Common Ground and Diversity in Early Christian Thought and Study

Edited by
RAIMO HAKOLA,
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Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
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Essays in Memory of Heikki Räisänen

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ISBN 978-3-16-155871-9 / eISBN 978-3-16-155872-6
DOI 10.1628/978-3-16-155872-6

ISSN 0512-1604 / eISSN 2568-7476
(Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament)

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available at *http://dnb.dnb.de*.

The book was typeset by Martin Fischer in Tübingen using Minion typeface, printed on non-aging paper by Gulde Druck in Tübingen, and bound by Buchbinderei Spinner in Ottersweier.

Printed in Germany.

Preface

Approximately six years ago, the news reached us that Heikki Räisänen, professor emeritus of New Testament Studies at the University of Helsinki, had passed away. Räisänen continues to be the best-known Finnish biblical scholar internationally with academic interests and scholarly networks extending wide and far. When we decided to publish a volume of collected essays in Heikki's memory, it was not difficult to attract contributors from among both his international collaborators and his former students and colleagues from his home department. Nor was it difficult to include a range of topics that all are, in one way or another, in dialogue with Heikki's scholarship.

Some of the essays in this collection were first offered as oral presentations in a commemoratory symposium entitled *Ancient Christianity and Judaism: Paradigm Changes – In Memory of Heikki Räisänen* held in Helsinki in 2017. We wish to thank the Finnish Exegetical Society and its board, who were responsible for organizing the event. The symposium not only looked to the past but also to the present and the future in discussing the advances and transformations in some of the research areas in which Heikki was involved. Our aim has been to retain the same spirit in this publication.

This book would not have materialized without the help and support we have received from several people. Jarkko Vikman took care of the copy-editing and prepared the manuscript for publication. Kenneth Lai, Bob Whiting, and Rod McConchie edited the English of the chapters that were written by non-native speakers. Markus Kirchner and Ilse König from Mohr Siebeck offered their professional expertise in the publication process. We are happy to acknowledge our gratitude to all of them, as well as to professor Jörg Frey for accepting the book in the prestigious *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* series.

Our sincerest thank you goes to all contributors to this volume. Thank you for your patience – the volume was in its final stages when the global pandemic broke out at the beginning of 2020 and disrupted everything. But first and foremost, thank you for your fine contributions. We believe that Heikki would have enjoyed reading them.

Helsinki, on Heikki Räisänen's 80th birthday, December 10, 2021

Raimo Hakola, Outi Lehtipuu, and Nina Nikki

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Common Ground and Diversity in Early Christian Thought and Study

An Introduction

Raimo Hakola, Outi Lehtipuu, and Nina Nikki

During his long scholarly career, Heikki Räisänen (1941–2015) touched upon many key questions in the study of early Christianity. The topics of his research ranged from the detailed study of various New Testament writings to methodological reflections on the theoretical foundations of biblical studies. In this book, Finnish and international scholars deal with many of the issues that were prominent in Räisänen's research and that continue to be debated. The contributors build upon Räisänen's legacy as well as present recent advancements in the study of early Christianity. The volume comprises four sections organized around topics central to Räisänen's scholarship. These include methodological "fair play," the non-confessional study of early Christianity, Pauline scholarship, and biblical reception in religious communities, including early Islam.

1. Early Christianity in Context: Comparisons and Fair Play

The first section of the book deals with one of the methodological benchmarks of Räisänen's scholarship that he formulated as the principle of "fair play."[1] This principle requires that biblical texts be treated similarly to other ancient sources and the methods that are prominent in the study of corresponding social and cultural phenomena should be used in the study of early Christianity. This methodological point of departure may seem to be self-evident and even trivial, but the history of New Testament and early Christian studies until recently suggests that this is not the case. Biblical scholars working from a Christian

[1] Heikki Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 2000), 156–70; "What I Meant and What It Might Mean … An Attempt at Responding," in *Moving Beyond New Testament Theology? Essays in Conversation with Heikki Räisänen*, ed. Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele, Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society 88 (Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 428–530; *The Rise of Christian Beliefs: The Thought World of Early Christians* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 3–6; *The Bible among Scriptures and Other Essays*, WUNT 392 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 8–9, 27.

background have quite often sought historical arguments to back up the Christian confession of Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God. In the 19th century and into the early 20th century, attempts to depict Jesus as exceptional often went hand in hand with the denigration of his Jewish contemporaries and resulted in the persistent tradition of Christian academic anti-Judaism.[2] Since World War II, mainstream Christian New Testament scholarship has struggled to shake off the long shadow of Christian anti-Judaism but old caricatures of Christianity's superiority over Judaism are deep-rooted and are still visible in some interpretations that present Jesus as the spokesman of the poor, the suppressed, and women while Judaism is painted as hierarchical, oppressive and misogynistic.[3] The popularity of many classical themes of Christian anti-Jewish propaganda among supporters of such recent conspiracy theories as QAnon shows that ethically responsible academic scholarship cannot cease its fight against anti-Semitic (mis)uses of the New Testament.[4]

The attempts to elevate Jesus above his historical context are still alive in some quarters of New Testament study. For example, in his influential book *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Richard Bauckham maintains that the historical assessment of the gospels "must also take seriously the testimony's claim to the radical exceptionality of the event."[5] Bauckham is not a lonely voice but joins numerous earlier Christian scholars who have asserted that the beginnings of Christianity, the so-called Christ-event, was incomparable in its ancient context and, presumably, remains unsurpassed. This may or may not be a defensible theological doctrine, but, as Jonathan Z. Smith has persuasively argued, descriptions of early Christian history that are based on "the illicit transfer" from the ontological beliefs to the realm of historical probabilities and comparisons

[2] Shawn Kelley, *Racializing Jesus: Race, Ideology, and the Formation of Modern Biblical Scholarship* (London: Routledge, 2002); Raimo Hakola, "Anti-Judaism, Anti-Semitism in the New Testament and Its Interpretation," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Steven L. McKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 27–35.

[3] Cf. Judith Plaskow, "Anti-Judaism in Christian Feminist Interpretation," in *Searching for Scriptures, Vol. 1: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 117–29; Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006), 119–90.

[4] See Paul A. Djupe and Jacob Dennen, "The Anti-Semitism of Christian Nationalists Thanks to QAnon," *Religion in Public*, 26 January 2021, https://religioninpublic.blog/2021/01/26/the-anti-semitism-of-christian-nationalists-thanks-to-qanon (accessed April 12, 2022). Their study conducted in October 2020 shows that 42.1 percent of QAnon supporters think that Jews killed Jesus and 34.1 percent that Jews think that they are better than others. Both of these fallacies have customarily been defended with references to the New Testament.

[5] Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 499, 506. For the scholarly discussion following Bauckham's claim, see Raimo Hakola, *Reconsidering Johannine Christianity: A Social Identity Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 5–21.

are problematic.[6] In the field of New Testament studies, the emphasis on the uniqueness of early Christian beginnings amounts to "a special plea to treating the Gospels in a way that most other historical documents are not treated."[7] Furthermore, the use of such theological concepts as "testimony" means that "the Jesus of historians and the Christ of the faithful community converge, even though only for members of that community."[8] Bauckham may have been provocative in formulating his thesis, but Kari Syreeni suggests that many other recent studies come dangerously close to "surrendering to fideism" in applying the concept of memory as a bridge between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of faith or when they have tried to bring together Jesus and his "post-history" by arguing that the key points of early Christology, soteriology and ecclesiology ultimately derive from the historical Jesus.[9]

This use of memory studies offers a case in point about how scholars have often failed to follow the principle of fair play when they have applied interdisciplinary methodology to the New Testament. In fact, psychological and cognitive memory studies often approach memories as constructions that turn to the past to address the present, not as containers of reliable recollections.[10] There is no reason to think that early Christian individual or collective memories would have functioned differently. Quite the contrary, memory studies remind New Testament scholars of what they should have internalized at least

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[6] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 39.

[7] Kari Syreeni, "The Identity of the Jesus Scholar: Diverging Preunderstandings in Recent Jesus Research," in *The Identity of Jesus: Nordic Voices*, ed. Samuel Byrskog, Tom Holmén, and Matti Kankaanniemi, WUNT II 373 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 12.

[8] Syreeni, "Identity of the Jesus Scholar," 12–13. Confessional discussions that emphasize Jesus's exceptionality should be kept separate from genuinely comparative attempts to understand his originality in his historical contexts. See Per Bilde, "Approaching the Issue of the Originality of Jesus," in *The Identity of Jesus: Nordic Voices*, ed. Samuel Byrskog, Tom Holmén, and Matti Kankaanniemi, WUNT II 373 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 17–37.

[9] Syreeni, "Identity of the Jesus Scholar," 12, 15. Räisänen emphasized the gradual evolving and the diversity of early Christian beliefs in Jesus; see Räisänen, *Rise*, 192–227.

[10] See Judith C. S. Redman, "How Accurate Are Eyewitnesses? Bauckham and the Eyewitnesses in the Light of Psychological Research," *JBL* 129 (2010): 177–97; John S. Kloppenborg, "Memory, Performance and the Sayings of Jesus," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 10 (2012): 97–132; Zeba A. Crook, "Collective Memory Distortion and the Quest for the Historical Jesus," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 11 (2013): 53–76; Petri Luomanen, "How Religions Remember: Memory Theories in Biblical Studies and the Cognitive Study of Religion," in *Mind, Morality and Magic: Cognitive Science Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. István Czachesz and Risto Uro, Bibleworld (Durham: Acumen, 2013), 24–42; Hakola, *Reconsidering Johannine Christianity*, 13–15. For a full assessment of memory studies in the study of the historical Jesus, see Tuomas Havukainen, *The Quest for the Memory of Jesus: A Viable Path or a Dead End?* CBET 99 (Leuven: Peeters, 2020), 275. Havukainen notes that "while the memory approach reasonably rejects any naïve notion about access to the historical actuality of Jesus, the concept of the remembered Jesus (or 'Jesus of testimony') ought not to be used to grant the Gospels a special status as historical sources."

from the heyday of form criticism: past events can become significant in promoting common group values even though the connection between the past and the present remains elusive and slim.[11] The concept of memory is helpful in highlighting various portraits of Jesus as socially constructed competing memories, not as accurate snapshots of the past. Following Räisänen's emphasis on the diversity of early Christianity, different memories about Jesus can be seen to represent alternative memory communities among early Christians.[12]

The principle of fair play challenges the use of concepts such as "orthodoxy" and "heresy" as neutral historical descriptions and emphasizes the diversity of early Christian traditions.[13] This is in line with a major development in the study of early Christianity, in which these concepts have increasingly been understood not as accurate descriptions of diverse early Christian groups but as instruments in the process of self-definition that is always achieved in relation to those experienced and excluded as others.[14] The portraits of groups and individuals who are perceived as opponents in New Testament writings are nowadays customarily seen as literary, rhetorical, and ideological constructs that helped shape and maintain particular Christian identities.[15] This development follows the basic axiom of historical studies according to which reconstructions based on the point of view of just one side in a conflict easily become biased. Instead, the standards of fair historical descriptions aim at doing justice to all involved parties.[16]

Räisänen maintained that academic scholarship cannot construct a full portrait of diverse early Christian groups without dismissing the artificial theological boundary between canonical and non-canonical writings.[17] Doing away with canonical boundaries not only helps draw attention to the diversity of

[11] Cf. Paul Foster, "Memory, Orality, and the Fourth Gospel: Three Dead-Ends in Historical Jesus Research," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 10 (2012): 202.

[12] For alternative memory communities in the eastern Mediterranean, see Susan E. Alcock, "The Reconfiguration of Memory in the Eastern Roman Empire," in *Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History*, ed. Susan E. Alcock et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 323–50. See also Raimo Hakola's article in this collection.

[13] Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology*, 156–70; *Rise*, 3–6.

[14] Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Belknapp, 2003), 20–54; Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 22–27; Raimo Hakola, Nina Nikki, and Ulla Tervahauta, "Introduction," in *Others and the Construction of Early Christian Identities,* ed. Raimo Hakola, Nina Nikki, and Ulla Tervahauta, Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society 106 (Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society, 2013), 9–30; Ismo Dunderberg, *Gnostic Morality Revisited*, WUNT 347 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015).

[15] Nina Nikki, *Opponents and Identity in Philippians*, NovTSup 173 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 12–13.

[16] Räisänen's formulations of critical fair play look a lot like some attempts in the field of philosophy of history to define the characteristics of fair historical explanations; see C. Behan McCullagh, *The Truth of History* (London: Routledge, 1998), 13–61; *The Logic of History: Putting Postmodernism in Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2004), 144–50.

[17] For example, Räisänen, *Bible among Scriptures*, 27–29.

early Christianity but can also illustrate how trajectories that are only in their early stages in the New Testament were developed later. For example, such a figure as the disciple whom Jesus loved in the Gospel of John is without parallel in other canonical gospels but similar figures in non-canonical Christian texts help us to see this figure as a part of a growing tendency to authenticate a particular rendering of the Jesus story as the only accepted version.[18] Scattered references to eyewitnesses in canonical gospels (Luke 1:1–4; John 21:24–25) reveal a tendency that becomes more articulated in non-canonical sources where numerous references to eyewitnesses create authorial fiction reflecting the need to legitimate diverse understandings of Jesus traditions among distinct early Christian groups.[19] Non-canonical sources may also encourage scholars to modify the search for the one and only original authorial meaning of a given New Testament passage because the scriptural heritage is often ambiguous enough to allow the emergence of various competing trajectories and plausible alternative interpretations.[20]

The essays in the first section of the book elaborate the consequences of the principle of fair play when the New Testament writings are placed in their larger comparative context in the ancient world. In her "The Uniqueness (or Not) of Jesus's Work as an Exorcist," Cecilia Wassén claims that many New Testament scholars still view Jesus as exceptional when his work as an exorcist is compared to his contemporaries. Wassén compares the gospel stories to what can be known about exorcisms in ancient Jewish sources such as Genesis Apocryphon, apocryphal psalms, and the works by Josephus. Wassén concludes that the possible theological implications of Jesus's exorcisms do not make him unique, but the available evidence suggests that he behaved in line with common exorcistic practices of his time even though these practices may appear primitive to a modern mind.

Antti Marjanen's article "The Radical Inclusion of Non-Canonical Texts in Heikki Räisänen's Reconstruction of the Thought World of Early Christians" examines how Räisänen's decision to include extracanonical early Christian sources has influenced his portrait of early Christian theologies. Marjanen shows that while canonical texts mostly provide the starting point for Räisänen's presentation, Räisänen has also chosen themes (for example, the transmigration of the soul, resurrection as a spiritual enlightenment) that originate and are devel-

[18] Cf. Ismo Dunderberg, *The Beloved Disciple in Conflict? Revisiting the Gospels of John and Thomas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 165–98.

[19] Cf. Kari Syreeni, "Eyewitness Testimony, First-Person Narration and Authorial Presence as Means of Legitimation in Early Gospel Literature," in *Social Memory and Social Identity in the Study of Early Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Samuel Byrskog, Raimo Hakola, and Jutta Jokiranta, NTOA 116 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 89–110.

[20] For various debates arising from Paul's teachings about resurrection, for example, see Outi Lehtipuu, *Debates over the Resurrection of the Dead: Constructing Early Christian Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

oped in non-canonical sources later labeled as "heretical." Marjanen shows how certain views related to resurrection have resurfaced in modern theological discussions even though they were once rejected by the mainstream Christian tradition because of their heretical connotations. The rehabilitation of these ideas suggests that the inclusion of non-canonical sources is not only necessary for a full portrait of early Christian history but can also stimulate present day hermeneutical discussions.

Jarmo Kiilunen's article "Looking for Parallels: A *Neutestamentler* Reads Marcus Aurelius" offers an insight into one of Räisänen's research project that came to a dead end. During the 1970s, Heikki Räisänen was involved in the international research project *Corpus Hellenisticum Novi Testamenti*, in which his planned study was to deal with the alleged parallels to the New Testament writings in Marcus Aurelius's work *Meditations*. Kiilunen describes how Räisänen meticulously traced similarities between the New Testament and the philosopher-emperor's work and recorded his observations in notes identifying more than 250 parallels or parallel phenomena. Kiilunen analyzes Räisänen's notes on Book XII of the *Meditations* and evaluates them critically. He also relates how Räisänen became increasingly frustrated with the inaccuracy of the concept of a parallel and finally entrusted the project to Kiilunen, who likewise soon realized the problems involved in defining parallels and recognizing them. Subsequently, scholars have continued to discuss the problem Räisänen and Kiilunen ran up against and tried to find adequate criteria for identifying what is similar between writings representing different intellectual movements and different literary genres.[21] While Räisänen initially grew impatient with the listing of parallels, he later returned to the comparison between early Christian writings and Stoicism. Contrary to what many scholars have claimed, Räisänen concluded that the fair comparison of moral discourses in early Christians sources such as Romans and 1 Peter and in Stoic texts shows that "Stoicism may seem to provide a more promising starting-point for inter-group cooperation than does Pauline (or 'Petrine') Christianity."[22]

2. History and Theology in the Study of Early Christianity

In his publications, Räisänen argued for a non-confessional and non-partisan approach to early Christianity whose results are accessible to anyone interested in the topic. The discussion of this aspect of Räisänen's program often resulted in exchanges in which Räisänen is made a representative of extreme post-enlight-

[21] For the methods in comparative studies on Christianity and Stoicism, see Niko Huttunen, *Paul and Epictetus on Law: A Comparison*, LNTS 405 (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 11–19.

[22] Räisänen, *Bible among Scriptures*, 191.

enment positivistic attitudes allegedly still prominent in some quarters of mainstream New Testament scholarship. In his replies to his critics, Räisänen rightly resists this proposed straw man, claiming that the impossibility for a scholar to be fully neutral and objective has always been widely acknowledged among New Testament scholars.[23] Räisänen makes the important observation that the dividing line here is not the issue of subjectivity versus objectivity but whether Christian theological concerns guide research and whether scholars can appeal to theological concepts such as revelation or inspiration.[24] While the discussion about the limits of objectivity has often led to a dead end, Räisänen's observation opens a way forward by highlighting the importance of the contexts in which academic study is done, a point that has been emphasized in recent discussions in the field of philosophy of science.

The debate between Räisänen and his critics has not really touched upon the question of what scholars mean when they say that academic knowledge should be objective or when they deny that it is impossible to achieve a strictly neutral and uninvolved stance. According to the ontological notion of objectivity, we can have knowledge of the world existing independently of human observers, and the value-free ideal means that non-epistemic values should not influence scientific evidence and its interpretation. Both of these notions have been heavily criticized in recent philosophical discussions.[25] Such negative conclusions have led some theorists to abandon the whole concept of objectivity, while others try to define an applicable notion of objectivity that does not "imply that the results of objective research would be certain, as we need an account that allows us to be fallible."[26] In a similar way, the awareness that the results of scholarship are never final but may be overturned in the future has always been a core principle of *critical* biblical studies even though some critics of the historical scholarship have

[23] See with references to Räisänen's critics, Räisänen, "What I Meant," 420–25; *Bible among Scriptures*, 25–27. Cf. also John J. Collins, "Historical-Critical Methods," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible*, ed. Stephen B. Chapman and Marvin A. Sweeney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 136. Collins maintains that the concept of objectivity has never been a main principle of historical criticism. Collins says that "there is surely a general assumption in historical criticism that the meaning of a text can be established in an objective manner, but this assumption is more complicated than it may seem" because "the meaning intended by an ancient author can only be reconstructed tentatively, and texts clearly can take new meanings in new circumstances."

[24] Räisänen, *Bible among Scriptures*, 26–27. For a similar conclusion, see Christopher M. Tuckett, "What is 'New Testament Study'? The New Testament and Early Christianity," *NTS* 60 (2014): 164. While Tuckett acknowledges that "a strictly neutral, uninvolved stance on the part of any interpreter may be impossible," he remarks that existential involvement with the sources does not require "positive religious commitment" and that such a stance is not "adopted in any other field of academic study."

[25] Cf. Inkeri Koskinen, "Defending a Risk Account of Scientific Objectivity," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 71 (2020): 1187–207; "Objectivity in Contexts: Withholding Epistemic Judgement as a Strategy for Mitigating Collective Bias," *Synthese* 199 (2021): 211–25.

[26] Koskinen, "Defending," 1190.

painted a caricature of scholars who allegedly still continue the endless search for absolute truths.[27] The objectivity of scholarly research does not mean that the results of the study are presented as certain and definitive but that general public can rely on a research community that "follows practices that ensure effective critical discussions and debates – which we take to be an efficient strategy for averting many individual and collective biases."[28] In the field of biblical and cognate studies, an interactive research community consisting of scholars with varied ethnic, religious or non-religious, and other backgrounds can be relied on because scholars "cannot necessarily presume that [their] audience share the same confessional commitment" which means that "any explicit institutional confessional alignment is explicitly ruled out."[29]

Philosopher Inkeri Koskinen concludes that objectivity is not "an on-off feature" but "a degree concept."[30] Even though practitioners of academic research do not naively claim that their views are absolutely objective, the adherence to the critical practices accepted by an interactive and diverse research community increases the objectivity of a given interpretation and makes it more objective than some other interpretations made in other contexts (church, synagogue, personal piety) following different criteria (traditional dogmas, the supervision of religious authorities, the spirit). In biblical studies, John Collins has expressed this point by saying that, while historical criticism does not require that texts have a single meaning, academic research can effectively show that there are limits to what texts can plausibly mean in specific historical contexts.[31] Following Collins, it can be argued that some measure of objectivity in historical criticism's pursuit of the range of possible meanings is also ethically warranted because it safeguards the otherness of historical texts that do not simply belong to particular religious communities but are shared cultural heritage.

While Heikki Räisänen advocated a historical and nondenominational perspective that can provide unbiased information about early Christianity for the general audience and not just for believers, legitimate concerns have recently arisen within academia as to whether there is still public demand for this kind of approach. According to Jorunn Økland, the desire for historical accuracy has

[27] Collins, "Historical-Critical Methods," 136.

[28] Koskinen, "Defending," 1190. Koskinen provides a more detailed discussion of the concepts of trust and reliance in discourses of scientific objectivity.

[29] Tuckett, "What is 'New Testament Study,'" 166. Similarly, John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel: The Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 11: "The assumptions governing the conversation [in biblical studies] may change, and have demonstrably changed over the last two generations, as the circle of participants has widened. … Assured results are those on which most people, for the moment, agree. Scholarship is a conversation, in which the participants try to persuade each other by appeal to evidence and criteria that are in principle acceptable to the other participants."

[30] Koskinen, "Defending," 1190.

[31] Collins, "Historical-Critical Methods," 141.

long been the driving force in critical biblical studies but this aim can no longer arouse public interest in the Bible in a secular, multireligious, and canonically illiterate world.[32] Økland proposes that reception history with its focus on familiar motifs that are "effective across times and cultures" and "expressed and preserved in a privileged form in the biblical texts" can still keep the Bible relevant. Økland remarks that the public wants to know "what might be in the Bible for me" but is not interested in "what the Bible really says about this and that."[33] While Økland's assessment of the importance of reception history as an essential and reformative part of biblical studies is to the point, public interest in what is historical in the biblical and related texts may vary according to context. Based on his own experiences with the media, Ismo Dunderberg remarks that what still creates media hype is controversies related to unconventional versions of biblical history (e.g., *The Da Vinci Code*) or to new archaeological or manuscript finds publicized as sensations.[34] The reason why media and the public turn to academic experts is because they want to know whether the "classical" or alternative versions of Christian history are true or false. This testifies to how historically oriented questions still continue to fascinate wider circles than members of religious communities.

According to Michael Legaspi, critical biblical studies have not only provided historical information but have also promoted values such as tolerance, reasonableness, and self-awareness as "social and moral by-products." Legaspi asks, however, whether these values are able to move people and motivate them in the way traditional biblical values – love, hope, and faith – do: "academic criticism tempers belief, while scriptural reading edifies and directs it."[35] Legaspi is certainly right in highlighting the ethical dimension of critical biblical scholarship, but the recent historical and political developments suggest that tolerance, reasonableness, and self-awareness are among the top take-aways academia can offer to various religious communities and the rest of society, not merely by-products. The rise of various openly anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, often drawing from quasi-Christian apocalyptic traditions, together with the growing appeal of antiscientific ideologies means that the task of critical academic study in producing measured and impartial knowledge of the formation of religious groups and ideologies is more urgent than ever. In this historical and societal context, academic critical research can redeem its relevance in society when it seeks to

[32] Jorunn Økland, "The Power of Canonised Motifs: The Chance for Biblical Studies in a Secular, Canonically Illiterate World," in *Present and Future of Biblical Studies: Celebrating 25 Years of Brill's Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Tat-siong Benny Liew, BibInt 161 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 216–39.

[33] Økland, "Power of Canonised Motifs," 235.

[34] Dunderberg, *Gnostic Morality Revisited*, 189.

[35] Michael Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 169.

refute uncritical historizing, to relativize biblicist or antibiblicist claims to the truth or untruth of the biblical text, to point out the potential exploitation of scholarship as continuation of politics and to assess critically the significance (or lack thereof) of the matter at issue for contemporary concerns.[36]

Heikki Räisänen applauded the potential of nondenominational religious studies to enhance a self-critical attitude among adherents of different religious traditions, believing that this could pave the way for interreligious dialogue. Räisänen remained skeptical, however, about the possibility of any large-scale breakthrough in interreligious relations because "such a self-critical dialogue will remain the task of minorities which some might call 'elitist.'"[37] In the light of most recent historical and societal developments this may be too pessimistic. In recent years, the formidable speed of advancing globalization has brought people from different cultural backgrounds closer together than perhaps ever before. This has greatly increased the need for dispassionate information about various religions. The growing immigration of war victims from the Middle East to Europe and North America in particular has created additional demand for information which can facilitate encounters between all three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The possibility can be entertained that, in the future, a larger section of the readership of early Christian studies may consist of members of other religious traditions who desire tools for interreligious dialogue in a changing environment.

Various academic institutions have responded to these recent developments. Faculties and departments that have traditionally been focused on Judaism and Christianity have included programs and courses on Islamic theology. For example, at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Helsinki, the goal of the new multidisciplinary study track on Islamic theology "is a multidimensional and integrated understanding of Islam through sacred texts and in the everyday lives of Muslims."[38] Räisänen was no longer with us to witness this development in his home faculty, but he would no doubt have welcomed it. Such new learning environments create spaces for students from different backgrounds to study their own and other religious traditions in a critical but constructive atmosphere and give scholars new opportunities for cooperation across disparate fields of academic study. The questioning of often artificial disciplinary boundaries can facilitate exchanges of methodological innovations and make it easier to draw comparisons and recognize continuities and changes across various historical

[36] Martti Nissinen, "Reflections on the 'Historical-Critical' Method: Historical Criticism and Critical Historicism," in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen*, ed. Joel M. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards, SBLRBS 56 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 484.

[37] Räisänen, *Bible among Scriptures*, 304.

[38] See "Islamilainen teologia / Islamic Theology," University of Helsinki, https://blogs.helsinki.fi/islamictheology (accessed April 12, 2022).

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