



Kyle Keefer

THE NEW TESTAMENT  
AS LITERATURE

A Very Short Introduction

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The New Testament as Literature:  
A Very Short Introduction

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Any reader of the New Testament traverses well-worn ground. The twenty-seven individual writings that date from 2000 years ago carry with them centuries of interpretation. Millions of Westerners—and as Christianity continues to spread in Africa and Asia, vast numbers of people in the Eastern and Southern Hemispheres—have felt the influence of the content of the New Testament. The Christian Bible, comprised of the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible (also known as the Old Testament), has been read by more groups and individuals than any other book ever written.

This panoply of readers, current and past, approaches the New Testament from a variety of perspectives. Most commonly, Christian readers read the New Testament religiously; they assume that their reading will provide guidance for their beliefs and actions. But Christian devotional readers are by no means the only type of readers. Followers of other religions—Jews or Buddhists, for example—read for cross-cultural religious understanding. The questions they bring to their reading may be similar to those of Christians, but from an outsider's perspective. Nonreligious or antireligious people also read the New Testament, often with an aim to point out fallacies or shortcomings of the text. Inevitably, the types of questions a reader brings to the New Testament will affect the interpretation.

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I am looking at the New Testament through a very particular lens, that of literary study. The questions raised here focus on the language and craft of the text itself. A literary approach to the New Testament assumes that the documents found here not only convey ideas but also entertain, prod, puzzle, and delight audiences. Even for readers not religiously bound to the New Testament, the artistry of the New Testament can prove engaging and provocative. Reading the New Testament as literature brings to light the dynamics of this engagement. Whereas religious interpreters of these scriptures, driven by a desire to find moral or theological content, might overlook the aesthetic experience of the reader, literary interpretation foregrounds this experience.

The literary approach dominates in many courses that go by the title “The Bible as Literature.” The word “as” in that description, however, is ambiguous. It could condition readers to approach the Bible as they would other literary works. That is, a reader will attune himself or herself to plot, syntax, character development, and rhetoric. Therefore, one sense of “the Bible as literature” refers to the *content* of the text. Such standard literary features are main concerns of this book, and I elaborate on them in this first chapter. But the “as” could also imply a reevaluation of the Bible, one that would insert it into the literary canon. In this second sense, the “as” relates to the *function* of the text. In the second chapter I address the relationship between the New Testament and the literature.

The early readers of the New Testament, perhaps surprisingly, were eager to distinguish it *from* literature. Around the year 400, in his *Confessions*, Augustine recounts how his first encounter with Cicero, “whose writing nearly everyone admires,” affected him so profoundly that he dedicated himself to philosophy. A few lines later, he contrasts this delight with his first reading of the Bible, which “seemed to me unworthy in comparison with the dignity of Cicero.” Although Augustine praises the content of the Christian scriptures (“of mountainous difficulty and enveloped in mysteries”), he finds scriptural language rather ordinary (“a text

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lowly to the beginner”). He chastises himself, though, for his inability to grasp this paradox of the scriptures: “My inflated conceit shunned the Bible’s restraint, and my gaze never penetrated to its inwardness.”<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the prose of the New Testament itself does not enthrall Augustine.

Literary study of the New Testament must surely grapple with Augustine’s dilemma. No writer of the New Testament thought he was composing literature in the sense of *belles lettres*. In fact, no reader even thought to apply the term “literature” to the New Testament until the nineteenth century. Augustine’s “humble gait” label, however, underestimates the texts’ verbal power. Because early Christian writers were eager to espouse the superiority of the New Testament over such works as the *Odyssey* or the *Aeneid* and because they hesitated to make their case stylistically, they drew a sharp separation between form and content, elevating the latter at the expense of the former. This emphasis on ideas left an indelible mark on Christianity, especially as literacy became an asset of a minority in the Middle Ages. With the landmark vernacular translations of the Bible (especially the King James Bible in 1611), the literary aspects of the text became increasingly important. Especially in the twentieth century, as scholars and readers began to attend more closely to the form of the writings, it became clear that the authorial skill of the New Testament writers had been greatly underestimated not only by Augustine but by the majority of Christian readers.

For most of Christian history, readers of the New Testament assumed that their reading would reveal God’s truth to them. Devout Christians interacted personally with the text. They would not, as a modern reader might, wonder about the medical facts surrounding Jesus’ healing/exorcism of an epileptic (Mark 9:17–29, cf. Matt. 17:14–20, Luke 9:37–42) but instead would take the miracle at face value and then ponder how they too might experience healing or deliverance from demons. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, biblical scholarship as an

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academic enterprise approached the Bible objectively. The biblical scholars of the nineteenth century, primarily in Germany, attempted to free themselves from the strictures of dogmatic concerns. They thought of themselves as scientists who investigated the New Testament through the microscopes of history. Thus they read the text quite carefully and practiced a type of literary critique, but without much interest in either aesthetics or the dynamic interplay between text and reader. Scholars enacting this older type of literary criticism wanted to go behind the text to find out what the texts could tell them about the world from which they arose. They did, in fact, ask questions about the veracity of Jesus' healing and concluded that the story reflected not historical truth but the early church's claims about Jesus. They looked at how the form of the miracle stories in general resembled folklore, and thus the stories said more about the people who transmitted them than about Jesus himself.

For a multitude of reasons, this historical method no longer dominates academic investigation of the New Testament. As scholars (and, more importantly, their students) realized that the historical approach often alienates readers from the Bible, literary approaches to the New Testament came to the fore in academic discourse. What was so refreshing about the rise of literary approaches was that it could (and can) appeal to nonspecialists. Most readers, now and in the past, simply do not read to develop historical acuity. Biblical scholars, because of the way they formulated their work, had created a gulf between themselves and the vast majority of New Testament readers. Literary readings of the New Testament help bridge this gulf by avoiding the extremes of objectivity and subjectivity. A literary reading will, for example, explore the pathos of the epileptic boy and the characterization of Jesus. Through aesthetic appreciation, someone can personally engage the New Testament without necessarily feeling the need to learn a moral lesson. Even if the New Testament authors did not envision themselves as rivals of Virgil, they ended up creating literature nonetheless. Like great literature, the New Testament

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writings have become part of the story-world of those who read them. A literary approach, therefore, seems commensurate with the actual experience of modern readers.

An example can illuminate the aesthetic appeal of the New Testament and the advantages of literary analysis. One of the best-known stories in the New Testament is the parable of the Good Samaritan. When speakers of English use the phrase “Good Samaritan,” they denote a kindhearted person who helps another person in distress. Even if such speakers have never read Luke 10:25–37, they intuit that the story gives an example of action to be followed. As much as any story in the New Testament, this parable has proved to resonate with audiences. A literary reading of the story, while not contradicting the received wisdom about this parable, highlights the layers of the story that contribute to its appeal.

The parable is structured around different rounds of questions and answers between Jesus and an inquisitive lawyer:

Introduction

[Lawyer] “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

[Jesus] “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

[Lawyer] “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.”

[Jesus] “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

[Lawyer] “And who is my neighbor?”

[Jesus] “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii,

gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him, and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

[Lawyer]: "The one who showed him mercy."

This exchange begins with agreement between the lawyer and Jesus about the necessity to love one's neighbor. But the lawyer immediately questions the semantic range of "neighbor," and a possible disagreement arises about who ought to be the recipient of the love. The parable Jesus tells in response centers on the definition of "neighbor," and Jesus cleverly redirects the original question. The lawyer, now having to answer his own query, equates "neighbor" with "one who showed him mercy." The conclusion of the parable gives an unexpected twist to the story, but only if the logic of the dialogue is followed carefully:

[Lawyer] "I know I should love my neighbor, but who is my neighbor?"

[Jesus] "Here's a story about a beaten man and a Samaritan. Now you tell me who the neighbor is."

[Lawyer] "The Samaritan."

[Jesus] "Then you should love that Samaritan, the outcast who comes to your aid."

If one should love a neighbor, and if the Samaritan plays the role of "neighbor," then the lawyer should love the Samaritan. Furthermore, if the lawyer must love the Samaritan, the lawyer identifies *not* with the giver of mercy but with the recipient of it. In other words, he must follow the example not of the Samaritan but, surprisingly, of the beaten man, who takes no action at all. He must be willing to love the despised neighbor (Samaritans were the object of strong racism at the time of Jesus) who becomes his benefactor.

Notice that this literary reading of the story runs contrary to popular interpretation in which the Good Samaritan stands as the

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example to follow. That reading becomes possible with a line I have so far omitted, when Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.” Here Jesus does enjoin the lawyer to take action. But what type? “Likewise” might refer to the Samaritan’s action, but Jesus does not make such an identification clear. The ambiguous ending hints that the lawyer is asked to take on two roles at once, both to show mercy and to receive mercy lovingly. To read the parable simply as a story about a do-gooder misses this complexity.

Too often the New Testament’s writings are similarly assumed to have simplistic meanings. Literary readings awaken us to the intricacies of the language that makes up the New Testament. We should guard against taking Augustine’s (and scholarship’s) viewpoint to the extreme, emphasizing content as the kernel to savor while discarding the husk of the words themselves. A literary reading of the New Testament allows readers to understand content through close engagement with form.

In chapters 3 through 5, I explore the major sections of the New Testament—the gospels, Paul’s letters, and Revelation—as literary documents. Then, I step back and ask questions about the New Testament as a whole. Whether read as a singular document or as a collection of parts, the New Testament presents readers with a variety of forms and viewpoints, and a literary exploration helps bring this multivalence to light.

A final note about the issue of translation. Since we live in an era in which we can read works in a plethora of languages through translation, this problem may not seem acute. Still, translation always distorts the original text at least somewhat, and one cannot perform as close a reading of the New Testament in English as one could in Greek, the original language of the New Testament. When necessary and useful, I will refer to the original language, but in a more general sense, word patterns



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and narrative structure are very accessible in the modern English translations that I use. Unless otherwise marked, I quote from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Sometimes I will use the King James Version (KJV) or my own translation, which I note clearly.

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## Chapter 2

# The New Testament and the literary canon

### What counts as literature?

The title of this book raises the pertinent question: “What does it mean to read literature?” or more specifically, “What is literature?” In the first chapter, I pointed out how one might appropriate the New Testament as literature, but can we simply call any work literature? Many people, upon hearing the word, think of it as some type of prose or poetry that surpasses other writing in its quality. They might remember works they were assigned to read in college or high school (and very possibly do not read anymore . . .). Reading literature, as opposed to other types of writing, implies a serious undertaking, unlike reading comics or the newspaper.

Thinking of literature this way—as a consciously aesthetic, high-minded activity—does not necessarily work when applied to the New Testament. As we’ve already seen, readers of the New Testament have judged it to be much *less* self-consciously polished than works in the literary canon. The Gospel of Matthew, for example, does not favorably compare with *Moby Dick* with regard to linguistic complexities we often associate with literary works. The definition of literature as art for art’s sake, however, is fairly recent and too limiting. If there seems to be cognitive dissonance involved in thinking of the New Testament as literature, the

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problem lies not so much with the biblical text as with the preconceived notion of what counts as literature.

But if literature is not defined by the intrinsic quality of “literariness,” whatever that is, how should it be defined? I propose that we think of literature according to its effects on its readers, or, more simply, according to its function. Here I refer to Kenneth Burke, a twentieth-century literary critic. He wrote an essay whose title is his thesis, “Literature as Equipment for Living.” Burke takes a pragmatic approach to literature, as opposed to an aesthetic one, and demonstrates how individuals *use* literature in their everyday life. His examples range from proverbs to poems to Aesop’s fables to dictionary entries. Through all these examples, he emphasizes how literature helps humans adapt to and respond to situations they face. He proposes that we think of literary works as

strategies for selecting enemies and allies, for socializing losses, for warding off evil eye, for purification, propitiation, and desanctification, consolation and vengeance, admonition and exhortation, implicit commands or instructions of one sort or another. Art forms like “tragedy” or “comedy” or “satire” would be treated as *equipments for living*, that size up situations in various ways and in keeping with correspondingly various attitudes.<sup>1</sup>

In a different work, but in the same vein, Burke calls literature the “verbalization of experience.” Great literature, therefore, equips humans for living, having verbalized in rich language those experiences that resonate with audiences throughout different eras. According to *this* understanding of literature, the New Testament certainly fits the bill.

## Using the New Testament

Burke implies that when a person reads a wide array of literature, he or she collects those literary experiences into a thesaurus or

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storehouse that can address particular situations. This sort of pragmatic reading of the New Testament happens all the time. Weary taxpayers moan that it is time to “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” a quotation from Matthew. Upon seeing a criminal convicted, an observer might cluck her tongue and mutter, “You reap what you sow,” a clear allusion to Galatians. In neither of the quotations does the interpreter of the text make a theological point, but in both the New Testament plays an important sociological role. As a text intricately tied to the West, the Bible is part of the cultural thesaurus, a source of cultural touchstones that millions of people share, irrespective of their religious beliefs.

Writers throughout Western history, until very recently, could assume that their readers would be able to understand their allusions to the Bible, even the most obscure ones. In 1681 John Dryden wrote a poem titled “Absalom and Achitophel,” in which the poet addressed the crisis in England about who would succeed Charles II. The poem was printed in several editions and enjoyed a wide enough readership that it seems to have influenced the politics of his day. Dryden assumed then—he would probably not assume so today—that his audience would understand the referents in the poem. It retells, with slight variation, the story from the Hebrew Bible of King David, his son Absalom, and Achitophel, an adviser to the king’s son. Dryden refers to almost every character in 2 Samuel, and his readers not only were able to follow this complex set of characters but also connect the biblical characters with English figures. The ancient Hebrew text served as the perfect tool for Dryden’s satire because he shared with his readers a common knowledge of the referents. Without such an agreement between author and audience, Dryden’s poem would have failed miserably as political satire.

Although biblical literacy is not as strong today as it has been historically, the New Testament, along with other classic literary works, contributes to the *lingua franca*, the common language of

Western civilization. To call a traitor a Judas differs little from calling an indecisive person Hamlet. In both situations, the speaker can assume that his or her hearer will have enough familiarity with the Bible or Shakespeare to make the names understandable. While the New Testament texts have often played a polemical role in doctrinal arguments, political battles, and religious instruction, they also have functioned as “equipment for living.” When life situations demand reaction, the stories of the New Testament can be used to address and guide reactions. For instance, the book of Revelation has strongly influenced how Europeans and North Americans have coped with and interpreted imminent threats to their existence. From the bubonic plague to the Cold War, the apocalyptic overtones of Revelation have colored people’s reactions to catastrophic events. Reading the New Testament as literature, moreover, opens up the text to an audience well outside the confines of a Christian audience. If the text serves as equipment for living, dogmatic belief about the sanctity of the text or its status as God’s word is not a prerequisite for profitable engagement.

## The New Testament in literature

The sense of the Bible as a storehouse seems especially pertinent in the study of actual works of literature. Any list of great literary works in the West will be replete with books, plays, poems, and essays that draw from the Bible. Some of these—*Paradise Lost*, *Pilgrim’s Progress*—have explicitly Christian themes while others—*Absalom, Absalom!*, *Ulysses*—allude to biblical language and themes undogmatically. Any reader attempting to appreciate Western literature without knowledge of the Bible will inevitably miss some of the depth in that literature, and recently in the United States schools have added the Bible to the curriculum in order to provide students useful cultural touchstones.

Recognizing biblical allusions, however, is only the first step; it is necessary to move beyond the bare fact of allusion to the analysis of

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how authors use the Bible. Exploring how authors have incorporated the Bible into their creations sheds light on the question of how contemporary readers might also appropriate the Bible in their own aesthetic appreciation of it. To read the New Testament as literature closely parallels the way that authors of literature use the text.

Consider the appropriation of the New Testament in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. As the pilgrim Dante descends into Hell and then ascends through Purgatory and Paradise, he meets a variety of individuals. The poet Dante drew from a wide-ranging stock, including historical figures from Rome (Cato, Virgil), his contemporary citizens of Florence (Brunetto Latini), mythological characters (Ulysses), Christian saints (Lucy, Francis), and biblical characters (Judas, Mary). The way that Dante incorporates all of these personae into his work indicates that he views them all as characters, drawing no distinctions between factual and imaginary ones. It strikes the modern reader as odd that he cares so little about differentiating between fact and legend, but in Dante's scheme, such a distinction becomes irrelevant. When it comes to using the New Testament to construct the tripartite otherworld of the *Commedia*, Dante treats the biblical text no differently than mythological texts or historical data. The New Testament does not stand on its own as an isolated work but rather, as in Burke's definition of literature, provides Dante with certain strategies for poetic creation. Another way to construe what it means to read the New Testament as literature is to say that a person like Dante thinks with the stories of the New Testament. They become part of the language used to make sense of the world.

The New Testament and the literary canon

A more detailed example of how an author kneads the New Testament into literature comes from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Of all the travelers to Canterbury, the Wife of Bath probably stands as the perennial favorite of later audiences. When her turn to regale the Canterbury pilgrims arrives, the Wife of Bath tells a fable centering on the ambiguous nature of power in

romantic relations between men and women. Before this tale, however, she spins a prologue more than twice as long as her tale. In her prologue, the Wife, who Chaucer has already characterized as sensuous (“of remedies of love she knew per chaunce”), defends her five marriages and her uncanny knack for finding herself a widow. The joyous complexity of the Wife is reflected in both her prologue and her tale, but here I focus on the prologue because in it the Wife repeatedly appeals to the New Testament text. In his construction of the Wife, Chaucer presents a character in literature who reads the New Testament as a literary text in explicit defense of her manner of life—as equipment for living.

She begins her prologue, “Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynogh for me / To speke of wo that is in marriage.” (If there were no authority on earth/Except experience—mine, for what it’s worth, / And that’s enough for me, all goes to show / That marriage is a misery and a woe.)” This rebellion against authority would seemingly disavow any reliance upon biblical texts to support her position. It is therefore surprising that in the next seventy-five lines of her speech, she makes a dozen different references to the Bible to justify her experience. She highlights characters from the Hebrew Bible—Abraham, Jacob, and above all Solomon—who precede her in polygamy; if they could have multiple wives, she should be able to enjoy multiple husbands (hers, of course, are in succession, not simultaneous).

Her engagement with the New Testament, however, goes deeper than allusiveness and illustrations. She first refers to the Gospel of John, to an episode where Jesus attends a wedding. Others, the Wife says, have used this text to bolster the claim for one marriage only: “Sith that Crist ne wernte nevere but onis / To weddyng, in the Cane of Galilee, / That by the same ensample taughte he me / That I ne sholde wedded by but ones.” She counters this argument by pointing to a different passage in John in which Jesus meets a Samaritan woman who has been wed five times, the same number

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as the Wife. Why those who refer to Cana overlook this fact, the Wife cannot understand.

Later in the prologue, the Wife engages Paul on the topics of marriage, sexual activity, and celibacy. In the fourteenth century, Chaucer's time, the church's position on marriage was strongly influenced not only by the Bible but also by writers who argued that Christians—women especially—should strive for virginity and that within marriage, sexual activity should be performed only for the sake of producing children. The Wife of Bath, who wants to enjoy sex for its own sake as often as she pleases, contradicts the establishment view. She enrolls Paul for support, in order to demonstrate how poorly the church fathers have interpreted 1 Corinthians, where Paul writes:

The New Testament and the literary canon

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is well for a man not to touch a woman." But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. This I say this by way of concession, not as a command. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried, as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion. (1 Cor. 7:1-9)

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Now concerning virgins, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.



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