for the simple reason that we understand the claim so clearly. The text says that Jesus was the Messiah. It meant and means that. As Gadamer would point out, the perception of the question that goes with this assertion entails the realisation that we understand exactly what confronts us. Assuming that we are not asked this question is, once again, the same thing as saying that we do not understand it (which in this instance is for NT scholars rather preposterous). We may of course want to say all kinds of things about the meaning of *Christos* in its first-century context, but as we do we will still discover when reading the Gospels that the question/answer dialectic turns out to be exactly the way the claim to truth about Jesus' identity is made. The basic assertion of truth and its necessary question remain: is that who Jesus is?<sup>41</sup>

(5) Revelation 1.8 (Lord God); 21.6 (God); 22.13 (Jesus): “I am the Alpha and Omega,” says the Lord God, “the One who Is, the One who Was, and the One who is To Come”, (1.8); ‘And the One on the throne said to me, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end”’ (21.6); Jesus says, ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end’ (22.13; we know from 22.16, along with other evidence, that it is Jesus speaking). It may well be harder to find the questions Revelation works with – i.e. to understand the text – than it is to land upon them in the Gospels or Paul, for example, but these three Alpha/Omega sayings assert the truth that all of human life is encompassed within the parentheses of God's self-identification, revelation, and act in Jesus of Nazareth. Once again, situating Revelation within a context of imperial domination and ad hoc persecution may help to illuminate such a claim as a claim to God's ultimate sovereignty over the emperor and the violent death he deals.<sup>42</sup> But such historicising does nothing whatsoever to qualify the statements as claims to truth. To understand the text is to understand that it asserts that the answer to the question of origin and end – the question of the encompassing of all human life – lies in God's identification with Jesus. Understanding *that* it is this question and this answer simply means that one understands it is *this* – which, in turn, means that the reader of the Apocalypse is inescapably asked the question of whether the assertion is true.

In all of these passages, the work of understanding comes as ‘an encounter with something that asserts itself as truth’. Reading as if this is not so – assuming that understanding the text is possible without grasping its claim to truth – is deflection, a defensive substitution of the issue of method for something that aims at truth.

#### 4. Truth

To speak with Gadamer of the hermeneutical event of reading the NT texts as an encounter with the assertion of truth begs for additional clarification and elaboration. There are, after all, many kinds of truth. The kind of truth at which the NT aims is what I have elsewhere called lived truth, truth that is inseparable from a pattern of human existence through which the truth about God is understood and displayed.<sup>43</sup> If Gadamer was

<sup>41</sup> For an interpretation that presses the significance of the Gospel's truth-assertion, see R. B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), esp. 365.

<sup>42</sup> See e.g. S. J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>43</sup> See C. K. Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) 160–76 and *One True Life: The Stoics and Early Christians as Rival Traditions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016) *passim*.

right that understanding a text requires the recognition of the assertion of truth – the question/answer that the text puts to its readers – what he left out was the fact that some questions and answers are not simply those of the dialogical intellect (as if there were such a thing as a ‘reading mind’ that could be divorced from the person whose mind it is).<sup>44</sup>

The NT does not, for example, primarily ask its readers to evaluate the correspondence of its assertions with the exterior world; its emphasis is rather on trusting the truth enough to live by it, a kind of hanging of your existence on the truth by the style of life you adopt and exhibit. Sentences such as ‘God so loved the world’ are not so much to be met with an ‘I agree with or assent to that’ or a ‘That is the way it is with the world in actual fact’ as they are with a pattern of life that shows what its truth means. The entire Gospel of John, that is, assumes that ‘God so loved the world’ is a way of life; its truth shows up for what it is in the patterns of the community that exhibit trusting belief (*pistis*) in God’s Son. One ‘does’ the truth (3.21). John’s Gospel refuses the modern separation of intellect and life, so powerful since at least Descartes, and locates truth in the full trajectory of a human life: thinking, willing, being – in short, living. In fact, the whole sweep of the NT texts is virtually unintelligible apart from the basic sense that the assertions of truth are built on questions about the lives of its readers. This is what Kierkegaard saw so clearly when he provocatively said that original ‘Christianity wanted to protect itself against acquiring characterless assistant professors instead of witnesses’.<sup>45</sup> The question/answer ‘dialectic’ is embodied in the life of the reader.

Deflection, then, not only turns from truth to method but also positions readers of the NT existentially in an attempt to ‘tear apart the act of thinking from the act of living’.<sup>46</sup> If we learn from Diamond that thinking can be deflected, we also learn from the NT itself that the sort of thinking that is ‘deflection’ is existentially committed whether one wants it to be or not. Precisely because of the kind of questions put to the reader through the NT’s claims to truth, the response to the truth of the NT can never be other than a lived response. To put it simply now: Jesus of Nazareth can either be the Jewish Messiah or not, and whether we take him to be or not is a decision that inflects the lives we live even as the lives we live display what we take to be true. When it comes to this kind of truth, there is no such thing, in George Steiner’s pointed phrase, as the ‘immunity of indirection’.<sup>47</sup> The advocates of not-theology – and any and all of their cousins – thus take positions on the lives we live even as they proclaim their skill in avoiding central theological questions. Their proclamation is self-deceived, of course, as it must be if they understand what they read, but the deeper trouble is their false commentary on the possibility of lives of indifference.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> I use ‘mind’ here colloquially, not as a way to endorse a view of ‘mind’ that takes it to be a ‘thing’ that is fundamentally different from the body (or brain), which would be taken to be yet another ‘thing’, and so on.

<sup>45</sup> S. Kierkegaard, ‘Was Bishop Mynster a “Truth-Witness”, One of “the Authentic Truth-Witnesses” – Is This the Truth?’, *The Moment and Late Writings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) 3–8, at 4.

<sup>46</sup> R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols.; New York: Scribner 1951–5) 250–1, with reference to Adolf Schlatter’s famous essay ‘The Theology of the NT and Dogmatics’ (cf. 249).

<sup>47</sup> Steiner, *Real Presences*, 39 (he uses the plural ‘immunities’).

<sup>48</sup> To take an example of someone who detested Christianity but understood that its truth claims had to do with life, we may think of Nietzsche. Nietzsche’s version of Christianity was often a caricature – and he relied on a false division between Jesus the ‘one true Christian’ and all others who were nothing of the kind – but he grasped what was put to him as a style of life and saw it for the canker it was to his own conception of authentic, powerful existence.

## 5. Implications/Conclusion

The proposal, then, for going back upstream in NT studies is rather simple: read for truth. Scholarship on the NT will probably not cease proliferating, but we can reclaim a seriousness in our study that matches the gravity of the texts that fund our inquiry.

Reading for truth obviously does not *eo ipso* entail an 'acceptance' of the claims of the NT, but it does require us to take the NT seriously as the possibility of 'God's question to us' – and, further, to dispense with self-deceptive interpretative grammars that claim to have no position on this question and try interminably to inhabit the distance Cavell saw between knowing and acknowledging.<sup>49</sup> Insofar as we understand what we read in the NT we already know that our humanity is implicated in the question it puts to us about its truth and the shape of the lives that follow our answers. Acknowledging this simply makes explicit what we already know hermeneutically from the texts we understand – and thereby makes available to critical scrutiny of a thick, existential kind exactly what it is that we claim to know.

If, in addition to the ancients, our conversation partners on the question of truth become for a time more like Kierkegaard and even Nietzsche – who knew enough about seriousness to realise that NT Christianity had to be rejected if not accepted – then that is all to the good. They, and those like them, are not doves with olive leaves, but they do know that when the NT claims to be true it means what it meant.

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<sup>49</sup> 'God's question to us' (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Supp. 1, 527).