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VOLUME 4

“BEHIND”  
THE TEXT:  
*History and Biblical Interpretation*

editors

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This volume well illustrates the Christian adage that faith pushes reason to achieve goals previously unsuspected but still proper to itself. The last few centuries have seen the development of an epistemology and an understanding of history that never leave the closed system thinking of both modernism and post-modernism. In biblical studies their child is the historical-critical method. The essays presented here respect the need and fruitfulness of a critical historiography while beginning the much-needed process of correcting the philosophical tenets that underlie much modern and post-modern biblical research. The result is a book that mediates a faith understanding, both theoretical and practical, of how to read the Bible authentically as a Christian today. I recommend it to both professors and students of theology and philosophy.

Fr. Francis Martin,  
Chair, Catholic-Jewish Theological Studies,  
John Paul II Cultural Center, Washington D.C.

This volume of excellent essays brings together eminent scholars from several disciplines, representing various theological positions, to focus on the subject of history and biblical interpretation. The book breaks new ground in its interdisciplinary examination of the methodology, the presuppositions, the practices, and the purposes of biblical hermeneutics, with a special emphasis on the relation of faith and history. It is requisite reading for anyone interested in the subject, from historical biblical critics and philosophical theologians to educated laity concerned to understand trends in the field.

Eleonore Stump,  
Robert J. Henle Professor of Philosophy,  
Saint Louis University, USA

Christian community that it be done. This is not to say, obviously, that Christian Scripture scholars should work only at this particular task. It is also important for Christian Scripture scholars to join the world of secular Scripture scholarship, pointing out inadequacies and biases, and perhaps showing how certain conclusions are the correct ones from the standpoints – Troeltschian, Duhemian, Spinozistic or whatever – adopted by secular Scripture scholars. That is also important, if only for apologetic reasons. But certainly a central task of the Christian community of Scripture scholarship is that of approaching and inquiring into the topics in question from a Christian epistemic base.

## 5

## Do You Want Us to Listen to You?

*Peter van Inwagen*

### Introduction

This essay was originally published in 1993. I re-publish it now, with a new title and a new introductory section.<sup>1</sup> I have two reasons for doing this. First, few people seem to have read it the first time round, and I'd like to give it another chance at attracting people's attention. Secondly, a significant proportion of the people who did read it seem to have misunderstood it. The new title and the new introductory section are intended to make its point clear.

Let me begin with the new title. The 'you' of the title refers to scholars professionally engaged in New Testament studies and, especially, to those among them who believe that very little of what is said about the words and actions of Jesus in the Gospels (and elsewhere in the New Testament) is true. (And, I should add, to those among them who do not regard this belief of theirs as simply a personal opinion, as something that reasonable and informed people could disagree about.)

The 'us' of the title refers to a class of people to which I and almost all other believing Christians belong: those who regard the New Testament as (in a sense I will try to make clear in the sequel) historically reliable and who are not trained New Testament scholars. ('Regards the New Testament as historically reliable' is not, as one might suppose it was, implied by 'believing Christian'. There are apparently Christian New Testament scholars and systematic

<sup>1</sup> This essay was originally published as 'Critical Studies of the New Testament and the User of the New Testament', in *Hermes and Athena*. It is reprinted in my *God, Knowledge, and Mystery*.

I have made a few small stylistic changes in the body of the essay and a few changes in the notes and have left it otherwise unchanged. It therefore says nothing about recent developments in NT scholarship. (From my perspective – the perspective of a 'user' of the NT – the most important recent development in NT scholarship is the vast amount of attention accorded the 'findings' of the 'Jesus Seminar' by the news media. I allude to the Jesus Seminar in note 11, but I do not discuss it.)

theologians who think the Gospels have little value as historical documents and who nevertheless recite the Nicene Creed with conviction every Sunday.)

This essay is addressed primarily to those of 'you' who are concerned about what 'we' think. In all probability, some of 'you' are *not* concerned about what 'we' think. It is entirely conceivable that a New Testament scholar should not care a fig for what people outside the academic field of New Testament studies think about the New Testament. But just as there are evolutionary biologists who care deeply about what non-scientists think about evolution, so there are New Testament scholars who care deeply about what 'the man on the Clapham omnibus' thinks about the New Testament. Among them are many of those scholars who deny that the Gospels have any value as historical documents. Some of them wish they had more influence in Clapham-omnibus circles. Van A. Harvey, for example, asks

Why is it that, in a culture so dominated by experts in every field, the opinion of New Testament historians has had so little influence?<sup>2</sup>

Skeptical New Testament historians who wish to be complacent about their lack of influence outside the academy will find all the materials they need for complacency in an obvious analogy of proportion: the skeptical New Testament historian is to Christians who ignore the 'findings of biblical scholarship' as the geologist (or palaeontologist or evolutionary biologist) is to 'fundamentalists' – Christians who believe that six thousand years ago God created the earth in six days.

A lot could be said about this analogy. I will not discuss it in any detail.<sup>3</sup> But there are facts that seem to me to imply that the analogy is very weak.

First, all geologists, palaeontologists and evolutionary biologists agree that the earth is not merely thousands but thousands of millions of years old. And they agree that there have been fish (say) for hundreds of millions of years and human beings, by any definition of 'human being', for at least a hundred thousand years. No such agreement about the past is to be found among biblical historians. If geologists and the practitioners of the various life sciences disagreed among themselves to the extent that New Testament historians do, we should not call them experts.

Secondly, agreement about the essential<sup>4</sup> historicity of the gospel stories is common to the apostolic fathers, the Fathers, the scholastics and the reformers.

<sup>2</sup> Harvey, 'New Testament Scholarship', 194.

<sup>3</sup> Much of what I would say about it can be inferred from my essay 'Genesis and Evolution', which is also reprinted in *God, Knowledge, and Mystery*.

<sup>4</sup> 'Mark ... wrote down accurately all that [Peter] mentioned, whether sayings or doings of Christ; *not however in order*'. (This is Eusebius' paraphrase of what Papias

It is therefore plausible to contend that the thesis that these stories are essentially historical is 'mere Christianity' – *pace* certain 'New Testament scholars and systematic theologians' to whom I alluded a moment ago. No such claim can be made on behalf of the thesis that the creation story in Genesis is the literal truth. (See, e.g., St Augustine's *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*. Augustine's speculations about the sequence of events comprising the creation may strike us as quaint, but it is no more consistent with literalism about the first two chapters of Genesis than is the modern, scientific account of the origin of the earth and of terrestrial life.<sup>5</sup>)

This chapter should be read as an answer to Harvey's question. That is, it should be regarded as a piece of information that skeptical New Testament scholars who want to convert the Christians on the Clapham omnibus to their views need to have in order to carry out this project. It should be read as advice on the best way for these scholars to present their case to Christians who are not professionally trained in New Testament studies. The essay takes the form of an argument for the following conclusions. First, 'ordinary' Christians (Christians not trained in New Testament scholarship) have grounds for believing that the gospel stories are (essentially) historical – grounds independent of the claims of historical scholarship. Secondly, New Testament scholars have established nothing that tells against the thesis that ordinary Christians have grounds independent of historical studies for believing in the essential historicity of the gospel stories. Thirdly, ordinary Christians may therefore ignore any skeptical historical claims made by New Testament scholars with a clear intellectual conscience.

One way to misunderstand this essay would be to regard it as an attempt to *prove* the conclusion that ordinary Christians may ignore the skeptical claims of New Testament scholars with a clear intellectual conscience. It is not an attempt at proof, however. It is no more than the presentation of an argument. Since this argument is logically valid (that is, since its conclusion follows logically from the five premises explicitly stated and labeled 'premises' in the essay), its conclusion – 'Ordinary Christians may therefore ignore any skeptical historical claims made by New Testament scholars with a clear intellectual conscience' – can be false only if at least one of the premises of the argument is false. To present a logically valid argument for a certain conclusion is not

said about Mark. See note 12 and the sentence in the text to which the note is appended.)

<sup>5</sup> I once met an atheist, a lapsed fundamentalist, who regarded the thesis that the earth was created in six days six thousand years ago as essential to Christianity. He maintained that any professed Christian who denied this thesis was a 'wishy-washy theological liberal', a Christian in name only. I asked him if he was willing to call St Augustine a wishy-washy theological liberal. 'Oh, certainly', he said.

necessarily to claim to prove or to have established that conclusion.<sup>6</sup> One *might* offer such an argument with that purpose in mind, but here is another purpose one might have in mind, and it is in fact the purpose I have in mind: to lay out the points at which those who deny the conclusion of the argument can attack the argument to some purpose – the points at which they can make *relevant* objections to the argument. The reason for this is simple: since the argument is logically valid, its conclusion must be true if its five premises are true. Therefore, no matter what ‘you’ say about the argument, what you say will not, as a matter of logic, have any tendency to show that the conclusion of the argument is false unless it has at least some tendency to show that at least one of its premises is false.

At the risk of belaboring the obvious, here is what I ask. What ‘you’ must do if you want ‘us’ to listen to you is to present some reason or reasons for thinking that at least one of the five premises of the argument is false.

### Critical Studies of the New Testament and the User of the New Testament

By *users* of the New Testament I mean: 1) ordinary churchgoers who read the New Testament and hear it read in church and hear it preached on; 2) the pastors who minister to the ordinary churchgoers; and 3) theologians who regard the New Testament as an authoritative divine revelation.

By *critical studies of the New Testament* (hereinafter, ‘critical studies’), I mean those historical studies that either deny the authority of the New Testament or else maintain a methodological neutrality on the question of its authority and which attempt, by methods that presuppose either a denial of, or neutrality about, its authority, to investigate such matters as the authorship, dates,

<sup>6</sup> The reader is asked to keep the above definition of ‘logically valid’ in mind. To call an argument logically valid in this technical sense is to make a rather weak claim on its behalf. The following (artificially simple) example illustrates this point. Every atheist who understands ‘logically valid’ will give his untroubled assent to the statement that the following argument is logically valid. The Bible is the word of God; if the Bible is the word of God, everything said in the Bible is true; therefore, everything said in the Bible is true. The atheist will, of course, reject the conclusion of this argument, but not on the ground that the argument contains some logical flaw (unlike the argument, ‘Everything said in the Bible is true; if the Bible is the word of God, everything said in the Bible is true; therefore, the Bible is the word of God’, which does contain a logical flaw). It is rather because the atheist *rejects its first premise* that he is in a position to reject its conclusion. An argument some of whose premises are false may well be logically valid. Indeed, an argument *all* of whose premises are *known to be false* may well be logically valid.

histories of composition, historical reliability and mutual dependency of the various books of the New Testament.<sup>7</sup> Source criticism, form criticism and redaction criticism provide many central examples of critical studies as I mean to use the term, but I do not mean to restrict its application to gospel studies. An author who contends that Paul did not write the Letter to the Ephesians or that 2 Peter was composed well into the second century is engaged in what I am calling critical studies. For that matter, so are authors who contend that Paul *did* write Ephesians, or who (like the late J.A.T. Robinson) contend that 2 Peter was probably composed in the early sixties of the first century – provided their arguments for those conclusions do not presuppose that the New Testament texts are authoritative or inspired.

I exclude from ‘critical studies’ all purely textual studies – studies that attempt to determine the original wording of the New Testament books by the comparative study of ancient manuscripts. Thus, the well-known arguments purporting to show that the last chapter of John was not a part of the original composition (arguments based mainly on a supposed discontinuity of sense in the text) belong to critical studies, while the well-known arguments purporting to show that the last twelve verses of Mark were not a part of the original composition (arguments based mainly on the fact that important early manuscripts do not contain those verses) do not belong to critical studies.

Again, a close study of a New Testament book or group of books or idea may not be an instance of what I am calling critical studies, for it may be that it does not raise questions of dates, authorship, historical reliability and so on, but, so to speak, takes the texts at face value. An example of such a study would be Oscar Cullmann’s famous Ingersol Lecture.<sup>8</sup> But it is unusual for a book or article or lecture about the New Testament to be a ‘pure’ example of the *genre* critical studies, and it is even more unusual for a book or article or lecture on the New Testament to contain no material belonging to that *genre*. Most recent works on the New Testament (to judge from the very small sample of them I have read) are mixtures of critical studies with many other things. My term ‘critical studies’ should therefore be regarded as a name for an aspect of New Testament scholarship, and not for something that is a subject or discipline in its own right.

It is taken for granted in many circles that pastors and theologians must know a great deal about critical studies if they are to be responsible members of their professions, and it has been said that even ordinary churchgoers should know a lot more about critical studies than they usually do. My purpose in this chapter is to present an argument against this evaluation of the importance of

<sup>7</sup> This is a purely stipulatory definition. My conclusions about ‘critical studies’ apply only to those studies that meet the strict terms of this definition.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Body?’.

critical studies to users of the New Testament. I present this argument first in the form of a schematic outline and then proceed to fill in the detail of the argument by commentary on, and defense of, the premises.

*Premise 1.* If a user of the New Testament has grounds for believing that the New Testament is historically and theologically reliable, grounds that are independent of critical studies, and if he has good reason to believe that critical studies do not undermine these grounds, then he need not attend further to critical studies – that is, once he has satisfied himself that critical studies do not undermine his reasons for believing in the historical and theological reliability of the New Testament, he need not attend further to critical studies.

### **Comment on Premise 1**

The famous Rylands Papyrus, a fragment of the Fourth Gospel, has been dated to around AD 130 on palaeographic grounds. Clearly the methods by which this date was arrived at are *independent of* radiocarbon dating. But if radiocarbon dating of the fragment assigned it to the fourth century, this result would *undermine* – if it were incontrovertible, it would refute – the palaeographic arguments for the second-century date. (The radiocarbon dating would not, of course, show where the palaeographic arguments went wrong, but, if it were correct, it would show that they went wrong somewhere.)

*Premise 2.* The liturgical, homiletic and pastoral use the church has made of the New Testament, and the church's attitude towards the proper use of the New Testament by theologians, presuppose that the New Testament is historically and theologically reliable.

*Premise 3.* These presuppositions of reliability do not depend on accidents of history, in the sense that if history had been different, the church might have held different presuppositions and yet have been recognizably the same institution. If the church's use of the New Testament had not presupposed the historical and theological reliability of the New Testament, the church would have been a radically different sort of institution – or perhaps *it* would not have existed at all; perhaps what was called 'the Christian church' or 'the Catholic Church' would have been a numerically distinct institution.

### **First Comment on Premise 3**

If the constitutional convention of 1787 had established a political entity called 'the United States of America' by uniting the thirteen former colonies under a hereditary monarchy and an established church, the United States would have been a radically different sort of political entity. Perhaps, indeed,

the nation called 'the United States' would not have been the nation that is called that in fact.

If the New Testament books had never been collected into a canon and portions of this canon read at Mass and as part of the divine office; if preachers had not been assigned the task of preaching on New Testament texts; if Christians had not generally believed that the New Testament narratives presented a reasonably accurate account of Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection, and of the beginnings of the church; if Christians had not believed that God speaks to us in the pages of the New Testament on particular occasions (as in the story of Augustine's conversion); if theologians had not generally believed that their speculations must be grounded in the spirit of, and subject to correction by the letter of, the New Testament – then the church would have been a radically different institution. We might in fact wonder whether an institution that regarded what we call the New Testament as nothing more than twenty-seven venerable but non-authoritative books would really be the institution referred to in the Nicene Creed as the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. I think we should have to say that if it *was* the same institution, it was that institution in a radically different form.

### **Second comment on Premise 3**

One might wonder why I am conducting my argument in terms of what the church has presupposed about the New Testament, rather than in terms of what the church has *taught* about the New Testament. The answer is that it is much clearer what the practice of the church presupposes about the New Testament than it is what the church has taught about the New Testament. The main reason for this is that the church's practice as regards the New Testament has been much more uniform than its teaching. I grant that there can be disputes about what a given practice presupposes, but I prefer dealing with disputes of that sort to dealing with the disputes that would attend any very specific attempt to define the church's teaching about the New Testament.

*Premise 4.* There are grounds, grounds independent of critical studies, for believing that whatever the church has presupposed is true – provided that presupposition is understood in the strong or 'essential' sense described above.

### **Comment on Premises 3 and 4**

There are things the church has pretty uniformly presupposed in certain periods that are false. I would say, for example, that Paul, and probably all first-century Christians, presupposed that Christians would never be able to do much to change the large-scale features of what they called the world and what



people today call 'society'. This was doubtless partly because they expected that the world was not going to last long enough to be changed by *anything*, but they seem also to have thought of Christians as necessarily held in contempt (if not actively persecuted) by those on whom the world has conferred power and prestige. Today we know that, for good or ill, it is possible for there to be a formally Christian society, and that even in a society not formally Christian, or formally anti-Christian, it is possible for Christians to exert significant influence on society as a whole.

No doubt there are false presuppositions that the church has held uniformly from the day of Pentecost to the present, though it is not for me, who do not claim to be a prophet, to say what they might be. The combined force of Premises 3 and 4 is this: Any such universally held but false presupposition of the church is not essential to the church's being what it is. And (the two premises imply) any presupposition of the church that is essential to the church's being what it is is true – or, more exactly, there are grounds for believing that it is true.

*Premise 5.* Critical studies do not undermine these grounds, and there are good reasons for believing that they do not – reasons whose discovery requires no immersion in the minutiae of critical studies, but which can be grasped by anyone who attends to the most obvious features of critical studies.

These five premises entail the following conclusion:

Once users of the New Testament have satisfied themselves that critical studies do not undermine their independent grounds for believing in the historical and theological reliability of the New Testament, they need not attend further to critical studies.

### *First Comment on the Argument*

I have already said that by critical studies I do not mean just any historical studies of or related to the New Testament. I have explicitly excluded from the category of critical studies purely textual studies and studies of aspects of the New Testament that, as I said, take the texts at face value. Many other historical studies related to the New Testament are obviously essential to pastors and theologians, and advisable for ordinary churchgoers who have the education and leisure to be able to profit from them.

Pastors and theologians should obviously know something about the history and geography of the ancient Mediterranean world. They should know something about who the Pharisees, Sadducees and Zealots were, what the legal status of the Sanhedrin was, what the powers and responsibilities of a procurator

were, what it meant to be a Roman citizen and how an appeal to the emperor worked. They should know something about the Jewish religion and the other religions of the Roman world. They should know something about second-century Gnosticism, and something about its probable first-century roots. They should know something about the social, agricultural and legal facts and customs of which knowledge is presupposed in the parables of Jesus. (I have found facts about fig trees to be enlightening.) All this is obvious, and a lot more that could be said in the same vein is obvious. I mention it only to show that I don't mean to deny the obvious.

It is also worth mentioning that there are historical studies that users of the New Testament need know little if anything about, but on which things they must know something about are based. (The painstaking comparisons of manuscripts by which our present New Testament texts have been established would be an example, but far from the only example, of what I mean.) It is my position not only that users of the New Testament need know little about critical studies, but also that nothing they need to know much about is so much as based upon critical studies.<sup>9</sup>

### *Second Comment on the Argument*

The conclusion of the argument applies to users of the New Testament *qua* users of the New Testament. Consider, for example, theologians. The conclusion is consistent with the thesis that *some* theologians, by virtue of the particular theological vineyard in which they labor, may need to be well versed in critical studies. For example, a theologian trying to reconstruct Luke's theology from clues provided by the way Luke used his sources would obviously need to have an expert's knowledge of critical studies. This qualification is strictly parallel with the following statement: A physicist *qua* physicist need

<sup>9</sup> Many studies of the NT presuppose the results, or the alleged results, of critical studies. The conclusion of our argument applies to such studies to the extent that these presuppositions are essential to them. Consider, for example, the following quotation from Professor Adams's 'Role of Miracles': '... Luke's Gospel was written in the 80s C.E., and arguably reflects the conflict between Christian and non-Christian Jews over who is to blame for the destruction of Jerusalem' (258). The thesis that Luke's Gospel was written in the eighties is an alleged result of critical studies. To the extent, therefore, that this thesis is essential to her paper – I do not claim that this extent is very great; it seems to me that most of what Professor Adams says in her paper could be true even if Luke's Gospel was, as I myself believe it to have been, written in the early sixties – the conclusion of our argument applies to her paper. Any study of Luke that is *wholly* dependent on the thesis that Luke was written well after the destruction of Jerusalem is, if our argument is sound, a study users of the NT may, if they wish, ignore with a clear intellectual conscience.

have scant knowledge of biology, but a *biophysicist* has to know a great deal about biology.

### *Third Comment on the Argument*

The conclusion of the argument is not that users of the New Testament must not or should not have an extensive acquaintance with critical studies, but that they need not. Biophysicists need to know a lot of biology, but it is not generally supposed that physicists working in the more abstract and general areas of physics need know much about biology. Erwin Schrödinger, however, set out to educate himself in biology because he thought that the observed stability of the gene was inexplicable in terms of known physics, and that the study of living systems therefore held important clues for the theoretical physicist. Well, he was wrong about the gene, but he was no fool, and the matter was certainly worth looking into. I want to say that something like that should be the case in respect of theology and critical studies: that critical studies are not, in general, particularly relevant to the theologian's task (except in the case in which the task is to reconstruct the theology of the writer of a New Testament book, or something of that sort); but a theologian may conclude at a certain point in his or her investigations that those investigations require a deep knowledge of critical studies. But this is no more than a special case of what I would suppose to be a wholly uncontroversial thesis: A theologian may conclude at a certain point in his or her investigations that those investigations require a deep knowledge of just about anything – physics, say, or formal logic or evolutionary biology. I am arguing that critical studies cannot be said *a priori* to be of any greater relevance to the concerns of the theologian (or the pastor or the ordinary churchgoer) than physics or formal logic or evolutionary biology.

### *Fourth Comment on the Argument*

Users of any very recent edition or translation of the Bible are going to be exposed to the judgements of those engaged in critical studies and the corresponding historical studies of the Old Testament. I mention the Old Testament because my favorite example of the way in which one can be exposed to such a judgement is Genesis 1:2. If one's translation says, 'and a mighty wind swept over the face of the waters', instead of, 'and the Spirit of God moved over the face of the waters', one may want to know what the arguments in favor of the former reading are. Or if in one's Bible the twenty-first chapter of John has some such heading as 'An Ancient Appendix', one may want to know what the arguments are upon which this editorial comment rests. No such example as these is individually of any very great importance, but a large number of such

translations and editorial comments may combine to produce an impression of the nature of the biblical texts – an impression that may be correct, but which certainly reflects views of editors and translators that are at least partly conditioned by critical studies. If one wants to make up one's own mind about the views that have shaped modern editions and translations of Scripture, one may have to devote more time to critical studies than the conclusion of my argument suggests – in self-defense, as it were. An analogy: in ideal circumstances, a student of Plato would not need to know much about nineteenth-century British idealism; but if the only available edition of Plato were Jowett, such knowledge would be prudent.

### *Fifth Comment on the Argument*

The argument refers to critical studies as they actually are. For example, the thesis of Premise 5, that critical studies do not undermine the user's grounds for believing in the historical and theological reliability of the New Testament (the grounds alleged to exist in Premise 4), does not imply that critical studies could not possibly undermine these grounds, but only that they have not in fact done so.

Even when the qualifications contained in these five comments have been taken into account, the argument is unlikely to win immediate and unanimous approval. The place of critical studies in theological education is more eloquent testimony to the strength of the convictions opposing the conclusion of the argument than any chorus of dissent could be. In the seminaries maintained by my own denomination, for example, seminarians spend more time reading works that fall in the area I am calling critical studies, or works which are deeply influenced by the supposed results of critical studies, than they do reading the Fathers of the church. I doubt whether things are much different in typical Roman Catholic and 'mainline' Protestant seminaries. And, no doubt, any suggestion that critical studies should have at most a marginal role in doctoral programs in theology would be greeted with the same sort of incredulity that would attend a suggestion of a marginal role for the study of anatomy in the training of physicians. As to the laity (as opposed both to the ordained clergy and the theologically learned), probably no small number of diocesan vicars of education, and their Protestant counterparts, would agree with the proposal of Ellen Fleese-man-van Leer that the Bible be taught to the laity, '... in such a way that the question of its authority is for the time being left to one side and that modern biblical scholarship is taken into account at every step'.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> From a sort of open letter written by Dr. Fleese-man-van Leer to the NT scholar Christopher Evans, 'Dear Christopher', in Hooker and Hickling (eds.), *What about the New Testament?*, 240.



The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to further clarification of some of the ideas contained in the argument, and to a defense of its premises. Unfortunately, I do not have the space to perform either of these tasks adequately. I must either touch on all the points that deserve consideration in a very sketchy way, or else be selective. I choose the latter course.

The ideas that figure in the argument that are most in need of clarification are the ideas of 'historical reliability' and 'theological reliability'. The premises most in need of defense are the fourth and the fifth.

Despite the fact that the idea of theological reliability is badly in need of clarification, I am not going to attempt to clarify it, because that would be too large a task. I could not even begin to explain what I mean by the words 'The New Testament is theologically reliable' in the one or two pages I could devote to the topic here. I shall, therefore, attempt to clarify only the idea of *historical* reliability. It is certainly true that the idea of historical reliability is more directly related to the topic of critical studies than is the idea of theological reliability. There are plenty of people who believe that critical studies have shown that the New Testament cannot be, in any sense that could reasonably be given to these words, theologically reliable. But the primary argument for this thesis would, surely, have to be that critical studies have shown that the New Testament is not theologically reliable *by* showing that it is not historically reliable. (After all, if we cannot believe the New Testament when it tells us of earthly things, how can we believe it when it tells us of heavenly things?)

But what thesis do I mean to express by the words 'The New Testament is historically reliable?' What is meant by historical reliability?

The concept of historical reliability, although it is much simpler than the concept of theological reliability, is sufficiently complex that I am going to have to impose two restrictions on my discussion of it. I hope that what I say within the scope of these restrictions will indicate to the reader what I would say about other aspects of the topic of historical reliability.

First, I am going to restrict my attention to the narrative passages of the New Testament: Passages written in the past tenses or the historical present, in which the author represents himself as narrating the course of past events (one typical sign of this being the frequent use of connecting and introductory phrases like 'in those days' and 'about that time'), passages in which what is presented is not represented as a dream or a vision, and in which the references to persons and places are in the main concrete and specific. Secondly, I am going to restrict my attention to descriptions of the words and actions of Jesus. I do this because there are certain stylistic and expository advantages to my focusing my discussion on a strictly delimited class of events, and this class of events has attracted more attention from those engaged in critical studies than any other strictly delimited class. I will attempt to explain what I mean by saying that the descriptions of the words and actions of Jesus in the narrative passages of the

New Testament are historically reliable. It should be kept in mind that in what immediately follows I am explaining what I mean by this thesis and not defending it. I give three explanations of historical reliability, which I believe are consistent and, in fact, mutually illuminating.

I begin with a formal explanation – roughly, an explanation in terms of how much of what is said in the texts is historically accurate – for obviously the notion of historical reliability must be closely related to the notion of historical accuracy. I mean by saying that the New Testament narratives are historically reliable (as regards the words and acts of Jesus) that (1) Jesus said and did at least most of the things ascribed to him in those narratives, and (2) any false statements the narratives may contain about what Jesus said and did will do no harm to those users of the New Testament who accept them as true because they occur in the New Testament. But clause (2) of this explanation is itself in need of an explanation.

I will explain the idea of 'doing no harm' by analogy. Suppose a general who is conducting a campaign in, say, Italy, is separated by some misadventure of battle from all his military maps and reference materials. Suppose he finds a pre-war guidebook to Italy with which he makes do. Suppose this guidebook is in some respects very accurate: its maps, tables of distances between towns, statements about the width of roads and so on, are all without error. On the other hand, it has wrong dates for lots of churches, contains much purely legendary material about Italian saints and has Garibaldi's mother's maiden name wrong. If the general, so to speak, treats the guidebook as gospel, and as a consequence believes all the legends and wrong dates and mistakenly concludes he is related to Garibaldi, it will probably do him no harm. At any rate, it will do him no military harm, and that kind of harm is the kind relevant in the present context. And if he later comes to believe that God providentially put the guidebook into his hands in his moment of greatest need, it is unlikely that he will be argued out of this belief by a skeptic who shows him that it contains a lot of misinformation about churches and saints and Italian patriots.

The false statements in our imaginary guidebook were militarily irrelevant. And it may be that there are false statements about the words and acts of Jesus in the New Testament that are irrelevant to the spiritual warfare. Let us examine this possibility.

Suppose Jesus never said, 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God'.<sup>11</sup> Suppose, however, that this is something he might very

<sup>11</sup> I learn from reports in the press that the seventh Beatitude has been established as inauthentic by the majority vote of a group of biblical scholars and will be so marked in the group's forthcoming edition of the NT, in which the words the evangelists ascribe to Jesus are to be printed in four colours, signifying 'certainly said', 'probably said', 'probably didn't say', and 'certainly didn't say'.

well have said. Suppose it in no way misrepresents his teaching, and is in fact an excellent expression of something he believed. If these things are so, it is hard to see how anyone would be worse off for believing he said these words. We may contrast this case with the following case: If the early church had twisted the story of the widow's mite into an injunction to the poor to give to the church, even to the point of starvation, the changed version of the story would have done grave harm to those who believed it.

My explanation of the notion of historical reliability, therefore, is consistent with the supposition that Jesus did not say all the things ascribed to him in the gospel narratives. But this statement naturally raises the question, 'how much?' Is it possible that these narratives ascribe to him *lots* of things he never said or did, all of them being nevertheless things he might well have said or done? I think there is no contradiction in the idea that the narratives are perfect guides to what Jesus might well have said and done, even though they are most imperfect guides to what, in point of historical fact, he did say and do. I do not, however, regard their having this feature as a real possibility. I believe that if very *many* of the ascriptions of words and acts to Jesus in the New Testament narratives are historically false, then it is very unlikely that any significant *proportion* of those ascriptions attribute to him things he might well have said or done. I shall presently touch on my reasons for believing this.

We can see a second kind of 'harmless' historical inaccuracy if we consider the order in which events are narrated. Suppose that, as most scholars apparently believe, the things Jesus is represented as saying in Matthew 5, 6, and 7 (the Sermon on the Mount), are things that – assuming Jesus said all of them – he did not say on any single occasion. But it has certainly never done anyone any harm to believe that he did – not, at least, if he did say them all, and said them in contexts that give them the same significance the 'Sermon on the Mount' narrative framework gives them. It is not an altogether implausible thesis that the order in which many of the sayings and acts of Jesus are recorded is of no great importance to anyone but New Testament scholars trying to work out the relations among the Synoptic Gospels. If Mark, as Eusebius said Papias said, '... wrote down accurately all that [Peter] mentioned, whether sayings or doings of Christ; not however in order',<sup>12</sup> and if a simple reader of Mark believes X happened before Y because that's what it says in Mark, when in fact Y happened before X, it's hard to see how this could have done the simple reader any harm.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Ecclesiastical History*, iii, 39 (as quoted in Bruce, *New Testament Documents*, 35).

<sup>13</sup> In correspondence, Harold W. Attridge has suggested that the various NT texts that have been used to justify persecution of the Jews pose a difficult problem for my thesis about historical reliability. In connection with this question, it is important to realize – I do not mean to imply that Professor Attridge is confused on this point –

This completes my formal explanation of what I mean by historical reliability. I now give a *functional* explanation of this notion.

As I have said, the church has made very extensive liturgical, homiletic and pastoral use of the New Testament, including the narrative portions thereof. These texts have been read to congregations and preached on for getting on toward a hundred thousand Sundays. My functional explanation of what is meant by the historical reliability of the New Testament narratives is this: the narratives are historically reliable if they are historically accurate to a degree consonant with the use the church has made of them. Again, the explanation needs to be explained. Let us consider a rather extreme suggestion. Suppose most of the New Testament stories about the sayings and actions of Jesus were made up in various communities of the early church in response to certain contemporary and local needs. (We suppose that when the evangelists eventually came to hear these stories, they took them for historical fact and incorporated them into their Gospels, adding, perhaps, various fictions of their own composition.) This suggestion is, I believe, *not* consonant with the use the church has made of the New Testament historical narratives. The church has caused these stories, these past-tense narratives bursting with concrete and specific historical reference, to be read, without any hint that they should not be taken at face value, to sixty generations of people the church knew full well *would* take them at face value. If these narratives were indeed largely a product of the imaginations of various people in the early church, then the church has, albeit unwittingly, been guilty of perpetrating a fraud. (We might compare the position of the church – if this suggestion is correct – with the position of the palaeoanthropological community in the thirties and forties in respect of

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that my thesis does not entail that these texts, or any texts, have done no harm; it entails only that, if any of these texts is not historical, no one has come to any harm by believing it was historical. Nevertheless, I am willing to defend the strong thesis that Mt. 27:25; Jn. 8:44; 1 Thes. 2:14; and Rev. 2:9 have done no harm. These texts have indeed been used as prooftexts by persecutors of the Jews, but it seems wholly obvious to me that only people who were already dead to both reason and the gospel could use them for such a purpose. As to the masses who may have been swayed by such texts – well, they must have been pretty easy to sway. ('There are in England this day a hundred thousand men ready to die in battle against Popery, without knowing whether Popery be a man or a horse.') I doubt whether the devil needs to quote Scripture to get people to murder Jews or any other harmless and inoffensive people. At any rate, it would take a strong argument to convince me that any NT text has been anything more than a sort of theological ornament tacked on the racks and gas chambers, like a cross on a crusader's shield. The only harm involving these texts I'm willing to concede is this: to attempt to use Scripture to justify murder and oppression is blasphemy, and those who have done this may have been damned for six reasons rather than five.

Piltown Man. The comparison is not an idle one: it would be hard to find a better case of a fraud that was accepted because it met the needs created by the *Sitz im Leben* of a community.)

What, then, is the degree of historical accuracy that is required of the New Testament narratives (as regards the words and actions of Jesus) if they are to satisfy the present functional characterization of historical reliability? Not surprisingly, I would identify it with the degree of accuracy that figured in our formal explanation of historical reliability. Last Sunday,<sup>14</sup> for example, many churchgoers heard a reading from the gospel according to John that began, 'There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, ... this man came to Jesus by night ...' The degree of historical accuracy exhibited by this passage is consonant with the use the church has made of it only if: (1) there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus who came to Jesus by night and had a certain conversation with him about being born again; or (2) the passage falls short of historical accuracy in ways that will do no harm to those who hear it read and accept it as a historically accurate narrative. As to the latter possibility – well, perhaps it isn't very important whether Jesus said those things to *Nicodemus*. Perhaps (despite Jesus' characteristic depreciation of the knowledge of 'the teachers of Israel') the passage has its historical roots in a conversation Jesus had with some wholly unimportant person, although he might well have said the same things to a distinguished Pharisee if the occasion had arisen. Perhaps the passage is woven together from things Jesus said on several different occasions, or perhaps it records a set speech he delivered many times with only minor variations. Perhaps the 'voice' Jesus is represented as using is to some degree a literary device of the Fourth Evangelist, or displays a way of speaking Jesus sometimes used in the presence of a few people like the Apostle John, but rarely if ever used in conversations with strangers. All this, and a great deal more in the same line, would be consonant with the church's use of John 3:1–17. If historical inaccuracies of all these kinds were present in that passage, and if someone heard or read the story and took it as unadorned historical fact, it would be a hard critic of the church indeed who accused her of deceiving that person.<sup>15</sup> If, on the other hand, Jesus never talked about being 'born again' at all, the charge of ecclesiastical deception would have considerable merit.

<sup>14</sup> That is, the Sunday preceding the conference at the University of Notre Dame, the proceedings of which are printed in Stump and Flint, *Hermes and Athena* (the second Sunday in Lent, 1990).

<sup>15</sup> I am myself inclined to take this passage as at least very close to unadorned historical fact. (This is, of course, merely one of my opinions – like my opinion that Anglican orders are valid – and not a part of my Christian faith.) If, on another shore, in a greater light, it should transpire that this opinion of mine had been incorrect, I should not regard the church as having deceived me.

The third explanation I shall give of the notion of historical reliability is *ontological*, an explanation that proceeds by describing the basis in reality of the fact (supposing it to be a fact) that the New Testament narratives possess the degree of historical accuracy I have characterized formally and functionally. In giving this explanation, I adapt to the New Testament narratives what I have said elsewhere about a very different part of the Bible, the creation narrative in Genesis.<sup>16</sup> What I said there had to do with the work of the Holy Spirit in the transformation of myth. What I say here pertains to the work of the Holy Spirit in the preservation of tradition.

It was natural for primitive Christian communities to tell stories about what Jesus had said and done. (I continue to restrict my discussion to this class of events. But what I shall say is applicable with no important modification to those parts of the gospel narratives about people other than Jesus, and to the Acts of the Apostles.) Every reporter, lawyer and historian knows that the stories people tell about past events are not always entirely consistent with one another – and therefore not entirely true. Intelligent, observant and wholly disinterested witnesses to a traffic accident will shortly afterwards give wildly different descriptions of the accident. The four ancient writers who provide our primary documentation of the life of Tiberius Caesar give accounts of his reign at least as hard to 'harmonize' as the four Gospels.<sup>17</sup>

Now let us assume that God was interested in Christians having an account of the things Jesus said and did during the years of his public ministry – an account conforming to the standard of 'historical reliability' described above. Let us in fact assume that he was sufficiently interested in there being such an account that he was willing to take some positive action to ensure its existence. (But let us put to one side the question of why God would have this interest.) Given the facts about the unreliability of witnesses briefly touched on in the last paragraph, and the many mischances a piece of information is subject to in the course of its oral transmission, what might God do to insure the existence of such an accurate account?

I suppose no one seriously thinks God might have chosen to achieve this end by dictating narratives of Jesus' ministry, Greek word by Greek word, to some terrified or ecstatic scribe. (People are often accused of believing that God did this, but I have never seen a case of anyone who admits to it.) Though I firmly believe in miracles, I do not believe – I expect no one believes – that God's governance of the world is entirely, or even largely, a matter of signs, wonders and powers. God created the natural processes whose activity constitutes the world. They are all expressions of his being, and he is continuously present in them. The natural process of story formation and transmission

<sup>16</sup> In 'Genesis and Evolution'.

<sup>17</sup> See Sherwin-White, *Roman Society*, 187–89.

among human beings is as much an expression of God's being as is any other natural process, and there is no reason to suppose that he would choose, or need, to circumvent this process to insure the historical reliability of the New Testament narratives. Nevertheless, I believe that his presence in the formation of the New Testament – and, more generally, scriptural – narratives was different from his presence in the formation of all other narratives, just as his presence in the formation of Israel and the church was different from his presence in the formation of all other nations and institutions.

I suppose that the New Testament writers and their communities were chosen by God and were rather special people. I suppose that if, say, St. Luke was told one of the bizarre stories about Jesus' boyhood that survive in the apocryphal infancy gospels, the Holy Spirit took care that his critical faculties – and, indeed, his sense of humor – were not asleep at the time. I suppose that if an elder of the Christian community at Ephesus in AD 64 was tempted by want of funds to twist the story of the widow's mite into an injunction to the poor to buy their way into the kingdom of God, the Holy Spirit saw to it that his conscience was pricked, or that no one believed his version of the story, or that the changed story never got out of Ephesus and soon died out. I suppose that the Holy Spirit was engaged in work like this on many occasions in many places during the formation of the New Testament books. I suppose that the Holy Spirit was at work in the church in similar modes during the process of canonization and during the formation of the opinion that the canonical books were the inspired word of God. I suppose that (although no good book is written apart from the work of the Holy Spirit) the Holy Spirit is present in just *this* way only in the formation of Holy Scripture, and that this mode of presence is part of what we mean by inspiration. (I say 'part of' because we are touching here only on the narrative aspect of Scripture.)

If I am right, God has guided the formation of the New Testament historical narratives by acting on the memories and consciences and critical faculties of those involved in their formation. His employment of this 'method' is certainly consistent with there being historically false statements in the New Testament. A false saying of Jesus might have arisen and gained currency without dishonesty or conscious fabrication on anyone's part. (No doubt many did.) And if it were in his 'voice', and if its content were consistent with his teaching, then it would not be of a sort to be 'filtered out' by the critical faculties of those who transmitted and recorded it, however perfect the operation of those faculties might be. The inclusion in the New Testament of such a false saying would, as I have said, do no one any harm, for it would by definition be consistent with his teaching. (There are many other, if less important, ways in which historically false but harmless ascriptions of words to Jesus might arise: for example, the attribution to him of an apposite quotation of a well-known proverb in a situation in which he said something less memorable; the substitution of one

arbitrary place name for another in a parable and so on.) But if this method is consistent with there being some inauthentic sayings of Jesus in the New Testament (the same point, of course, applies to actions), it does not seem to allow any real possibility of a very high proportion of inauthentic sayings. One's critical faculties need something to work on: one cannot judge that an alleged saying of Jesus is not the sort of thing he would have said unless one has at one's disposal a large body of sayings characteristic of Jesus. And the only real possibility of having at one's disposal a large body of sayings characteristic of Jesus is this: having at one's disposal a large body of actual sayings of Jesus.

If the Holy Spirit has indeed been at work in the formation of the New Testament narratives in the way I have described, what would the results be? I think we could expect two results. First, we could expect the narratives to be historically reliable in the formal sense. Secondly, I think we could expect them to look pretty much the way they do – or at least we can say that the way they look is consistent with their formation having been guided by the Holy Spirit in the way I have described. In one sense, the New Testament narratives are far from coherent. That is, while 'harmonization' of the narratives is no doubt logically possible, any attempt at harmonization is going to look rather contrived. (The same could be said of the Tiberius sources.) But these incoherencies are of little consequence to the people I have called users of the New Testament, however important they may be to those engaged in critical studies. Let us grant for the sake of argument – I am in fact very doubtful about this – that it is impossible to reconcile Jesus' representation of himself in John with his representation of himself in, say, Mark. How Jesus represented himself to his audiences and to the authorities and to his disciples at various points in his ministry is no doubt of great interest to certain scholars, but what has it got to do with the Christian life, or with Christian ministry, or even with Christian theology? Or does this incoherency (supposing always that it exists) show that the Holy Spirit cannot have guided the formation of the New Testament narratives in the way I have supposed? How, exactly, would an argument for this conclusion go?

This completes my tripartite explanation of the meaning of 'historically reliable'. I now turn to my promised defense of Premises 4 and 5. This was Premise 4:

There are grounds, grounds independent of critical studies, for believing that whatever the church has presupposed is true.

I am a convert.<sup>18</sup> For the first forty years of my life I was outside the church. For much of my life, what I believed about the church was a mixture of fact and

<sup>18</sup> The ideas contained in the defense of Premise 4 that follows in the text are presented in a very sketchy and, I now think, not entirely satisfactory way. Soon after writing



hostile invention, some of it asinine and some of it quite clever. Eventually, I entered the church – an act that involved assenting to certain propositions. I believe that I had, and still have, good reasons for assenting to those propositions, although I am not sure what those reasons are. Does that sound odd? It should not. I mean this. I am inclined to think that my reasons for assenting to those propositions could be written down in a few pages – that I could actually do this. But I know that if I did, there would be many non-Christians, people just as intelligent as I am, who would be willing to accept without reservation everything I had written down, and who would yet remain what they had been: untroubled agnostics, aggressive atheists, pious Muslims or whatever. And there are many who would say that this shows that what I had written down could not really constitute good reasons for assenting to those propositions. If it did (so the objection would run), reading what I had written on those pages would convert intelligent agnostics, atheists and Muslims to Christianity – or would at least force them into a state of doublethink or intellectual crisis or cognitive dissonance. Perhaps that's right. If it is, then among my reasons there must be some that can't be communicated – or I lack the skill to communicate them – like my reasons for believing that Jane is angry: something about the corners of her mouth and the pitch of her voice, which I can't put into words.

Philosophers are coming to realize that the fact that one cannot articulate a set of reasons that support one's assent to a certain proposition, reasons felt as having great power to compel assent to that proposition by everyone who grasps them, does not mean one does not have good reasons for assenting to that proposition. And they are coming to realize that being in this sort of epistemic situation is not the peculiar affliction of the religious believer. Let me give an example of this – a rather less abstract example than most of the examples philosophers use to illustrate points in epistemology. When I was a graduate student, in the Vietnam era, it was widely believed among my friends and acquaintances that there was something called 'the socialist world', which was soon (within ten or fifteen years) to extend over the entire surface of the globe through the agency of something called 'the Revolution'. Now I believed at the time that all this was sheer illusion. In fact, I didn't just believe it was sheer illusion, I *knew* it was sheer illusion. Nevertheless, although I knew this, if you had asked me why I thought it was an illusion, I could not have cited anything that was not well known to, and which would not have been cheerfully conceded by, any reasonably alert campus Maoist: that such-and-such a story had appeared in the *New York Times*, that George Orwell had once said this, or that Leopold Tyman was currently saying that.

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'Critical Studies', I gave what I believe is a more satisfactory presentation of those ideas (it is certainly a longer presentation) in 'Quam Dilecta', see esp. 41–59.

A second illustration of this philosophical point is provided by philosophy itself. A philosopher I deeply respect once told me that he could not accept any religion because there were many religions and they disagreed about important matters. I pointed out to him that he himself accepted many philosophical positions that other, equally able, philosophers rejected – philosophers who knew all the arguments *he* knew. (He resisted the parallel, but on grounds that are still opaque to me.) And his situation is not unique. Every philosopher, or so it seems to me, accepts at least some philosophical theses that are rejected by some equally able and equally well-informed philosopher. But I am not willing to say that no philosopher knows anything philosophical.

Such examples can be multiplied indefinitely. What do you think of psychoanalysis, the theory of evolution by natural selection or the Documentary Hypothesis? Someone as intelligent and as knowledgeable as you are rejects your position. Are you willing to say that this shows you lack reasons that support your opinions on these matters? If so, why do you continue to hold them? (Why, in fact, did you hold them in the first place, since you were perfectly well aware of the disagreements I have alluded to?) If not, then it would seem to follow that you should agree that it is possible for one to have reasons that support a belief, even if one is unable to give an account of those reasons that has the power to compel belief in others.

In my view, I have such reasons with respect to the propositions assent to which is essential to membership in the church – although, as is typical in such cases, many will dispute this claim. One of these propositions is the proposition that Jesus Christ (who, in addition to being the Way and the Life, is also the Truth) is the head and cornerstone of the church. I cannot reconcile assent to this proposition with assent to the proposition that falsehoods are presupposed in the essential operations of the church. I have contended that the historical reliability of the New Testament is presupposed in the essential operations of the church. I therefore claim to have good reasons for regarding the New Testament as historically reliable: they are my reasons for accepting the whole set of propositions essential to membership in the church. And those reasons are independent of the findings of critical studies.

Or so I say. But are they really, *can* they really be, independent of the findings of critical studies? Some would perhaps argue as follows. Among the propositions essential to Christianity are certain historical propositions – for example, that Jesus was at one time dead and was later alive. Therefore (the argument proceeds), if the believer has reasons for accepting the propositions essential to Christianity, reasons that actually warrant assent to those propositions, they must be partly historical reasons, reasons of the kind historians recognize as supporting a thesis about the past. (And it is in critical studies that we see the methods of objective historical inquiry applied to the task of sifting historical fact from myth, legend and fancy in the New Testament narratives.) I have said

'some would perhaps argue ...'; I concede, however, that the only people I can remember actually arguing this way are avowed enemies of Christianity like Antony Flew. And they of course believe that it is impossible to demonstrate, on historical grounds, certain of the historical propositions essential to Christianity. While I would agree with them that it is impossible to demonstrate on historical grounds that, for example, Jesus was at one time dead and was later alive, I see no merit in the thesis that the only grounds that could warrant assent to that proposition are grounds of the kinds historians recognize. If I have, as I believe I have, good grounds for accepting what the church teaches, and if the church teaches certain things about the past, and if some of those things cannot be established by the methods recognized by historians, why should I cut myself off from those truths about the past by believing only those statements about the past that are endorsed by the methods recognized by historians?

I think it is worth noting that, whether the thesis that propositions about the past should be accepted only if they can be established by the methods recognized by historians is true or false, it is certainly incompatible with Christianity. A more careful statement of the thesis would be this: a proposition about the past should be accepted *by a given person* only if *that person knows* (or at least *has good reason to believe*) that it can be established by the methods employed by historians. Now it is obvious that many of the historical propositions essential to Christianity are rejected by large numbers of historians. I don't know whether it is possible for there to be a historical proposition that is (1) rejected by large numbers of historians, and (2) such that some people know, or have good reason to believe, that its truth can be established by the methods recognized by historians. But if this is possible, it can hardly be doubted that only a very well-educated person could know, with respect to a proposition rejected by large numbers of historians, that its truth could be established by the methods recognized by historians. It follows that some of the propositions essential to Christianity have the following feature: only a very well-educated person – if anyone – should accept them. This conclusion is, of course, radically inconsistent with the gospel. It is, in fact, very close to Gnosticism, for it entails that a form of knowledge accessible only to an elite is necessary for salvation.

I conclude that I do have grounds for accepting the historical reliability of the New Testament – grounds independent of critical studies.

As we have seen, however, it is still possible that my grounds may be *undermined* by critical studies. Let us therefore see what can be said in defense of Premise 5:

Critical studies do not undermine these grounds, and there are good reasons for believing that they do not – reasons whose discovery requires no immersion in the minutiae of critical studies, but which can be grasped by anyone who attends to the most obvious features of critical studies.

That discoveries by those engaged in critical studies have undermined whatever grounds anyone may ever have had for accepting the historical reliability of the New Testament is not an unknown opinion. The late Norman Perrin, for example, says:

In revealing the extent to which the theological viewpoint of the evangelist or transmitter of the tradition has played a part in the formation of the Gospel material, [redaction criticism] is forcing us to recognize that a Gospel does not portray the history of the ministry of Jesus from AD 27–30, or whatever the dates may actually have been, but the history of Christian experience in any and every age. At the same time this history of Christian experience is cast in the form of a chronicle of the ministry of Jesus, and some parts of it – whether large or small is irrelevant at this point – are actually based on reminiscence of that ministry. The Gospel of Mark is the prototype which the others follow and it is a mixture of historical reminiscence, interpreted tradition, and the free creativity of prophets and the evangelist. It is, in other words, a strange mixture of history, legend, and myth. It is this fact which redaction criticism makes unmistakably clear ...<sup>19</sup>

It is obviously a consequence of the point of view expressed in this quotation that whatever grounds I may have for believing in the historical reliability of the New Testament have been undermined by critical studies – just as F.C. Baur's grounds for believing that the Fourth Gospel was a product of the late second century (whatever they may have been) have been undermined by the discovery of the Rylands Papyrus.

How shall I, who possess none of the tools of the New Testament critic, decide whether this evaluation (or other less extreme but still highly skeptical evaluations) of the historical reliability of the New Testament are to be believed? Someone might well ask why reasoning parallel to my earlier reasoning does not show that I need not raise this question. Why not argue that if one needed to decide whether the findings of critical studies undermined one's grounds for believing in the historical reliability of the New Testament before accepting the historical reliability of the New Testament, this would entail the false conclusion that only highly educated people – if anyone – could accept the historical reliability of the New Testament? The answer is that there are good reasons for thinking that critical studies do not cast any doubt on the historical reliability of the New Testament, and that one does not have to be a highly educated person to understand these reasons.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Perrin, *Redaction Criticism*, 75.

<sup>20</sup> At any rate, one does not have to have the tools of a trained NT scholar at one's disposal. It is certainly true that the reasons I shall give for believing that critical studies do not cast any doubt on the historical reliability of the NT could be understood only by someone who had enjoyed educational opportunities that have not



This is not surprising. In general, it is much harder to find reasonable grounds for deciding whether a certain proposition is true than it is to find reasonable grounds for deciding whether so-and-so's arguments for the truth (or for the falsity) of that proposition are cogent. If the proposition under consideration is one whose subject matter is the 'property' of some special field of study (like 'The continents are in motion' and unlike 'Mario Cuomo is the governor of New York'), and if the 'reasonable grounds' are those that can properly be appealed to by specialists in that field of study, then it is almost certain that only those specialists can find reasonable grounds for deciding whether it is true. (I suppose it is reasonable for me to believe that the continents are in motion on the basis of the fact that all the geology textbooks say they are. But this is not the sort of fact *geologists* can properly appeal to when they are asked to explain why they believe that the continents are in motion.) But if the 'reasonable grounds' are ones it is appropriate for the laity to appeal to, then it is almost always possible for the laity to find reasonable grounds for deciding whether the arguments employed by some group of specialists are cogent.

Suppose, for example, that the director of the Six Mile Island Nuclear Facility delivers to Governor Cuomo a long, highly technical case for the conclusion that the facility's reactor could never possibly present a radiation hazard. The governor, of course, doesn't understand a word of it. So he selects ten professors of nuclear engineering at what he recognizes as leading universities to evaluate the case with which he has been presented. Eight of the professors say that the reasoning on which the case is based is pretty shaky, one says it's abominable, and one – who turns out to be married to the director of Six Mile Island – says it's irrefutable. It seems to me that the governor has found reasonable grounds on which to decide whether the director's arguments in support of the proposition *Six Mile Island is safe* are cogent. And this is true despite the fact that he is absolutely unable to judge the case 'on its merits' – that is, unable to judge it using the criteria employed by nuclear engineers.

It is not impossible, therefore, that it turn out to be a comparatively easy matter for me to decide whether the findings of critical studies undermine my grounds for believing in the historical reliability of the New Testament. I say this in full knowledge of the fact that the field of New Testament scholarship is as opaque to me as nuclear engineering is (I suppose) to Governor Cuomo. I am aware that an academic field is an enormously complex thing, and that it takes years of formal study and independent research to be in a position to find one's way about in one of them. (Independent research in a field is absolutely essential for understanding it. This fact leads me to take with a grain of salt what

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been available to everyone to whom the gospel has been preached. I would say, however, that these reasons could be understood by anyone who could understand the passage I have quoted from Perrin's book.

some of my fellow philosophers who have had some seminary or university training in New Testament studies tell me about the field. I think of new Ph.D.s in philosophy from Berkeley or Harvard or Pittsburgh, whose mental maps of academic philosophy are like the famous Steinberg *New Yorker* cover – the world as two-thirds midtown Manhattan – the philosophical world as two-thirds Berkeley or two-thirds Harvard or two-thirds Pittsburgh.)

Nevertheless, some facts about New Testament studies are accessible even to me. One of them is that many specialists in the field think – in fact, hold it to have been demonstrated – that the New Testament narratives are, in large part, narratives of events that never happened. I have quoted Perrin to this effect. On the other hand, one can easily find respectable workers in the field who take precisely the opposite view. In this camp I would place F.F. Bruce, John Drane and (to my astonishment, given *Honest to God*) John A.T. Robinson. Could it be that these people are *not* respectable? Well, their paper or '*Who's Who*' qualifications are excellent, and how else shall I judge them? That, after all, was how I judged Perrin: if he had not had impressive paper qualifications, I should have picked someone else to quote.

How can one expert in a field say what I have quoted Perrin as saying, when two other experts – as nearly simultaneously as makes no matter – write books called *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*<sup>21</sup> and *Can We Trust the New Testament?*<sup>22</sup> and answer their title questions 'yes'? (Drane's *Introducing the New Testament*<sup>23</sup> is, if anything, more trusting of the New Testament than the writings of Bruce and Robinson are.) A philosopher, at any rate, will not be at a loss for a possible answer to this question. A philosopher will suspect that such radical disagreement means that New Testament scholarship is a lot like philosophy. Either there is little *knowledge* available in the field, or, if there is, a significant proportion of the experts in the field perversely resist acquiring it.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Bruce, *New Testament Documents*. Bruce was Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis in the University of Manchester.

<sup>22</sup> Robinson, *Can We Trust?* Robinson was the Bishop of Woolwich and the Dean of Trinity College, Cambridge.

<sup>23</sup> Drane is Senior Lecturer in the School of Divinity and Religious Studies at Aberdeen.

<sup>24</sup> In the case of philosophy, my own view is that, while certain people know certain philosophical propositions to be true, it would be very misleading to say that philosophy, the academic subject, has any knowledge to offer. I consider cases of philosophical knowledge – a particular person's knowledge that human beings have free will, say – to be something on the order of individual attainments. A philosopher who knows that human beings have free will is not able to pass the grounds of his or her knowledge on to other persons in the reliable way in which a geologist who knows that the continents are in motion is able to pass the grounds of his or her knowledge on to other persons.

Is New Testament scholarship a source of knowledge? Or, more exactly, is what I have been calling critical studies a source of knowledge? Well, of course, the *data* of critical studies constitute knowledge: we know, thanks to the labors of those engaged in critical studies, that about ninety per cent of Mark appears in closely parallel form in Matthew, and that the phrase *en tois epouraniois* appears several times in Ephesians but in none of the other letters that purport to be by Paul, and many things of a like nature. But such facts are only as interesting as the conclusions that can be drawn from them. Do any of the conclusions that have been reached on the basis of these data constitute knowledge? Or, if you don't like the word *knowledge*, can any of these conclusions be described, in Perrin's words, as a 'fact' that critical studies 'make unmistakably clear'? (We know, thanks to the geologists, that the continents are in motion. This is a fact, which their investigations make unmistakably clear. Is there any thesis that we know in this sense that we can credit to the practitioners of critical studies?) I suppose that if any of the conclusions of critical studies is known to be true, or even known to be highly probable, it is this: Mark's Gospel was composed before Luke's or Matthew's, and both Luke and Matthew used Mark as a source. But this thesis, while it is almost universally accepted (at least everyone I have read says it is), has periodically been controverted by competent scholars, most recently by C.S. Mann in his commentary on Mark.<sup>25</sup> One might well wonder whether this thesis is indeed known to be true. If it is, how can it be that Mann, who is perfectly familiar with all of the arguments, denies it? If it is unmistakably clear, why isn't it unmistakably clear to *him*? And if the *priority* of Mark has not been made unmistakably clear, can it really be plausible to suppose that the much more controversial thesis that Mark is 'a strange mixture of history, legend, and myth' has been made unmistakably clear?

My suspicion that critical studies have made nothing of any great importance unmistakably clear, or even very clear at all, is reinforced when I examine the methods of some of the acknowledged experts in that field. Here I will mention only the methods of Perrin and his fellow redaction critics, for it is they and their predecessors, the form critics, who are the source of the most widely accepted arguments for the conclusion that the New Testament is historically unreliable. If someone supposes that critical studies undermine my supposed grounds for believing in the historical reliability of the New Testament, he will most likely refer me to the redaction critics for my refutation. (No doubt there are highly skeptical New Testament critics who reject the methods of redaction criticism. I can only say that I am very ignorant and do not know about them. I suppose them to exist only because it has been

<sup>25</sup> Mann, *Mark*.

my experience that, in the world of scholarship, every possible position is occupied. I shall have to cross their bridge when I come to it.)

I have few of the skills and little of the knowledge New Testament criticism requires. I know only enough Greek to be able on a given day to work my way painfully through one or two sentences that interest me on that day, using an interlinear crib, a dictionary and the paradigms at the back of the grammar book. I have more than once wasted time looking for a famous passage of Paul's in the wrong letter. But I do know something about reasoning, and I have been simply amazed by some of the arguments employed by redaction critics. My first reaction to these arguments, written up a bit, could be put in these words: 'I'm missing something here. These *appear* to be glaringly invalid arguments, employing methods transparently engineered to produce negative judgements of authenticity. But no one, however badly he might want to produce a given set of conclusions, would "cook" his methods to produce the desired results quite so transparently. These arguments must depend on tacit premises, premises the redaction critics regard as so obvious they don't bother to mention them.' But this now seems to me to have been the wrong reaction, for when I turn to commentaries on the methods of the redaction critics by New Testament scholars, I often find more or less my own criticisms of them – although, naturally enough, unmixed with my naïve incredulity.

I could cite more than one such commentary. The one I like best is an article by Morna Hooker,<sup>26</sup> and it articulates perfectly the criticisms I would have made of the methods of redaction criticism if I had been as knowledgeable as she and had not been hamstrung by my outsider's fear that there had to be something I was missing. If the author is right, I have certainly not missed anything: All the premises of the redaction critics are right out in the open. If she is wrong – well, how can *I*, an outsider, be expected to pay any attention to redaction criticism? If its methods are so unclear that a future Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity couldn't find out what they were, what hope is there for me? I might add that Professor Hooker's witness is especially impressive to an outsider like me because she does not criticize the methods of the redaction critics in order to advance the case of a rival method of her own; rather, their methods are the very methods she herself accepts. She differs from a committed and confident redaction critic like Perrin mainly in her belief that these methods can't establish very much – perhaps that certain logia are a bit more likely on historical grounds to be authentic than certain others – and she adheres to these methods only because (in her view) these methods are the only methods there are. (But if she accepts Perrin's methods, she would appear to dissent from one of his premises: that, owing to the pervasive influence in the

<sup>26</sup> 'On Using the Wrong Tool'.

formation of the Gospels of the theological viewpoints of the transmitters and evangelists, the gospel narratives are intrinsically so unreliable as historical sources that, in the absence of a very strong argument for the authenticity of a given saying, one should conclude that that saying is not authentic. If I understand Hooker, however, she would say in such a case that nothing can be said about its authenticity; she would conclude that a saying was inauthentic only if there were good arguments – arguments relating to the content and gospel setting of the particular saying – for its inauthenticity.)

I conclude that there is no reason for me to think that critical studies have established that the New Testament narratives are historically unreliable. In fact, there is no reason for me to think that they have established *any* important thesis about the New Testament. I might, of course change my mind if I knew more. But how much time shall I devote to coming to know more? My own theological writings, insofar as they draw on contemporary knowledge, draw on formal logic, cosmology and evolutionary biology. I need to know a great deal more about these subjects than I do. How much time shall I take away from my study of them to devote to New Testament studies (as opposed to the study of the New Testament)? The answer seems to me to be: very little. I would suggest that various seminaries and divinity schools might consider devoting a portion of their curricula to these subjects (not to mention the systematic study of the Fathers!), even if this had to be done at the expense of some of the time currently devoted to critical studies.

Let me close by considering a *tu quoque*. Is not philosophy open to many of the charges I have brought against critical studies? Is not philosophy argument without end? Is not what philosophers agree about just precisely nothing? Are not the methods and arguments of many philosophers (especially those who reach extreme conclusions) so bad that an outsider encountering them for the first time might well charitably conclude that he must be missing something? Must one not devote years of systematic study to philosophy before one is competent to think philosophically about whether we have free will or whether there is an objective morality or whether knowledge is possible? And yet, is one not entitled to believe in free will and knowledge and morality even if one has never read a single page of philosophy?

*Ego quoque*. If you are not a philosopher, you would be crazy to go to the philosophers to find anything out – other than what it is the philosophers say. If a philosopher tells you that you must, on methodological grounds, since he is the expert, take his word for something – that there is free will, say, or that morality is only convention – you should tell him that philosophy has not earned the right to make such demands. Philosophy is, I think, valuable. It is a good thing for the study of philosophy to be pursued, both by experts and by amateurs. But if it is a good thing for a certain field of study to be pursued by experts, it does not follow that that field of study comprises experts who can tell

you things you need to attend to before you can practice a religion or join a political party or become a conscientious objector. And if it is a good thing for a certain field of study to be pursued by amateurs, it does not follow that anyone is under an obligation to *become* an amateur in that field.

This is very close to some of the depreciatory statements I have made about the authority of critical studies. Since I regard philosophy as a ‘Good Thing’, it should be clear that I do not suppose my arguments lend any support to the conclusion that the critical study of the New Testament is not a ‘Good Thing’. Whether it is, I have no idea. I don’t know enough about it to know whether it is. I have said only this: the very little I do know about critical studies is sufficient to establish that users of the New Testament need not – but I have said nothing against their doing so – attend very carefully to it.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> I am grateful to Ronald Feenstra for his generous and careful comments on this essay in *Hermes and Athena*. The fact that I do not take this opportunity – the opportunity afforded by the re-publication of the essay – to discuss Professor Feenstra’s criticisms of my argument does not mean that I think they are without merit. It rather reflects my judgement that even if all his criticisms were valid, this would not affect the argument in any essential way. I am also grateful to Harold W. Attridge, who sent me a long and thoughtful letter about various of the points raised in this chapter. I have tried to address one of his concerns in note 13. I should like, finally, to express my indebtedness to the writings of Professor E.L. Mascall, particularly his *Theology and the Gospel of Christ*, which directed me to many of the authors I have cited.