

5-1-1988

## Reading the New Testament: Methods of Interpretation

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### Recommended Citation

Schlueter, Carol J. (1988) "Reading the New Testament: Methods of Interpretation," *Consensus*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol14/iss1/14>

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here in Canada as a matter of high priority. How many of us, for instance, can describe the "denominations" of Judaism to the same degree we can detail differences in Christianity?

Finally, the one spectre that haunts our century as does no other is the *Shoah*, the Holocaust. We Canadians need to be almost physically sick as we reflect on some recent headlines that tell us how hatred can thrive in Alberta classrooms or in Ontario society. Not only must anti-semitism be seen as a theological heresy, but as *the* spiritual question above all. Where *was* God in the concentration camps? Elie Wiesel saw him die on the gallows at the hands of a Nazi-Satan. No Christian should ever pray the 22nd Psalm as if it were only a Good Friday liturgical support piece, unless every syllable, every sound, be first heard echoed in Auschwitz and Buchenwald. How dare we pray this prayer as ours, unless we first pray it as theirs?

*Judaism: An Introduction for Christians* is easy to read, and a great source for what almost every major church body has ever said on anti-semitism. There are additional resources including, wonder of wonders, Canadian addresses for B'nai B'rith. How tragic if we Christians allow ourselves to see Judaism as having come to an end with the Pharisees, who, it turns out, were pretty great believers as believers go! Without their Rabbis and scholars, what a poor Bible we would have, an incomprehensible book apart from the living faith that gave its light to the world! Yes, this definitely is one book every Christian ought to read.

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## Reading the New Testament: Methods of Interpretation

Christopher Tuckett  
Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987

The work under review consists of an introduction to the main methods used in the interpretation of the New Testament, the primary purpose of which is to provide for students a discussion of the many ways the New Testament can be interpreted.

Tuckett begins from the premise that the whole purpose of biblical study is to enable us to bridge the gap between our day and the first century. Tuckett sets out a definition for the normative role of the Bible in Christian life. In contrast to earlier positions of Christians who used the Bible as a source of "proof-texts", Tuckett stresses that the Bible is normative in the sense that the canon provides the basis, the starting point

and origin, for all subsequent Christian tradition and occupies this position for all further Christian reflection (17). Tuckett suggests that with this model of scriptural normativeness, some things may no longer be valid or acceptable for us today in exactly the same form as they appear in the Bible, e.g. slavery. Within this model of scriptural normativeness, one need not suspend critical faculties and the use of those faculties makes the New Testament come alive and speak to us in the present.

The methods that Tuckett covers include both those traditionally associated with the historical-critical method: source, textual, form, genre, and redaction criticism and more recent methods such as canonical criticism and the New Testament and sociology.

Tuckett gives some background to each method and tests each method by applying it, where appropriate, to the pericope of the healing of the man with the withered hand in Mark 3:1–6. By this application, Tuckett is able to illustrate not only what questions each method can answer but also demonstrate the limitations of each method. He argues for the continuing importance of the historical-critical method in interpretation and makes an attempt to show how this method can be maintained by people for whom the New Testament is scripture and canon.

Tuckett encourages students to recognize that while an historical approach cannot provide us with every answer, it presents us with “figures battling within their historical situation about the values and truth of their religious commitment, sorting out what was essential from what was peripheral, seeking above all to live their lives in conformity with the will of God whom they served. Those who struggle to do the same today can only gain by entering more deeply and sympathetically into the struggles of the past” (187).

This brief summary of Tuckett’s approach and treatment of methods of reading the Bible makes possible a few observations. Tuckett’s book will be useful for introductory work in hermeneutics. His clear and comprehensible approach provides a helpful way into a vast subject. On the whole Tuckett gives a balanced presentation of the various methods, but he might have given more attention to the recent reconsideration of the arguments in favour of the priority of Matthew. His assumption of the priority of Mark leads him to emphasize a certain direction for the development of the synoptic tradition.

The most serious weakness of the book is that it omits feminist criticism. It is particularly surprising that Tuckett has not noted the results gained from the work of Elizabeth Schuessler-Fiorenza, results which have extended our knowledge of social history in the first century. Further, an inclusion of a discussion of Schuessler-Fiorenza’s work on a feminist hermeneutic and scripture as prototype would have strengthened the book.

Although it will need to be supplemented in places, Tuckett's book deserves to be considered as a text for introducing students to methods of interpreting the New Testament.

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## **Die Theologie des Hebräerbriefes: Ihre Verankerung in der Situation des Verfassers und seiner Leser**

Mathias Rissi

Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1987

What meaning one detects in any given document depends in large measure on how one reconstructs the setting in which that document originated and what one considers to be the issue which that document intended to address. It is precisely at this point that Mathias Rissi offers new possibilities for reading the Letter to the Hebrews. As the subtitle of Rissi's book indicates, he intends to let his understanding of the theology of Hebrews be informed by a careful reassessment of the situation which prompted the author of Hebrews to take up the pen.

General consensus has it that Hebrews was intended to encourage a second or third generation faith community which experienced the typical problems of tiredness. It has become customary to regard 12:12 ("lift your drooping hands...") as the theme verse, directed to Christians suffering from burnout or just plain laziness.

Rissi reconstructs the situation quite differently. Hebrews addressed a problem very similar to that which Paul encountered in Corinth, argues Rissi. As in Corinth, so here the powerful charismatic experiences which had accompanied the profuse outpouring of the Holy Spirit, had given rise to spiritual elitism.

Rissi is convinced that Hebrews addressed not a congregation as a whole, but a smaller holier-than-thou group which had largely withdrawn from that congregation and now stood aloof from it. This inference Rissi draws from the comment that only "some" neglect the participation in the public worship of the community (10:25), and from the observation that the author asks these particular members to pass his greetings on to "all your leaders and all the saints" (13:24). When the author of Hebrews exhorts his readers to strive for peace (12:14) and not to neglect the needs of the community (13:16), to "lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees" (12:12), he is not addressing a congregation which had become tired, but an enclave of readers who had become spiritually arrogant.

The members of the conventicle had begun to feel that they already possessed all that God had to offer them. Hope had become an empty