

[*In Beyond the Obvious: Doorways to Understanding the New Testament,*] Dale Walker has written an engaging, insightful collection of essays that offers a fresh way to introduce the historical study of the New Testament to students of the Bible. With clarity and brevity, each essay explores a critical observation to open up historical analysis of the New Testament for the reader. Each essay is accessible to the nonspecialist and offers an ideal prompt for classroom discussion. This book is an excellent guide through the historical complexity of the production of the texts that came to be included in the New Testament.

—Christopher Mount
DePaul University

Dale Walker's new book, *Beyond the Obvious: Doorways to Understanding the New Testament*, represents an introduction to the New Testament unlike any other. Rather than outlining and analyzing each New Testament text, Walker begins each of the seven chapters of the work with an observation about the New Testament. Walker then goes "beyond the obvious" to explore the ramifications of the observation. . . . Walker's book meets students where they are intellectually, and it sensitively leads them to a point where they can begin their own exploration of the New Testament texts. . . .

—Paul B. Duff
George Washington University

Beyond the Obvious: Doorways to Understanding the New Testament provides reliable, incisive treatments of classic problems of scholarship. But it does this while also modeling the sort of creative, sustained development of basic premises that professors want to see. . . . [This book] should be ideal not only for generating classroom discussion but for anyone looking for an accessible guide to what the historical study of the New Testament is really all about.

—Matt Jackson-McCabe
Cleveland State University

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BEYOND THE
OBVIOUS
DOORWAYS TO
UNDERSTANDING
THE NEW TESTAMENT

DONALD DALE WALKER

The logo for Anselm Academic features a stylized, wavy line above the word "ANSELM" in a bold, serif font. Below "ANSELM", the word "ACADEMIC" is written in a smaller, spaced-out, serif font.

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CONVENTIONS AND ABBREVIATIONS

The essays in this volume quote the New Revised Standard Version of the English Bible (NRSV), unless indicated otherwise.

Style note from the author: In these essays, *gospel* is spelled with an uppercase letter when it indicates one or more of the canonical Gospels, that is, Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, whereas *gospel* is used in these three instances: to reference the noncanonical gospels (except when part of the title), the written genre of gospel, or a spoken message of salvation. Thus, Matthew wrote a Gospel, the *Gospel of Mary* is a noncanonical gospel, gospels are sometimes referred to as a type of biography, and Paul preached the gospel. This differentiation of *Gospel* and *gospel* is standard style, and although it aligns with the historical trend, it is prejudicial with respect to the canonical and noncanonical gospels. From the perspective of canon, the canonical Gospels are more special. But, from the point of view of the historian, this approach to capitalization skews how things unfolded and the importance of the noncanonical gospels.

KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
REB	Revised English Bible

Introduction

As best that I can tell, I have never met anyone who has not heard of the Bible. No student in any of the classes I have taught was discovering it for the first time. When standing before a room of undergraduates to introduce them to the New Testament, the challenge has always been to figure out what level of knowledge they have in order to target instruction appropriately.

To help with this, I administer a simple quiz on the first day of class. (No, it is not a factor in a student's grade.) I emphasize that it is simple, yet less than 1 percent of students ace it. The questions, I think, are transparent, assuming one knows anything about the Bible. For example, name a modern country in which events recorded in the New Testament occurred. Or, in what century did the events in the New Testament take place? Or, how many Gospels are there in the New Testament? It turns out the answers are not as obvious as I thought.

After asking how many Gospels there are, I ask students to name them. This has become my favorite question. Some students rattle them right off: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. At some point in childhood, they may have earned a candy bar for memorizing that. Others, without this training, stare blankly; but a few think for a moment and then write. These are the ones I call on to answer. These students think of a couple of names, while some come up with all four: John, Matthew, Luke, and Mark—or some other random order. I love that the information is there but is not as neatly organized as it is for those of us who memorized the canonical list. These students have a familiarity that comes from experience, not memorization.

The first time I heard all four Gospels named but not in “correct” order, I was dumbfounded. The student knew them, but not as a preprogrammed sequence. The student evidenced an interaction with

Christian scripture wholly different from mine. I suspect a further difference existed between us. I think of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as texts, growing up as I did in unadorned, “Bible-believing” churches. What if I had grown up with statues, stained-glass windows, and other religious art? Might I instead think of the Evangelists as people? People who exist in no prescribed order?

I give this quiz on the first day of class simply to orient myself to the students whom I am about to teach, and it turns into a teachable moment for all of us. The questions, we discover, are not as simple as they seem at first blush.

Take the question about the century in which New Testament events take place. The expected answer is the first century CE. Thinking it was so easy, I was embarrassed even to put that question on the quiz. I was wrong. Few undergraduates recognize the calendar as a cultural and historical artifact. The question, however, is not as straightforward as it might seem, because Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great who died in 4 BCE. At the other end of the time line, many scholars date some of the documents in the New Testament to the second century CE, so the New Testament reflects three centuries. The point is, the answers to some seemingly simple questions prove complex, not as obvious as they first appear, providing an opportunity for deeper consideration.

Simple questions are often the most consequential. For example, how many Gospels are there? The lion’s share of New Testament scholarship in the twentieth century, and especially after World War II, devoted itself to answering this question. Well, let me qualify that. Scholars expended their energy on investigating the implications of the question, as will I in chapters four and six. *This book demonstrates that what seems so obvious and straightforward is, upon reflection, a way of entering into some of the most important questions about the New Testament*—and consequently the early church and Christianity.

A Word to Readers

There are different ways to introduce the New Testament. One kind of book surveys its content, providing summaries of each of its twenty-seven books with interpretive comments. Another focuses on

the issues of each text's origin: authorship, date, location, and other questions. Typically these volumes are analytical, breaking down each question into a distinct item for discussion, while some weave the many questions into a larger narrative about Christian origins. Most run to many hundreds of pages.

This book takes a different direction and adopts the essay form to discuss multiple texts in the New Testament in an integrated manner. Individual matters of biblical interpretation do not stand as isolated points of analysis but add up to something larger, as expressed by the titles of every chapter. The titles are not clever enticements or simple topics but actual theses—that is, they make a case for something—such as chapter 6, “There Are More Than Four Gospels.” Each title is a propositional sentence, stating a premise or argument that the corresponding essay attempts to expand on and make meaningful.

The desired outcome for the reader is to learn seven basic propositions about the New Testament. The thesis of each essay points the reader to something important. I want the reader to get more than a list of names and dates. I want the reader to gain ideas that link many documents in the New Testament. Together, the essays will help orient the reader to the academic reading of the New Testament and provide a foundation for examining other issues, such as the historical Jesus or the development of Christian morality.

These essays, like most academic writing on the Bible, may surprise the reader. They do not provide advice about how to live, do not offer life-affirming encouragement, do not provide guidance on how to approach the New Testament devotionally or for worship. Instead, they reflect the academic discourse about the Christian scriptures, particularly as this conversation has evolved in the last two centuries.

The academic enterprise is ecumenical. People from many branches of Christianity participate in it, certainly from Catholicism and mainline Protestants. Students may be surprised to listen in on these conversations. What they will find are not the confident answers they may have expected but many more questions and options. With every good question scholars ask, multiple competing answers emerge.

The essays in this book reflect a conversation between scholarship and the author. I try to represent the broad stream of scholarship

as much as possible and not idiosyncratic views, yet at times, I side with a minority point of view. For example:

1. I think the Gospel according to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles were written in the second century, a later date than the vast majority of scholars. I tried to avoid making this opinion the linchpin of any arguments in these essays.
2. I agree with the majority of scholars that the same person wrote Luke and Acts. However, scholars have been challenging this, arguing that different people wrote them. I do not think they have won the day—yet—but even this once seemingly safe view now encounters dissent.
3. As I read the Gospel of John, I detect allusions to the traditions associated with the other three Gospels. This is probably a minority point of view, but the tides of scholarship have gone back and forth on the question of the influence on John's Gospel by the other three, with a range of options between yes and no.
4. I think that the Gospel of John was written earlier than Luke. This is certainly an idiosyncratic view. Nothing in the essays to follow depends on that, so it will just be an eccentricity.
5. I do reflect the consensus in scholarship that there was an early document (called Q) that contained sayings of Jesus, a document used in the writing of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. I admit, however, that I have moments when I question whether this hypothesis is one of the brilliant gains of scholarship or just an amazing house of cards, ready to collapse with one incisive insight. Though I fear that attempts to identify the stages of Q's evolution involve skating on thin ice, I have presented this, for it represents the current state of the scholarly conversation about Q. Meanwhile, on the other end of the spectrum, a number of scholars, though still a minority, think the author of Luke knew and used Matthew's Gospel, which makes Q irrelevant.
6. It may surprise readers to learn that most scholars harbor suspicions about surface claims made by the New Testament, especially where authorship is concerned. In my opinion, a minority

of letters in the New Testament were written by the alleged authors. While I have lots of good company in my suspicions, many scholars are less skeptical. These are questions that make an enormous impact on one's views of early Christian history. One cannot really paper over the differences in responses.

7. Chapter 5 presents an argument that the “beloved disciple” mentioned in John’s Gospel is Lazarus. This is a decidedly minority position but is presented because of the problem it introduces for the traditional view of John’s authorship.
8. Most problematic, the theory that “the Gospels are anonymous” is neither obvious nor easily or widely accepted. So, I have provided one thesis that the reader will have to think about with caution.

These issues could easily have made for sidebars and lengthy footnotes, but such would undermine the goal of focusing on larger themes and examining them from a variety of angles in a reasonable amount of time. I hope that, as this text is read in classes, readers raise questions and discover that their teachers have still other views.

My advice while reading is simple: keep moving, and try to see the whole. The reader should also understand that the essays are indeed idiosyncratic in their organization. There is no rigidly right or wrong way to elaborate on any of the themes in this volume. Their composition is entirely an act of rhetorical invention, and that very enterprise created moments of discovery and insight for me. If the reader starts rearranging the parts and adjusting points of emphasis, additional learning might take place. All the better.

If after finishing this book, the reader can recite seven basic observations about the New Testament (things one should recognize from the start) and understand their consequences, then I will consider this book a success. But it is only a beginning. Interest in the New Testament likely arises from curiosity about what Jesus taught, the nature of Christian faith, or the origins of Christianity. These essays will not resolve those questions, which can easily consume a lifetime of investigation but will provide information and perspectives to inform their discussion. The seven theses will help anchor and guide further reflection.

A Word to Teachers

This book represents five challenges to me as a teacher. These include (1) making knowledge meaningful, while (2) making the effort to learn manageable, and (3) striving for brevity. At the same time, I want to contribute to students' general education, helping them (4) to improve their written communication and (5) become more creative. Though the content will necessarily focus on early Christianity, I want students (and readers) to become better thinkers, writers, and innovators.

As to the first challenge, dates and lists are easy things to put on a test and easy things to grade. But do they matter? I can ask students, "In what language was the New Testament written?" But (1) do I have any *meaningful* reason for doing so? The essays in this volume attempt to elevate simple observations into meaningful ones, turning rote, fill-in-the-blank questions into clues that lead to synthetic knowledge and consequential insights, so that knowing obvious and basic facts about the New Testament leads to broader understanding.

Beyond this main objective of making the basic meaningful, this book addresses additional pedagogical concerns. Introducing the New Testament creates a struggle between an analytical approach that breaks everything down into individual, isolated questions of dates, authors, locations, etc., and a broader sweep that creates a narrative thread. These essays reflect a compromise. Each focuses on a single, very specific observation but then attempts to weave together many interpretive judgments to create a broader, more integrated perspective. I like to think of these (2) as *manageable* bites that help organize information so it can build into larger, more complex questions. The reader will not finish this book with a comprehensive view of the origin and content of the New Testament but will know seven crucial observations that apply to these narratives.

In addition to trying to make a sea of data digestible, this book (3) strives for *brevity*. It will be brief, so individuals can finish it quickly, and groups can read and discuss it in seven or fewer weeks. This, too, reflects my experiences teaching. A brilliant book that goes unread serves no purpose. Seven manageable bites, chewed and digested, can lead to real learning. To be sure, more than seven

simple, fundamental observations could be made. Others come to mind, and readers may wonder why their favorite is missing. But brevity here will permit readers to move on to other things, especially the actual reading of the biblical books.

Another objective I have as a teacher in this volume is to contribute to students' general education. For this reason, (4) I have written *essays*. Apart from discussions in class, essays are a fundamental way students communicate with teachers. Putting these essays in front of students provides an opportunity to talk about the writing of essays, a contribution, I hope, to general education as well as the particular course.

These essays will also contribute to students' general education by noting (5) examples of *creativity* within the New Testament and among those who interpret it. One way of becoming more creative is to recognize how others have done it and build a vocabulary for talking about it. The creative arts do this. Designers, for example, habitually talk about ideating, reframing, iterating, and prototyping. Books such as Vijay Kumar's *101 Design Methods* and *The Ten Types of Innovation* by Lawrence Keeley wonderfully open one's eyes to possible ways of approaching creative action. These essays will point to examples of creativity on the part of biblical authors and critics to add to students' ideas about innovation.

The essays also reflect my own exercise in creative thinking. In the first, I consciously use an analogy as a creative device and, in the book's concluding remarks, explicitly reflect on how Christians—ancient and modern—exercised creativity in the production and interpretation of the New Testament. In between, each essay is an exercise in rhetorical invention. Each could follow a different path than it does and, in fact, did during the course of writing and revising. The final result reflects a persistent dissatisfaction that kept me asking, "So what?" Anyone can memorize the names of the four canonical Gospels and repeat that information on a test. This remains a nearly mindless task unless someone asks a question. By asking, "So what?" over and over, I was able to see where the answers led and where I might take them.

