

## How Might NT Studies Thrive?

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What do we want to thrive? New Testament studies. What do we mean by this? Well, the BNTC responses circulated suggest that NT studies means different things to different people, from ancient historical criticism, through theology, to cultural receptions of the Bible. What I want to thrive is some collection of all these approaches we might find at SBL or BNTC which have come together often by happy chance to be 'NT studies' or 'Biblical Studies' but what I say tonight will work, I think, for those who prefer one element over another. What I don't think will work—and this is my dig at a fair few of the entertaining responses that were circulated—is to say, 'My preferred area of NT studies (whether ancient historical criticism, theology or reception) is, miraculously, the future of a field'. If things were that simple we would not be having this panel debate.

If NT studies is to thrive then it is worth saying something about the fraught situation much of British NT studies currently finds itself and then suggest what lessons can be learned from mistakes. There are a number of problems we face, some or maybe all will be familiar to you. When I took A Level RS it was 50% NT studies. That was common then but isn't now and the ramifications are obvious for university-level NT studies. Grade inflation has become an issue too. Only a few years ago when I was at Sheffield we could take students with 3 Cs or no As, some of whom got firsts and even went on to successfully complete PhDs and publish academic books. They would not be allowed in now and when this happened around 2012 it was devastating for biblical studies at Sheffield and put it in more direct competition with Durham and Oxbridge. I strongly dislike this insistence on higher grades alone—surely people with lower A level grades developing at university is a good thing—and it should be fought wherever possible but it is a contributing factor. Indeed, UG numbers is a central issue for survival of departments and if UGs come in there's less to worry about. But that is a big 'if', and we'll return to this, but it is clear that universities do not like small numbers in the classroom (despite the pedagogical advantages) and Greek is precisely the sort of thing likely to be affected. I'd also add that I remain unconvinced that all our colleagues in Arts and Humanities know what we do and what they *think* we do they do not necessarily like. We can be tolerated if we bring in students but if we don't then do not be surprised if NT studies is further targeted by a managerial class that seems to have some machismo drive to close things and cut costs, though obviously not their own, often enormous, salaries. At Sheffield, I repeatedly tried to convince people that we were more than what they often called (sometimes to my face) a 'mere subfield' or 'not a proper subject' or the like. Difficult though it was, persuasion did work, aided by allies in the humanities, but then 3-4 years later the personnel change and then the game began again.

Much more can be said but the problems are obvious enough (and stark) and I think I need to move on to how we might thrive in the future. My focus is on universities rather than theological colleges as my knowledge of theological colleges is very limited and Stephen (Wright) will be talking about this more.

There is no one model that will work for all, that is clear. What will have to happen is for people to play for their local strengths. Let me give some possible models (and there are no doubt more) which might help, or point to some risks that might be worth taking.

One simple suggestion is this: keep something like the status quo for some places. Anecdotally, and please correct me if I'm wrong, but places such as Durham and Edinburgh (and others) seem to be in comparatively good health. Even though complacency is obviously to be avoided, there's a certain

image each have and it seems to steadily attract students and international PhD students in particular. Indeed, this may exemplify one of the strengths of NT and biblical studies in the UK: a decent PhD recruitment, particularly in comparison with other subjects.

But NT at such places does not necessarily work elsewhere. There are strong depts like Leeds where there are one biblical studies person and no official NT person and yet RS seems to be thriving. And that may be what they want and it's not for me to push for them to do otherwise. But colleagues in this audience will be well aware of the shrinking role of NT and biblical studies in certain other departments. There are places like Sheffield where there is no department and few studying on what remains of a degree that was formerly called 'biblical studies' with languages under serious threat and, it seems, effectively abandoned. So, we might ask, what can be done with places like this?

One suggestion is to focus on embedding biblical studies and NT studies in the humanities and beyond, in terms of UG, PG and research. This is a big ask and it is part of a very slow moving process in the universities of bringing humanities subjects closer together. This more cross-disciplinary model could be one of the developments that really helps us. And it is something that can be done, and has been done. If we are really serious about the claim that the Bible and NT is historically and culturally important then why not have modules for students of English, History, cultural studies, or the humanities more broadly, on the development, use and reception of biblical texts? We have the expertise; they, largely, do not. Why not build on that and develop further modules for students to take down the line? Anecdotally, when I was at Sheffield, these sorts of modules or related ones opened up explicitly to students in other subjects were extremely popular, the highest recruiting modules we did. The other advantage of this is that English and History recruit comparatively well and what we offer them, in addition to a serious intellectual contribution, is help with staff-student ratios. Such moves should always be seen to benefit both sides, I think, and will make persuasion easier. Moreover, it releases some of the burden on us for the dreaded recruitment issue

This is an easier move for those more interested in reception history. But it doesn't mean that ancient historical criticism cannot make similar moves with e.g. Archaeology or Classics depts. However, Archaeology and Classics aren't always in the greatest of health themselves so why not make a case for helping with history depts? History does not necessarily have to begin after the Fall of Rome and given Christian and indeed Jewish histories are significant parts of how history departments function, could not Christian origins play an important role here? Why not start history a few centuries earlier? And, of course, Greek itself is not without its uses for History and literary studies.

I also mentioned research. Along with some other colleagues, I have been involved in conferences in different fields where there has been an open admission that they lack any expertise in biblical studies and the critical study of religion. Moreover, some of the interdisciplinary stuff we do can be ahead of the game (I am thinking, in this instance, of some of the excellent work done by colleagues on uses of the Bible in contemporary politics). I have heard similar stories of people working in geography, critical theory and even literary studies. We might even get involved more in RS or theology to help promote our standing on those circles vital to our thriving. And nor should this be a reception thing. We have people who could, and in some cases have, get involved in classics, ancient history, archaeology, historical theory, sociology, languages, and so on. Disciplinary boundaries should be broken down as much as possible and here we'd actually stand, as Ward Blanton suggests, in the tradition of NT scholars—if that is the right label—from the C19 and early C20. Of course, this will not suit everyone but does suit some and it is one way to promote the field widely and can feed

into a more interconnected model of UG teaching. We can show that we can teach the humanities a thing or two rather than meekly accepting our lot.

This relates to a final model and one that is the riskiest. At St Mary's we are lucky enough to use much of the money we get from the UK strength of PhD recruitment to fund the Centre for the Social-Scientific Study of the Bible and PhD resources and it works well. If others can use this model, I'd strongly encourage it. However, others are not so fortunate as university finances are often convenient fictions and colleagues from other institutions will be well aware of how money gets syphoned off to other parts of the university. But even a softer version of the standard university research centre is relatively easy to justify and can be used, *if done right*, to bring in interested colleagues from around the university. A high profile research centre is one way for those struggling with staff posts in NT or biblical studies, to keep regular seminars going, to keep research alive in universities, to be a light to the disciplines, make allies and connections, and even to be tied in with more interdisciplinary teaching. But it is also a danger. It provides university management with the perfect excuse to downsize. The model at Sheffield was to run a research centre and close the Department. This was first tried and wildly botched in 2009 and it was quite clearly an attempt to get rid of the subject while pretending not to. Whether that is currently the case at Sheffield where there is still something of a degree running for the time being, I don't know. Nevertheless, we will need to be as shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves in negotiating with the wolves who do not necessarily share our commitment to the field.

These are some suggestions. It is not going to be easy and in 10-20 years we may see a radically reduced NT provision in the universities. Even if some of our suggestions work, we may well see university NT studies looking quite different still. Some places may thrive in traditional ancient historical criticism, some may thrive in reception, some may thrive as a central feature of RS, some may thrive as a minor feature of RS. We may even see some places teaching languages and others not and that may be a sacrifice some will have to make. I would encourage those of us who work in universities to work closely with students on this. At the very least, universities are much more reluctant to treat students with contempt and student support for positive changes will mean a lot. We might even envisage BNTS playing a supportive role for those departments where the subject and staff under threat. As a society we can say things that those in precarious situations cannot and we can mobilise international support. But BNTS can also offer positive suggestions and strategies for, and in consultation with, UK universities to enable the possibility of a thriving field.