

One man's forty-year battle with Academia and the Church over a jaw-dropping, far-reaching New Testament discovery

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Buried for eighteen centuries in the Greek texts of the New Testament and now unearthed in huge quantities are important features and characteristics that no one (through the ages) ever thought existed. If scholars had known the texts of Christian Faith as they should have done, because the information has always been there and readily available, the church today, I contend, would not have been as divided and as hand tied as it is.

It is forty years now since this discovery first emerged. So what have Academia and the Church been doing about it? They have been ignoring it, or deliberately side-lining it, maybe. But why? Because it undermines what main-stream scholars have been saying about the texts? Or because it raises the possibility that they have failed to do the right thing by them and they are embarrassed? Or is it because it challenges the status quo? Or maybe it is because the source of their learning is not the texts *per se*, but the available secondary literature through which they learn all they think they need to know about them? Or maybe, it is because theirs has been a conservative education and they are convinced that everything that could possibly be known about the texts is already known? Or rather, let it not be so, they have assumed that a discovery could not be of any real importance if it was made by someone who never held a University or College post, or secured a publisher for his work? It could not be, could it, that one who was 'outside the establishment' and a Nonconformist was just the kind of researcher who would find something to turn the world of New Testament studies upside down? For whatever reason, the significant non-involvement of Academia and the Church in the making of this discovery is noted.

These last forty years have been useful however: they have seen the unearthing of much more treasure than was first imagined. It may not even yet all be known, but Academia and the Church will surely see now that the New Testament's Greek texts need to be given a place today that is both front and centre, that the texts might be given the role their writers thought they were giving them, as text begat text and each writer in turn answered questions and yet raised more, in a time of political upheaval and terror.

Scholarship surely matters. And scholars are needed at times like this, who know that they have responsibilities not only to their fellow professionals in things that absolutely do matter, but also to countless others who have committed themselves to lifetime vocations, as well as to the millions who live their lives by the faith they know. New Testament scholars are reckoned by people outside of their profession to be experts, experts essentially in regard to the texts, experts, that is, who could tell us all that *we would*

ever need or want to know about them. The Church and Academia are at a crossroads. It is important for the sake of the many that the right direction is taken.

This discovery is to be celebrated. It means we all will be able to read these texts in the ways that their first readers did. And that means, amazingly, that we all will be able to read these texts in exactly the ways that their writers always intended. Further, we will be able to appreciate and understand the texts for what they actually are, and not for what we have wanted them to be. They can be taught, preached and commended as *they were* meant by their writers.

Chapter and Verse currently help us in our reading around the texts. Eight-hundred years ago, they were first imposed on the texts. But they are vastly inferior as divisions and sub-divisions of the texts to those that the writers still signal to us in their writing presentations. Be excited about this! The writers themselves (of the first two centuries) have given us all that we have ever needed to read their texts in their way. It is true that, for at least the last seventeen-hundred years, scholars have not been able to show us these things, but when they are disclosed in all the twenty-seven texts of the New Testament these texts will delight, inform and give everyone every opportunity to interpret their meaning for themselves.

Rudimentary things about the texts have been overlooked. That is one truth. The reason these things have been hidden for so long is down, purely and simply, to deficiencies in New Testament scholarship. That is another truth. So what of today's New Testament scholars? What have they been doing? A further truth is that they have allowed themselves to be distracted from their core task. In a paper I delivered to the British New Testament Society¹ in 2018, I asked 'What is a New Testament Scholar?' I suggested that the expectations of non-scholars were way different from those of scholars themselves, and that scholars were expected not only to know important things about the texts, but also to share these things with people who desired to know all that there was to be known about them.

For seventeen centuries at least, scholars have not known the details of the Greek texts that are essential to a meaningful reading of them. They have not known the writers' discipline of writing to the rules and practices of their era. They have not known, and some have not wanted to know, it seems, that these writings are works of Hellenist (ancient) rhetoric, the products of literary-artists constrained by the requirements of an oral/aural 'world' of communication in which writers reached their *listening* audiences through readers and reciters. The features of the texts which enabled their reading were always *structure* and *writing style*. They aided *memory* and *presentation* too in the early years. It is these that will change our approach to the texts today, from what was subjective and a stab at an interpretation to that which is objective and unifying in that everybody will find themselves reading the texts in exactly the same way as each other.

¹ See my paper, 'What is a New Testament Scholar?' delivered to the British New Testament Conference in 2018: it is on my website, www.davidgpalmers.co.uk/blog. In it, I list something like fifty-four different 'specialisms'.

What happened that these reading helps disappeared? The earliest loss of valuable detail can be put at the doors of men who, in the late second century, were the first to translate copies of Greek texts into Latin and Syriac. Augustine noted this, and that they did this work of translation incompetently.² The project of assembling the Latin Vulgate version was born of this and it took Jerome his lifetime to complete the project. We note then the likeliest and earliest loss of these writing characteristics. As translators did their work, to the best of their poor abilities, the texts gave up their meaningful divisions and sub-divisions which are essential to defining their constructions. Translators mistakenly translated the 'words' and not the 'works'. The point could have been quickly reached, therefore, when scholars viewed the texts as having no structure and no real compositional discipline.³ Further, for almost eleven-hundred years after that, the church read and encouraged everyone to read only its own Latin texts.

Only with the Reformation did the Greek texts begin again to get the attention they really deserved. The attempts to give priority to the Greek texts, of course, were not welcomed by all. A time of turmoil ensued. And things grew very much worse when individuals began to translate the texts into their own mother tongues. Eventually, thankfully, things stabilised.

In 1734, a big step forward was taken by John Albert Bengel, a Swiss Lutheran, who produced his Greek text of the New Testament that year in Tübingen. It very quickly included the first critical apparatus (alternative readings from various manuscripts). And then in 1742, he produced his *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*. The German title reads: *Exegetical*

² Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, II, 11 (*De Doctr. Christ.*, ii, II) 'For the translations of the Scriptures from Hebrew into Greek can be counted, but the Latin translations are beyond numbering. In the early days of the faith, no sooner did anyone gain possession of a Greek manuscript, and imagine himself to have any facility in both languages (however slight that may be), than he made bold to translate it.'

³ Through the centuries, scholars have judged these texts to be composed free of the rules that the New Testament writers' (pagan) writing colleagues followed. By the twentieth century, they absolutely saw no reason to look to the Hellenists for help in understanding the literature they were handling. Scholarship had been *persuaded fully* that New Testament Literature was *new literature*. For a sure example of this, Rev J.N. Sanders, Dean of Peterhouse College, Cambridge, can be quoted. He was writing on 'The Literature of the New Testament' in **Peake's** single volume **Bible Commentary**: 'The New Testament can hardly be considered as literature at all, except in the most general sense of the term.... 'The aesthetic motive and the desire to produce fine writing as something worthwhile in itself are foreign to its authors whose aims were urgent and practical.... 'Lk 1.1-4 echoes the cadences and repeats the conventional claims of Hellenistic historians, but there the resemblance ends.... 'Their comparative indifference to pagan literature was on the whole an advantage to the writers of the New Testament. They gained thereby in freshness and freedom from stale conventions and artificial rhetoric. They were not conscious literary artists, obeying a convention and imitating the correct models, like Hellenistic authors, but rather practical men falling into familiar forms when these happened to provide them with effective means of expression.... 'The Literature of the New Testament is in the main something new.' On speeches and sermons, Sanders admits that Thucydides puts speeches into the mouths of his principal personages at appropriate moments and states 'he set an unfortunate precedent', but that Luke didn't follow the precedent. And on artistic/sculptural representations of literature, he notes that samples exist where artists reproduce Hellenistic themes, giving the following example, of Orpheus charming the beasts - as the pattern for Christ the Good Shepherd. See: **Peake's** (single volume) **Commentary on the Bible**, editors Matthew Black and H.H. Rowley, first published in 1962 and reprinted in 1962, 63, 64, 67, 72, 75, 76, 77 and further? It did two things: it reflected the critical position taken in all earlier generations and it *groomed* future generations to believe the same. The Commentary was recommended by the Local Preachers' Department of the Methodist Church (of Great Britain).

Annotations on the New Testament. In it, Bengel presented his notes on all the texts of the New Testament and built his case for seeing all the texts as works which included *chiasmus*, chiasm. To him, the texts revealed structuring in its most ancient forms. For Bengel it was helpful to interpreting the meaning and presentations of any work. Key to his reading was the arrangement, ABB'A', where two outer pieces, A and A' (A prime), balance each other around two middle pieces, B and B', which also balance. Other arrangements which he considered included ABA'B' and variations like ABCA'B'C' and ABCDEE'D'C'B'A'. Sadly, it was not its time. Bengel's work had to wait until the early part of the twentieth century to be given the attention it fully deserved. And the reason for this, in the main, was that John Wesley took Bengel's notes for his own work in 1754, his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*. While Wesley greatly admired Bengel and called him 'that great light of the Christian world', he wanted Bengel's work for his own preachers of the Methodist Revival. But he did not want to bother them with the technicalities of the text and so left out all reference to 'chiasm'.⁴ Reading Wesley's *Notes* reveals Bengel's own assessments of the layout of each New Testament book but without Bengel's lines of rhetorical linkage between sections. These, Wesley expunged. Though it is disappointing to discover any real breakthrough in any real understanding then of style and structure, in either Bengel's

⁴ It has to be admitted that Wesley wronged Bengel, but for his own 'good reason'. We start with the doctrinal standards of Methodism which are laid down in Section 4 of the Methodist Church Act of 1976. It begins: 'The Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ... It tells, 'The doctrines of the evangelical faith... are based upon divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures...' And it tells further that the 'evangelical doctrines to which the preachers of the Methodist Church are pledged are contained in Wesley's *Notes on the New Testament* and the first four volumes of his sermons.' It then states, 'The Notes on the New Testament and the 44 Sermons are not intended to impose a system of formal or speculative theology on Methodist preachers, but to set up *standards of preaching and belief* which should secure loyalty to the fundamental truths...' In his 1754 Preface to the *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (London Epworth Press, Edition 1976), in paragraph three, Wesley tells that he is not writing for the learned who were 'provided with many other helps'; he was not writing 'for men of long and deep experience in the ways and Word of God (I desire to sit at their feet and learn from them, he said).' He 'writes', he says, 'chiefly for plain, unlettered men, who understand only their mother-tongue, and yet reverence and love the Word of God, and have a desire to save souls.' In the eleventh paragraph of the Preface, Wesley wrote disparagingly of 'the division of the New Testament into chapters.' It was 'made in the dark ages,' he said, 'and very incorrectly, often separating things that are closely joined, and joining those that are entirely distinct from each other.' He determined, therefore, to educate Methodists in the reading of the New Testament by presenting the 'chain of arguments in each book' in *tables* at the beginning of each of his presentations. He thought it would be more use than prefixing the argument 'to each chapter'. He was intent on introducing into Methodism an exegetical approach to the New Testament that he found in the works of J.A. Bengel. Wesley wrote about the New Testament's 'inspired writers' as having employed 'exactly regular series of arguments, a precise expression of their meaning and a genuine vigour of suitable affections'. What he meant by this can be established only by reference to Bengel. He was an able communicator who sought to guide the reader to ascertain meaning for him/herself. His work defined exegesis: readers of the New Testament were to import nothing into Scripture, but to draw out of it everything that it *really* contained. Wesley took to this approach and wanted it for Methodism. Bengel's hope was that his *Gnomon*... would help rekindle interest in the study of the New Testament. He was not disappointed. And none did more than Wesley to promote this. 'Apply thyself wholly to the text,' Bengel directed; 'apply the text wholly to thyself.' The modern critical era began with Bengel's 1734 and 1742 publications. The evangelical awakening and John Wesley gave it impetus. Yes, Wesley's use of Bengel's work was purely pragmatic and much abridged. It was kept as simple as possible lest he 'should leave the ordinary reader behind'. So it was not for him to present all that Bengel wrote about the *grammatico-historical rules* of Greek literature.

Gnomon... or Wesley's Explanatory Notes..., it is heartening to learn that someone in the mid-eighteenth century had begun to ask questions of the texts that others were not asking.

So it is since then, and even all through the era of modern biblical-criticism, that translators have continued to work with texts that others punctuated and paragraphed before them. No one, it seems, 'parsed' the texts and rhetorically examined them simultaneously for themselves. Did they think the work had been done? That it had been done well enough, that they didn't need to go back to first principles themselves and give their time to 'parting' a text through applying their own skills in Greek grammar and composition? All through the ages, it seems, scholars believed too much in the perspicacity of their predecessors! That is, in every generation there were few like Bengel who saw the need to determine the writers' divisions of their texts for themselves, that is, the parts, sub-wholes and wholes, the sections, paragraphs, sentences, clauses and words. So many questions about the texts were never raised.

Today, therefore, translators will be surprised to discover that they now have much more to do than translate 'words'. The 'works' are made up of 'words' set in a repeating (*dactylic* and *Homeric*) writing style which aids punctuation and which reveals structure, where the same writing style is employed from the opening of a text to its closing. And structure itself, as Augustine says⁵, is *essential* to revealing meaning and purpose. There is much for many to delight in and there is much for many to do. A huge agenda awaits a rising generation of scholars. A revolution in New Testament reading (and who knows what else) is prompted by this discovery which was first made forty years ago in Cambridge by an undergraduate (of all people!) who just happened also to be a 'Methodist' and 'an Architect'.

Some History about this Discovery:

It was at Wesley House and Fitzwilliam College in Cambridge in 1982, that this breakthrough in the reading of the New Testament texts first signalled itself to me. I was an undergraduate who was training to be ordained a Methodist Minister (Presbyter), an Architect who had trained previously at University College London in the nineteen-sixties and -seventies. Before I left Cambridge in 1983, I knew I had the structural designs of the Four Gospels and Acts just about fully sorted.

It happened this way. On the day of the last of my Cambridge finals and an exam in 'The religious thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries', and after a bath and evening hall (for a meal), I went to my study and worked there till 4.30am. The session began with my sweeping my books and papers (for my last exam) off my table with the back of my right hand onto the floor. Onto my study table I placed my own folder of collected questions on the Gospels and Acts which I reached down from the top shelf where it had sat waiting for just this moment. That summer, before my (and my family's) move to Cardiff, for

⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, III.5; *On Christian Doctrine*, IV.6-7.

my first post-ordination ministry, I worked on the texts every day and every minute that I could. As I left Cambridge, I just about knew all that there was to know about their structures. I also knew that I had a lot of new material in my hands that no one else was holding in theirs. I was moved by the thought and was open to re-considering what was my particular 'calling' in life.

In Cardiff, after settling into my new ministry, I approached the University there to see if I might register for part-time PhD studies. What follows, in my own words, with a little editing, is taken from my book, ***New Testament: New Testimony to the Skills of the Writers and First Readers***⁶:

When in ministry I arrived in Cardiff and sought to register as a part-time post graduate research student at the University there, the Dean of the Faculty (and Principal of a local Theological College) asked me to say what it was that I had been doing. I'd barely started before he became very rude, 'Do you mean to tell me about the New Testament?' A few minutes later, he was barking, 'Do you want us to write your book for you?' I left awkwardly at the end of the interview. The Vice Dean was swiftly on the phone to me. He'd been there in the interview room. He invited me to his own home later that day. The first thing he said to me, before even I had got over his front door mat, was that if he had been me he would have got up and walked out! It's what I had wanted to do, I told him, but I stayed because I really wanted to make progress with this research.

When I did get to publish in Cardiff in 1988 the results of my research on the literary structures of the Four Gospels, Acts and the Revelation to John⁷, my first book ***Sliced Bread...***⁸ was subjected to reviews that demonstrated an almost total resistance to the results of my analysis. All I really got, after all that work and the risky expense of borrowing money from the bank to self-publish, was, 'the Revelation maybe, but not surely the gospels.'⁹ When my successful Glasgow University PhD Thesis, ***The Markan Matrix...***¹⁰, my second self-published book in 1999, was reviewed, the first reviewers responded pretty much in the same way. They could not be excited by it, even though it focused wholly on the Greek text and included a full rhetorical analysis and 'parsing' of it, while testing the whole compilation against the rules and practices of writing in that era and exposing the book's structure and purpose. But eventually another review did surface with the April 2001 issue of *JTS* (Journal for Theological Studies). It was a long and thorough review, but towards its close the writer could only say, 'Much as one respects the scholarship and conviction that has gone into this book, *sadly it runs counter to too many currents and consensuses in*

⁶ Palmer, David G., ***New Testament: New Testimony to the Skills of the Writers and First Readers*** (Fifth, Illustrated Exhibition Edition), Ceridwen Press, Church Gresley, 2016, first published in Sri Lanka in 2004.

⁷ His New Jersey congregation during a summer exchange in 1986 with a United Methodist Minister led him to this book.

⁸ Palmer, David G., ***Sliced Bread: the Four Gospels, Acts and Revelation: their Literary Structures***, Ceridwen Press, Cardiff, 1988.

⁹ The Expository Times Vol III, No.6, March 2000 and Methodist Recorder, 17 November 1988.

¹⁰ Palmer, David G., ***The Markan Matrix: A Literary-Structural Analysis of the Gospel of Mark***, Ceridwen Press, Paisley, 1999.

Markan Scholarship.’ This phrasing astonished me. What was this word ‘sadly’ doing in the summary? I’d put on the back cover of the book that it challenged just about everything that had ever been written about this gospel. I was a little miffed! I felt I was not responsible for other people’s ‘currents and consensuses’. As my PhD was awarded me with due ceremony at Glasgow University in 1998, in the quad after, I got an unexpected apology from my supervisor; he expressed his thought that I could have had someone else who might have been more helpful. I assured him otherwise. But meeting up with him a few years later in Exeter for the annual conference of The British New Testament Society, I tried talking with him, in the bar, about the progress I was making with my literary analyses of other books. He shocked me when he began shouting at me to drop my futile studies!

Resistance from academia has been my constant reward. I was on the mailing list for the British New Testament Society from 2003 and received many notices about events that other people put through the secretary during the first decade of the twenty-first century. But when I attempted to share details of my own events my requests were blocked, or just simply ignored. Am I saying too much? It doesn’t make for comfortable reading, I guess. And it must sound like sour grapes. But I think it needs to be said. It was during that time that I found that the Society seemed unsure of its role. Should we, or should we not have contact addresses for each other? Could we, or could we not call ourselves ‘members’? Was the Society there to support research, or not? Or was it there for the Professors and not the Post Graduates and the Post Doctoral scholars? It has, of course, now settled these matters. Yet, I still wait for any professional scholar to ask me: May I examine with you what you are proposing?¹¹ What continues to be affirmed as the years go by, and I find it to be so even among young Methodist scholars, is that ‘no one’ thinks it possible that there is anything important to know about the texts, that we don’t already know!

What no one in academia has done, as I have done, is to commit *themselves* to a ‘purely literary analysis’ of the Greek texts of the New Testament Books. This I did begin to do myself in 1982 after I had been dragged ‘kicking and screaming’ to Cambridge. ‘You have a degree in Architecture. You’ll have one in Theology! And you’ll go this year, or you won’t be going at all!’ This was what I was told by the then Secretary for Ministerial Training. After my two years at All Nations Christian College, I was involved full-time in a busy lay ministry in the Methodist Churches of Holloway and Camden Town and I really did not want to leave a very fulfilling appointment. But as I look back, I am so glad that attitude was taken with me. What got me onto my lifetime’s study is this. To save myself from doing one course, with its lectures, terms’ papers and annual exams, I opted instead to tackle an Undergraduate Dissertation on the Central Section of Luke’s Gospel. (Everybody then thought the section began at 9.51. And no one then knew where it ended, or what held it all together! Even now,

¹¹ My last attempt so far at communicating my findings through the BNTS is still visibly recorded on its Facebook site. On the 31 May, I posted a link to my website and a notice of my latest book launch. I mentioned that the thesis of the book builds on an observation of Augustine. One member responded, ‘Forgive me for not whipping out my credit card in unbridled enthusiasm.’ Another asked, ‘Oof. And what observation of Augustine are we talking about??’ I replied with reference to the quote I include in my note 2 above.

two-volume commentaries on Luke begin their second volume at 9.51!¹²) If I had not taken the ‘undergraduate dissertation’ option in 1982, I am very sure that I would not be writing as I am today.

The first time I held an Exhibition to promote the findings of my New Testament research was in Leicester in the Spring of 2008. It toured three local churches. Although I had produced pen and ink A1-sized drawings of the Four Gospels, Acts and the Revelation in 1989 (while on a three-month sabbatical) I had not exhibited them before. The idea for a national exhibition tour, therefore, was well set in my mind. I planned it. I would retire a year early (as I would be allowed to do) and, beforehand, seek out a property where I might have a studio in which I could prepare and store artworks at Double A0 size. A public house which closed in October 2008 became our successful target in June 2010 before my (early) retirement in 2012. In October 2014, I had my first artworks that I could take to the Christian Resources Exhibition (CRE) in Manchester, along with some posters, jigsaws, mugs, cards, etc. to promote the results of my research. In February 2015, I had enough artworks to start a tour with An Exhibition in Art: ‘Seeing the New Testament for what it is’. The intended conclusion of the tour would be in my old home town of Hull, City of Culture, 2017. So, after the launch at Leicester, it visited Oxford, then Cambridge, Cliff College, various locations in South Derbyshire, Edinburgh, Birmingham (for the Christian Resources Exhibition), Cardiff, London (but not at any prestigious Methodist Church), Paisley, Birmingham, Durham, CRE - London Christian Book Fair, the Derby Book Festival, the British New Testament Conference at Chester and last of all Hull.

I sent posters for display to many Professors and Departments of Theology, Biblical and Religious Studies. As I half-expected, there were mostly no replies and no professional attendances at any one of my talks. Today, I may view some of my choices of venue to have been mistaken, choosing city-central Methodist Churches where I thought I might be welcomed free of charge. It was unfortunate that, at the one where I was asked to pay a rental and give proof of my own third-party insurance cover, I was greeted by the minister (a supernumerary who was temping there for a year) who announced immediately to me that the poster which I had sent ahead had upset already three of his congregation who were world-renown bible scholars! What was it I had written? I wondered then and I still wonder. Even, when at the British New Testament Conference I got permission to set up my (publisher’s) stall alongside the usual publishers and so set things there, there was no persuading some Professors even to take a look. My stall, as for my exhibition tour included, besides my books, jigsaws, mugs, charts and other things too! It is the charts I think that are my problem. New Testament scholars (and New Testament publishers) have an aversion to charts! They prefer pages of words set in chapters. Indeed, I recall on one occasion sending material to a journal on translation; it was rejected for publishing because it did not fit their publishing format!

Indeed also, I recall my first attendance at a British New Testament Conference. In a plenary session, the speaker referred to Lk. 9.51 as the beginning of the Luke’s central section. I said, so that those around me could hear, ‘it’s 9.43b’. My

¹² Consider this: the largest section, by far, of any New Testament book begins at Lk. 9.43b, half-way through a verse! Structurally-speaking, it is, of course, a meaningless kind of reference which does the writer no justice.

comment attracted only strange looks. And no one asked me at the conclusion of the lecture why I had said what I did. Over the years since, I have had my own paper proposals accepted by different seminar groups. But seared into my memory and to my embarrassment are two that I would have done differently on reflection. There was one when I made it my purpose to share my proposal for the structure of the Revelation to John. The other was when I presented my work on the structure of Acts in its relation to Luke, even also to Mark and Matthew. (Since this one, all my paper proposals have been unsuccessful.) With the first of these seminars, I angered an individual because I had not engaged with the secondary literature. The second seminar preceded another in the schedule and left me without any feedback: I had tried to present too much information and left no time for questions and comments. (If I had had a college appointment, of course, I would have had a colleague read or hear my paper beforehand.) I am also reminded of an earlier occasion. A Professor came up to me and said, You're the one, aren't you, who is interested in numbers? (She knew of my PhD thesis on Mark.) I said respectfully that the writer of Mark's Gospel is the one who was interested in numbers and I referred her to Mk. 8.18-21 which satisfied her. (As fellow Methodists, we enjoyed several conversations at meal times.) Yet it is true: scholars are wary of 'numbers', especially when the writers appear to be attaching meaning to the numbers they use. There are many uses of numbers and especially triangular numbers in the New Testament which are used symbolically. Twice over, triangular numbers are placed where they are in the texts to enable the readers to check they are reading the texts as the writers intended. The texts do need to be read as the writers intended them to.

The first texts that I fully-parsed and rhetorically analysed were summarised on a 'msn-users' website on Bible Sunday (the old one) in 2003. Since that time, ***New Testament: New Testimony to the Skills of the Writers and First Readers*** has seen five editions - published between 2004 and 2016. Now, it is available on a website, in a new edition with revisions and additions, five years on from the fifth book publication with many more literal English translations of the texts - for which, see: www.new-testament-new-testimony.com. It is still the only publication on the New Testament since Bengel's *Gnomon...* which attempts a rhetorical analysis of all the texts. And it is still the only one ever to include a Rhetorical Table of all the texts. Included among the documents are art-works, tables, the Greek text - fully-parsed and rhetorically analysed, and 60% of the New Testament in literal English.

'Biblically naïve and theologically naked' is how scholars have at times described church-going people. But now, the tables are turned. Church-goers and those who have stopped church-going, Christians and those who have turned away from the faith will have every right to feel aggrieved. Church leaders and New Testament Professors have not bothered themselves enough with their own readings of the Greek texts. They see so little and understand so little still about the writers' writing skills and writing endeavours. And they are still a long way off from reading the texts as the first readers did.

What are the Benefits of this Literary Discovery?

Because of this comprehensive literary study and purely literary analysis of the Greek texts of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, we can know things today that we never thought there were to be known! And this latter point is necessarily underlined. It is because modern scholarship has never expected to find things as revealed here, that it has been wary of what has been shared about this discovery throughout the last forty years. The resulting accumulation of the results of rigorous analysis is surely helpful now. As a result of this research and its findings, the following are the things we can do today:

- we can jettison 'chapter and verse' and use the books' self-referencing systems;
- we can identify the writers' common writing style;
- we can locate with pinpoint precision the original divisions in the texts
and define whole book structures;
- we can establish the leading ideas of the books and the purposes behind them;
- we can reconstitute and critically restore original texts;
- we can read, teach and preach the books as their writers always intended;
- we can acknowledge the symbolic and structural use of numbers and triangular
numbers; and
- we can delight in the books in all the ways that we were meant to.

All this together means that we can dispense with the old subjective ways of reading that focused principally on the contents of the writings. Instead, we can read the texts for both their contents and their grammatical form in an exercise of objectivity. And because we can do this we will do it in exactly the same way as each other, anywhere and at any time.

New Testament scholarship faces its biggest challenge ever: new translations, editions, lectionaries, reading schemes, commentaries and training courses are all required. Yet, New Testament scholarship is in crisis today. Just as the profession needs a great team of qualified researchers, it is haemorrhaging undergraduate students and postgraduates in both the UK and the USA. And its work overall is being seen as less relevant, less helpful and less influential than ever it used to be, both in the world and in the church. Consider what 'sure results' of New Testament Studies can be said to have been shared with the church in the last thousand years, the last hundred, or the last ten. Yet, we now have here a new focus for research which demands mass engagement. It is an exercise in objectivity that is waiting to be done. Consider, for example, the facts about Psalm 119. The one who reads it in Hebrew knows what they are reading. Its arrangement is understood because it is easily defined; it discloses itself in the same way to every Hebrew reader. (It is laid out to the Hebrew alphabet where eight lines of text begin with the same letter, followed by eight lines beginning with the next, and so on.) So too, in the future, the texts of the New Testament will be read by Greek readers in the very same way, or if they are translated in a

literal way in every language of the world they will be read in the same ways by everyone everywhere, whatever their language.

Because the New Testament texts are disciplined in their writing, they beg disciplined reading. It cannot be that they continue to be read in ignorance. And, fortuitously, the Christian Church has preserved in its Canon of the New Testament a set of texts that were written to operate in a world of oral/aural communication. As such, their disciplined presentations meant these Greek texts were 'heard' by everyone everywhere in exactly the same way. These documents were prepared for memorising by people who could not read. It also means we now have more help than we ever thought we had - to both read and understand these texts. Now we read them in a slipshod fashion, ignorant of our heritage, to chapter and verse and lectionary tables which hardly ever begin and end a reading where their writers would have wanted. It is some heritage, but one that is currently unappreciated, and one from which we currently gain nothing. But we could right now be reading these texts as the writers intended. The reasons we are not, however, are many. Obstacles abound.

In a recent article in the Church Times for Bible Sunday 2023¹³, I was struck by the author's complacency and satisfaction with all things as they are. It worried me enough that I persuaded myself to send an email to the writer. Hers was a kind and almost immediate response, but it showed me she really did not want to engage with me over the following:

In her article, she wrote, 'Punctuation and layout were not invented in Bible days; so words must do those jobs on their own.' I replied in my email, 'But besides the 'words', all the New Testament texts reveal 'structure' and 'a repeating style' which do the job of punctuation and portray layout. They also provide self-referencing for the parts that make up their wholes. Chapter and verse were never needed. Their continuing use, eight-hundred years after their introduction, reveals we are nowhere near where we could be with New Testament Studies today.

She wrote in her article, 'When we read a Bible book, working out what connects with what, and which words, sentences, or stories belong together, is a reading skill as essential as learning the alphabet. We divvy up the Bible into sections (this can be called "chunking"), either within books, or across the whole Bible....' So I wrote, 'It is a reading skill indeed, even as essential as learning the alphabet, but where is the evidence that anyone knows what it is and teaches it? I demonstrate in my work that for the past eighteen centuries no one has been reading the texts in the ways that the writers intended. Augustine himself, as you will know, has something derogatory to say about those who began translating the Greek texts into Latin and Old Syriac.'

Her article focused on texts talking to each other within or between Testaments, 'Lectionary compilers help us to see this,' she wrote. 'They draw on the wisdom of Bible translators and exegetes, experts who pour a lifetime of scholarship into working out where sentences begin and end, whether words should be capitalised.... and how to arrange text on the page so as to help modern readers, and to express authors' meanings.' I replied, I

¹³ Church Times No. 8380, 27 October 2023 p.18

myself have spent forty years working out where sentences begin and end, and how to arrange the text on the page, but few have even bothered to look at what I have found and published. I present the first Rhetorical Table of the New Testament! Or, we might say, it is the first since Bengel who charted each book but who failed to provide a summary chart. Bible translators continue to get between the writers and their audiences. Exegetes fail to recognise either a text's structure or its style. Didn't Augustine say something too about the need of knowing a text's structure if one was to know its purpose and meaning.'

In her next paragraph, we read, 'We do not know how blest we are to have our modern Bibles presented to us with such beautiful clarity, and with every assistance for wise reading.' I wrote, 'Because I can see what I can now see, I cannot share your view. The contrary is the case. Bibles do not help as they could help. I've challenged the staff of the Bible Society over this for forty years. All they can say to me is that they have no scholars in Swindon. I can point you to every translation and presentation, including the King James, where translators and editors fail the writers...'

In the next paragraph, she wrote, 'Every form of technology which helps the Bible to be read has been lavished upon us... the Word has to speak with equal clarity to the occasional visitor...' In brief, I responded, 'I get your point that all readers, whoever they are, deserve the best help. But they are not getting it!'

As I concluded my email, I wrote, 'I see that you are a staff member of the Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge, covering Classical Greek and Latin language and literature (esp. Caesar and Livy); Augustine; Early Christianity (with special interest in historiography); Liturgical language and praxis; and Theory and practice of translation (Greek and Latin into English)....'

I mentioned above the British and Foreign Bible Society. I have contacted them several times over forty years. The last time I wrote was on line, filling in a form on their website, offering myself as a volunteer. I'm still waiting for the reply. I saw they needed help.

The Bible Society was offering ways on their website to read the texts they were making available. On Matthew's Gospel, they say, '(It) strikingly has five 'discourses' or five major pieces of teaching in it. These may give us a clue to the structure of Matthew.' And then they present their table:

1.1–2.23 Title and birth narratives

3.1–7.29 The baptism of Jesus and the first discourse (Sermon on the Mount)

8.1–10.42 Miracles, the calling of the disciples and the second discourse (on mission and suffering)

11.1–13.52 Conflict with opponents and the third discourse (a series of parables)

13.53–18.35 Increasing conflict and opposition and the fourth discourse (preparation of the disciples for Jesus' absence)

19.1–20.34 Jesus travels to Jerusalem and the fifth discourse (the coming end)

21.1–28.20 Epilogue or culmination: the last week of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and the great commission

As a plan, it does not work. See 7.28, 11.1, 13.53, 19.1, 26.1. There is no regularity of use of the well-known repeating phrase, 'When Jesus had finished...'. It is found variously positioned: at the beginning, at the end and in the middle of a section!

I then began looking at the Society's other so-called plans, or frameworks. I was disappointed to find that Mark's Gospel looked pretty much the same as it did fifty years ago, never mind forty years ago! See:

The beginning of the gospel 1.1–13
Jesus' public ministry in Galilee 1.14—9.50
From Galilee to Jerusalem 10.1–52
The last week in and near Jerusalem 11.1—15.47
The resurrection of Jesus 16.1–8
The appearances and ascension of the risen Lord 16.9–20

In my notes to my offering voluntary help, I asked who was responsible for these 'plans'. I gave them my website addresses that they might compare the help they were offering the general public with the help I was offering the Bible Society.

NT Wright was conscious in his early years of 'being constrained by a sense of the discipline of New Testament Studies and a sense of the ruling elite in theology and biblical studies.' I have been too. And over the last forty years, I have uncovered not only a lack of discipline in New Testament Studies, but also a lack of intent overall to present anything useful to the church and a lack in particular of a sense of personal duty to the New Testament's writers, to represent their endeavours and present their texts in the ways that they intended.

One obstacle today of course is that people think, like the writer for the Church Times' Bible Sunday article, that the Bibles they possess are the best that they could possibly be! Because of what I can see, I can say categorically that our modern Bibles do not do what they could do. 'Beautiful clarity' is only possible when we ditch chapter and verse and present the texts to the divisions and sub-divisions of the writers themselves. With this one step, we would begin to provide 'every assistance for wise reading', but it would be a beginning only. Translation and presentation need a lot of attention. Currently, people can neither see nor hear what it is that they are missing. It is as though Isaiah 6.9-10 is doing the rounds once again in the twenty-first century as it did during the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles, during the lifetime of Christ and immediately after, and as it appears to have done over the past eighteen centuries: God's people are 'ever seeing, but never understanding', 'ever hearing but never perceiving....'

Another obstacle, of course, is the disposition of scholars towards conservative evangelicalism which properly builds its case on the Bible as the Word of God. While my two-year Bible College experience left its mark on me in a positive way, each time I tried sending my own books to the college bookstall, outlining changes that would be needed in the reading of the texts, because of the college's conservative evangelical stance staff were advised to show no interest in them. One staff member wrote privately, encouraging me, at

the same time as expressing her sorrow at the college's judgement. No book of mine has ever been sold in their bookshop! And no conservative evangelical has ever got excited about my work! What is it they fear? It is the Bible they don't yet know!

My promise is that we really do have the details of first-century writing construction that will help us answer the questions that have been stacking up over the centuries. Scholars have wrestled with many issues and often in the past with each other over what should be taught and how the texts might be interpreted.

Our first question has to be: What are we reading when we read these texts? We are reading the works of men who wrote to the rules of writing which had been established by men over seven-hundred years (or, as some would say, over nine-hundred years) from the time of Homer and his *Iliad*.

And now the second question: Are they inspired? Divinely inspired? The answer is in the affirmative and it is supplied by the church. Its second century leaders collected and preserved these texts because they judged them to be divinely inspired. Interestingly too, both the first and the last of the New Testament's texts make their own appeal to their being God's Word: see 1 Thessalonians 1.5 and 2.13, and 2 Peter 1.20-21 (possibly a long while after 2 Timothy - and 3.16-17 - was written).

We now question: What are the gospels? Are they histories, or something else? They come first in the age-old ordering of the books of the New Testament, and that in itself misleads all readers. There is a good case to be put for re-ordering the New Testament for serious study purposes. The gospels were written after Paul's letters and they came, as the evidence clearly suggests, after AD 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. Mark's Gospel, the first to be written, answers the question people were asking, What was the God of the Jews and Christians doing when he let the Roman armies destroy the headquarters of both the Old and New Covenants, kill millions and wipe out and pillage the Empire's second largest and most wealthy city? It is in his structuring of Mark's Gospel, in its Four Series of Seven Days, that the writer suitably reveals his explanation. Of the four gospels, Mark's is a Drama with a Challenge for audiences around the Roman Empire; Matthew's is a Teaching Manual, helpful to first century Jewish Christians in particular; Luke's offers certainty in regard to 'the Word' and 'the Words' (see the Prologue in the Greek), it is written for the Gentile world of that era; and John's is an Evangelistic composition which, beginning with a focus on 'the Word', displays two endeavours, the first to show the Signs which Jesus gave of himself in life, as to who he was and what he was present to do, and the second to present Jesus' own teaching (the Church's teaching in fact) about his death, his Passion and Resurrection, and at the last present his challenge to the 'listener' to believe the two presentations.

It is of course a sketchy answer to the question, What are the Gospels? But here I am seeking simply to show how the discussion will go. Now we have to ask: Are they histories? The short answer is: they are not. The writers themselves never expected that their texts would be read as histories. They are eternal truth, creed, the belief of the church set to stories and presented in series of stories, or connected stories. The justifications for this are many. Here, I introduce only a few. Paul and Peter were dead. They were executed in Rome,

legend says in the late 60s, after Christians had been blamed for Rome's burning in 64. The seat of Mother Church was in Jerusalem and if they had not died earlier, in AD 70 the last of the witnesses to Jesus' life, including the apostles, will have perished in the pogrom. The facts in the gospels about Jesus' life, his mission, some of his teachings and his death and resurrection came from Paul's earlier writings (of the 50s and 60s). Ideas about Jesus and his life came from the scriptures of the Old Covenant. And other features came from reflections on the horrific events of the Jewish War, 67-73; they required interpretation by the church. Factual differences between the gospel accounts are many: as one was written for a set purpose and followed by another for a different purpose, details of the text were changed easily by the writers (because they were not facts). Very clear points of difference between the gospels exist and they are many. As such these differences really do undermine any historical reading of the texts. Each gospel requires to be read separately, each one for what it means, each without reference to the other, to establish the writer's purpose for each, to establish his meaning and not the histories of the events, or their historical ordering.

It does seem to me that the church should take greater care today than it does with its Sunday lectionary readings of the Gospels, its homilies and its sermons. The writers did not intend their presentations to be used in pieces, or indeed as pieces to be addressed as if they were pieces of historical, day-to-day truth. Rather, they were interested in presenting what was soteriological truth which is the truth about our salvation and our eternal life, told through stories and connected stories. To be avoided is the kind of confusion which preachers cause when they raise questions like, 'How did Jesus feel when he entered Jerusalem?' It is not the historicity but the meaning which the writers want us to take from their texts.

That all the books of the New Testament have recognisably Hellenist purposes and literary structures is to be acknowledged. For example, contrary to the *five* chapters of presentation that we have in our Bibles for the letters of James, 1 Peter and 1 John the writers presented *four* sections in the form of the chiasm ABB'A', two outer paralleling sections enclosing two inner paralleling sections. It is the classic chiasm of Bengel's focus, though for these letters of the New Testament he did in fact fail to recognise its use. Further, he did not see that the Four Series of Seven Days of Mark's Gospel were similarly arranged in an ABB'A' sequence, or that each of these Series of Days were arranged to the same scheme as Homer's *Iliad* of ABB'XABB', where the first three days, beginning with an introductory day, A, followed by two paralleling days, B and B' (which is dactylic in literary terms), has its parallel as a whole after the turning point/middle day, where in the first three days, Jesus is fulfilling and completing the Old Covenant and in the second three days, after the turning point, he is establishing the New Covenant. The whole story narrative in Mark's Gospel lies within the telling of the opening day, day one, of the sun going down on the Sabbath of the Old Covenant and the telling of the closing day, day twenty-eight, when the sun rises on the Sabbath of the New Covenant. This framework, though artificial, serves the primary purpose of the writer which is to present his drama, the 'Beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ', and tell what God was doing.

On 1 John (of the three letters I have mentioned above) many scholars have attempted descriptions of its composition. Writing as they do with the help of a predecessor's attempt at a solution they adopt some of their language and description for their own presentation. The next commentator does the same and maybe draws also from another, and so on. But not one of them, not one of the thirty-one by my count, in print, has been able to present the text as the writer intended. It is to the shame of New Testament Studies, both ancient and modern! Even the textual question of 1 Jn 5.7-8, as to whether it is original to the text or not, can be answered: the structure and the style of the letter together say that it is. To an extent, I confess that I am enjoying this moment, given the cost to me of my research in time and effort and finance, as also the brickbats I have suffered from University and College scholars over forty years, but it is no boast of mine that I am writing this way because I am the one who has found these things. Anyone could have done what I have been doing, but they haven't! Rather, it is the writers of these texts who will have their day, even their era, and it is their skill and their dedication to their calling long ago which they fulfilled in their service of the church and of Christ that will be our focus. In this we all will boast.

Questions abound and there are answers to them all. Did the writer of Mark's Gospel write an Epilogue? Yes he did, he wrote an Aristotelian Epilogue, one to the rule of Aristotle, that when you get to your Epilogue, you must not use *Kαὶ* ('And') to begin your sentences. (Because they are not found in the longer ending, 16.9-20, scholars say Mark did not write it.) My reading is that 16.9-16,19-20a is the original Epilogue. What is more, scholars who advise that the Epilogue is not to be found in the longer ending say that the Prologue is to be found in Mk. 1.1-13 (or 1.1-15 in some cases). In this, they are all misguided. They read only the contents of this text. They do not read it for its opening and repeating phrases and its grammatical style of ABB' (abb'), where A is the introductory piece, B is the first development and B' is the second and paralleling/completing development of each three-part whole. This is *dactylic*. In Homer's *Iliad*, the style is *dactylic hexameter*. The Prologue of Mark's Gospel is aping Homer's style and is 1.2-20. 1.1 is the title, originally, 'Beginning / of the Gospel / of Jesus Christ' (an abb' construction).

Another question: What about the number '153' towards the end of John's Gospel? Is there anything to be made of it? Yes, a sure answer really does exist, and it is one that the writer wanted everyone to get right because it would mean that everyone was reading his gospel as he intended. For the reader, there is a revelation in the story of the catch 'of large fish', but also in the reading of it there is confirmation, confirmation (because of similar number usage earlier in the gospel) that the reader has been reading the gospel as the writer wanted them to, given its seven sections each with their twelve parts per section.

What then are we to make of the Revelation and 1 John, seeing that we are focused here on the Johannine section of the New Testament? The structure of the Revelation reveals itself as a seven times seven presentation. In both the Gospel and the Apocalypse, the Jewish menorah has its structural reference for its symbolical meaning in its extended chiasmic form, 1,2,3,C,3',2',1'.

So this presentation could continue in this way and with more of the same. But here I choose to desist. My presentations, especially my charts, my layouts of the Greek texts and much literal English translation are available elsewhere. See below for where to find them.

To Conclude:

As the fortieth anniversary of my literary analysis of the Gospels and Acts has now come and gone with the summer of 2023 (and with it also the fortieth anniversary of my ordination), I am updating this paper which I wrote in the lead up to it, to provoke interest in my discoveries. As it has not done that, I am rewriting it (still) to see if it will now kick-start interest, if possible, across both Academia and the Church. To celebrate the first twenty-five years of my venture, I settled on a very pricy two-page centre-fold spread in the *Methodist Recorder*, 7th August 2008. It was supposed to attract lots of attention to what I had been discovering. I have to report, however, that I received no written or verbal response. It was that (twenty-fifth) anniversary that saw me trial a Travelling Exhibition that summer in Leicester, and it was this, in turn, which prompted my later nation-wide travelling exhibition of 2015-17. The fortieth anniversary has come and gone. Maybe before the fiftieth, I will have success. It is for the sake of the writers of the New Testament texts that I keep on keeping on, of course, but it is for today's and tomorrow's readers too, that they may have the advantage of informed and disciplined reading.

I now think of the things with which I wrestled as I sought to understand Writing and Publication in the first centuries of the Christian Era. I have two of my own papers that I want to recommend, rather than add them here as Addenda. The first is: 'On Writers, Readers and Reciters'. It can be found in my book, *New Testament: New Testimony....* (the Fifth Edition). The second is: 'A Reconstruction of the Writing World in which the New Testament Texts were written'. It is a paper I wrote in appreciation of the work of Burton L Mack who died on the 9th March 2022. My paper was intended for presentation at the British New Testament Conference that year, but my proposal was turned down. This paper can be found in my Blog on my personal website (below).

Occasionally still, I find solace in the writings of others. Today, on the world-wide-web, I have come across, serendipitously, a paper from 2013 titled, 'John Albert Bengel's Chiasmus Advocacy in English Translations of his Gnomon'¹⁴. In it, the authors, Dennis Chadwick and Marlin Schaich, speak of the sort of opposition they and others encounter as they have tried to secure scholarly attention to chiasmus in the New Testament. What is particularly telling is their quote of Bengel which shows that he clearly suffered opposition in his day:

"Chiasmus is altogether worthy of being observed diligently. It is hoped that, by the knowledge of it, hermeneutical studies will be further assisted. This hope truly can

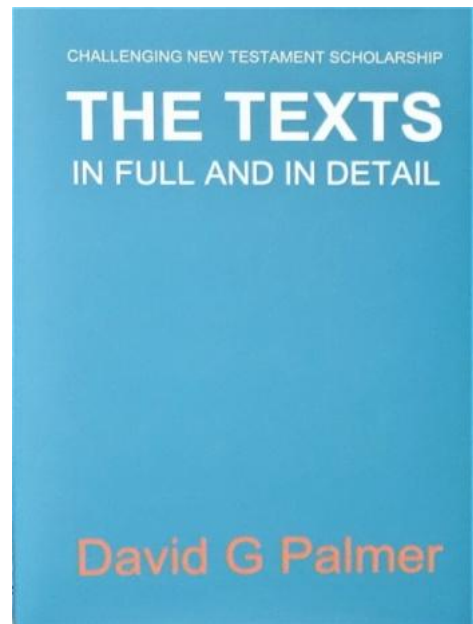
¹⁴ (http://www.mccks.edu/sites/default/files/Bengel_Chiasmus_Advocacy.pdf)

hardly be snatched from us by those who so despise the name and province of Chiasmus, both direct and inverted, as to deny that it has any weight in investigations of the text: nor even by those who endeavour to accuse of strange novelty the doctrine concerning this class of Figures”.

At the last, here, I pay my respects to scholars who have been a help to me in my own particular endeavours:

John Drury, for his supervising of my Cambridge Undergraduate Dissertation;
John Riches, the supervisor of my PhD research at Glasgow University;
Augustine for his specialism in Latin rhetoric, that there is no understanding of a text without first understanding its structure;
JA Bengel, for his pioneering work on the texts long ago and his understanding of the scholar’s task - to present the text to the reader as the writer would have wished that its meaning be revealed to its reader;
WG Kümmel, for pointing out that we can say what the purpose of a text is if it comes only from the text itself;
Heiki Räisänen, who noted we should suspend all judgement on a writer’s theological and literary abilities until we have carried out a ‘purely literary analysis’ of the writer’s texts;
Burton L Mack, for his presentations on the rules of classical writing, exposing: Idea, Framework, Style, Memory and Performance;
Michael D Goulder, for hosting me in Birmingham so we could talk about Luke and years later when I was able to return the favour so we could talk about Mark;
I Howard Marshall, for his review of my work on 1 John and for the opportunities we had to converse as fellow Methodists at the BNTS Conferences;
CK Barratt, who opened his home to me to visit him (in his final year of life, as it turned out to be) to talk about John, as well as reflect on ‘the charge’ he preached at my ordination in Durham in 1983; and
Paul Ellingworth, who, ever after he was an assessor of my PhD thesis on Mark, showed an interest in my progress with a similar analysis of all the texts and emailed me ‘congratulations’ when my 2016 publication fell on his mat through the post for review from the *Methodist Recorder*;
Dennis R MacDonald, for his encouragement by email; and
Vernon K Robbins, likewise, for his encouragement by email.

My work can be seen on: www.davidgpalmer.co.uk, www.new-testament-new-testimony.com, on Facebook: @centrestudyingnttexts and YouTube: David G Palmer, Challenging Scholarship, and in my sixteenth book which I now regard as my final publication which pulls all my work together: **CHALLENGING NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLARSHIP, THE TEXTS IN FULL AND IN DETAIL**, ISBN: 978-1-9161068-5-7, Hardback, 340x250mm, 240pp, Ceridwen Press 2023.



David G Palmer, Church Gresley, rev. 28.11.2023

Postscript: Writing and collecting texts was an important first step in the Church's establishing of the new World Faith. The texts are *foundational*: they give us insight into the earliest phases of Christian thought at a time of political turmoil and terror. Christian Faith is still evolving and the Church is still being *built* today, but *the Builder* is the same 'I AM WHO I AM'.