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Editorial:
*An “Unspeakably Narrow Discipline”: Martin Hengel and the Need for
Interdisciplinary Scholarship*

The New Testament discipline, as a scientific enterprise, is still relatively young. Although young, it has blossomed into emphases such as Jesus studies, Pauline studies, and assessing early forms of Christianity. According to Martin Hengel, the earliest chair of New Testament studies was held by Bernhard Weiß during the latter half of the nineteenth century.¹

Those who studied the New Testament during the 19th century rarely—if ever—were solely New Testament scholars. Rather, they assumed diverse professorial roles and contributed to Old Testament scholarship, systematic and biblical theology, and most notably, church history.² Beyond the list Hengel provides, for example,

¹ Martin Hengel, “A Young Theological Discipline in Crisis,” in *Earliest Christian History: History, Literature, and Theology, Essays from the Tyndal Fellowship in Honor of Martin Hengel*, WUNT, ed. Michael F. Bird and Jason Mason, trans. Wayne Coppins (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 459.

² For example, Hengel notes, “The great scholars who advanced the investigation of the New Testament in the nineteenth century were precisely not ‘New Testament scholars’ according to today’s understanding, but distinguished Old Testament scholars, systematic theologians and above all church historians. I need only mention names such as de Wette, Ewald, Wellhausen and Gunkel for the Old Testament or Ferdinand Christian Baur, Hilgenfeld, Overbeck, Harnack and Zahn for church history. And, as Hengel notes, “Especially at the time when the investigation of the New Testament in the nineteenth century were precisely not ‘New Testament scholars’ according to today’s understanding, but distinguished Old Testament scholars, systematic theologians and above all church historians. I need only mention names such as de Wette, Ewald, Wellhausen and Gunkel for the Old Testament or Ferdinand Christian Baur, Hilgenfeld, Overbeck, Harnack and Zahn for

Lightfoot was both a New Testament and Apostolic Fathers scholar. Rudolph Bultmann—regarded as one of the more influential 20th century scholars—was both an exegetical thinker as well as a systematic consortium of sorts. Among 21st century New Testament scholars, John Barclay, Francis Watson, James Dunn readily come to mind that do likewise.

Within the 20th and 21st century, the specialization of disciplines—even intradisciplinary specialization—has increased dramatically. The reality of the Gospel scholar, the Pauline scholar, and Epistle of Hebrews scholar is a fact of biblical scholarship in the modern era. While, these are good and valuable ventures, it is not the entire portrait. We need broader disciplines and scholars willing to embrace a classical interdisciplinary approach to biblical scholarship. Hengel observes this “pernicious specialization” as a post-World War II phenomenon, a fact of academic life that poses a genuine dilemma.³

Specializing in the New Testament, focusing on a set corpus, is a noble cause, based on both theological and ecclesiastical importance:

It is the special meaning of this book for the study of theology and
the service of the pastor that justifies the relatively young

church history. Already Schleiermacher especially liked to give exegetical lectures; Ritschl, Lipsius, Cremer and Lütgert were systematic theologians and as such simultaneously theologians with a comprehensive philological, historical, and philosophical education. Their scope of work — so E. v. Dobschütz on H.J. Holtzmann — ‘encompassed the whole of theology’. This competence, which — at least from our perspective, which has become too narrow — covers multiple subjects also distinguishes scholars in the twentieth century who were simultaneously church historians and exegetes, such as W. Bousset, A. Jülicher, H. Lietzmann, E. Klostermann, H. von Campenhausen and K. Aland.” Hengel, “A Young Discipline,” 459–60.

³ Hengel, “A Young Discipline,” 460.

academic existence of our subject, often with two or even three chairs in a faculty.⁴

Thus, the relatively small size, the ecclesiastical importance, and the theological role of the New Testament make specialization understandable.

Placing this relatively and “unspeakably narrow discipline” against its neighborly disciplines, an imbalance emerges.⁵ Much work remains in integrating New Testament insights with broader theological and historical scholarship. For instance, there are 378 volumes in the Minge series awaiting full analysis from Latin and Greek scholars. Also, consider the historical, archeological, and philological—let alone theological considerations—of the Old Testament and Jewish literature that New Testament scholars utilize.

Here’s our point: with the scholarly acumen of our New Testament academic predecessors, with the potential over-intraspecialized New Testament discipline, and with the ecclesiastical importance of the New Testament, scholars of the New Testament would do well to add the study of Early Christianity to their scholarly work. This call is for New Testament scholars to consider linking your academic study of the New Testament to a neighboring discipline—Second Temple Judaism, Graeco-Roman backgrounds, Patristics and Earliest Christianity, or others. The fruit of interdisciplinary work is ripe for the harvest.

⁴ Hengel, “A Young Discipline,” 460.

⁵ Hengel, “A Young Discipline,” 461.

As Christoph Marksches notes, “Those who only study Second Temple literature know very little of Second Temple Judaism.”⁶ Georg Christoph Lichtenberg once said something similar:

The one who understands nothing but chemistry does not really understand it either.”⁷ Hengel confirms this sentiment: “Then this applies all the more to our fundamental but simultaneously from its beginning unspeakably narrow discipline.”⁸

The specialization of the New Testament would be greatly aided by a secondary specialty that accentuates and expands one’s understanding of earliest Christianity. Hengel moves towards a solution:

In principle a double major in theology and classical philology would be an ideal solution for the new academic generation in New Testament and in Patristics, and we should encourage gifted students to this end.⁹

Hengel’s clarion call demands attention. Students of the New Testament should seek to incorporate a neighborly discipline in order to better understand the content of their primary study. It would be

⁶ See: Timothy Michael Law and Christoph Marksches, “Coffee Table Talk with Christoph Marksches,” *Marginalia Review of Books*, 29 April 2014, accessed 14 December 2015 <http://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/coffee-with-christoph-marksches/>.

⁷ Hengel, “A Young Discipline,” 461.

⁸ Hengel, “A Young Discipline,” 461 (emphasis in original).

⁹ Hengel, “A Young Discipline,” 467.

helpful to observe how the seasoned scholars could heed this call as well.

So what are some solutions moving forward? Here are a few suggestions we have:

- 1) Thoroughly integrate the study of the Greek NT into your study.
- 2) Read primary source literature beyond the 27 NT books. These should be texts that historically precede and subsequently follow the historical era of the New Testament. For example, secondary specialized interest for an NT scholar could be early Christianity and Patristic literature.
- 3) Ascertain text traditions and connect these texts together to observe a general worldview—both with an eye towards intertextually, historical reconstruction, and source influences. In this way, observations of literary, historical, and critical readings should emerge.
- 4) Be mindful of the intraspecialists within the New Testament and read their works. Creatively find ways to connect, refine, and clarify their work to others, including your own.
- 5) Be committed to learning and maintaining ancient languages such as Greek, Latin, Coptic, and Syriac.
- 6) Model integrated work for the study of New Testament with early Christian literature.
- 7) As you incorporate all these, begin to produce work—conference papers, monographs, chapters, etc.—which display the work of intradisciplinary endeavors.

We'd love to hear from readers regarding their own efforts towards intradisciplinary scholarship. Here at the Center for Ancient Christian Studies and in *Fides et Humilitas*, we are excited about the possibilities that can emerge from this sort of labor.

May we all seek to listen to the voices of the past and present within respective academic fields!

Coleman M. Ford
Shawn J. Wilhite
Editors-in-Chief