

Common Exegetical Fallacies in New Testament Scholarship Rectifiable through External Evidence

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Urban legends last far too long and fool too many people. Christian preachers and teachers need a snopes.com equivalent to help them debunk biblical interpretations that deserve to die. But scholars likewise fall victim to lingering lore. A *κατάλυμα* was not an inn; the text means that there was no room for Joseph, Mary and her soon-to-be born child in the “guest room” (Luke 2:7).¹ There never was any gate in Jerusalem called the Needle’s Eye in the first millennium that camels passed through only after their packs were unloaded (often alleged in trying to make sense of Mark 10:25 par.).² And Matthew did not misunderstand Hebrew parallelism and imagine Jesus straddling two animals as he made his so-called triumphal entry (Matt 21:5–7).³

Sometimes external evidence plays the primary role in helping us refute certain popular interpretations of given books or passages in Scripture and/or arrive at the most probably correct understandings. A by-product of this evidence is to bolster support for historicity of narrative material and authenticity of documents of other genres. This paper canvasses a representative sampling of texts from all four New Testament genres—Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypse—to illustrate the value of archaeology, inscriptional, and ancient non-canonical literary evidence, and other external evidence for the correct understanding of well-known or oft-abused New Testament texts.

The first example that comes to mind when thinking about a *Festschrift* for Stan Porter appears in the book of Revelation and is one for which he has helped set the record straight. For that reason, and because it would be easy in a study of this kind for discussion to become Gospel-top-heavy, I will proceed backwards in canonical sequence through the New Testament.

1 Cf. Luke 22:11; Mark 14:14. See esp. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 35–37.

2 Evans, *Mark 8:27—16:20*, 101.

3 Keener, *Gospel of Matthew*, 491.

1 Apocalypse

Given the nature of Revelation's contents, one might not expect there to be much that could be confirmed by external evidence, except perhaps after the apocalyptic events narrated there actually unfold. Meanwhile, history is littered with nothing but *failed* attempts to correlate John's visions with current events. The letters to the seven churches in chs. 2 and 3, however, form a notable exception to this trend. Numerous researchers have demonstrated how the imagery used in Christ's address to each church corresponds closely to various features of that city's culture and topography.⁴ Perhaps the most important example bears on 3:15–16, part of the letter to the Laodiceans: "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth." Already in the late 1950s, Rudwick and Green called attention to the reason the Laodicean water was notoriously lukewarm in the ancient Mediterranean world. Having no fresh water supply of its own, its water was piped in by aqueducts either from the clear, cold mountain streams near neighboring Colossae or from the therapeutic hot springs at nearby Hierapolis. Either way, by the time it reached Laodicea it was tepid.⁵ Porter supplemented this study by calling attention to comments by Herodotus and Xenophon that confirmed that the water's temperature rendered it unsuitable for drinking in most people's eyes, but the Laodiceans had no alternative but to use it.⁶

Apart from knowledge of the ancient literary and recent archaeological evidence about Laodicea's water supply, it is understandable how the popular notion developed about God preferring those who were clearly against him to those who were vacillating between belief and unbelief. But more careful reflection should have called that notion into question, even without external evidence. Would God really prefer that people be clearly on their way to hell than have them right on the verge of finally making a lasting commitment to him? Now, through external evidence, we can see that both "cold" and "hot" are positive metaphors for that which is either zestfully bracing or soothingly healing. Only the lukewarm is to be avoided as disgusting. A majority of subsequent commentators on Revelation have agreed,⁷ but a surprising number have still passed on the old urban legend, without betraying an awareness of any

4 See esp. Hemer, *Letters to the Seven Churches*.

5 Rudwick and Green, "Laodicean Lukewarmness," 176–78.

6 Porter, "Why the Laodiceans Received Lukewarm Water?"

7 E.g., Boxall, Beale, Keener, Mounce, Osborne, Aune, Blount, Michaels, Witherington, Johnson, Trafton, and Smalley.

alternative.⁸ Craig Koester rejects the idea that Laodicea had unusually luke-warm water because of evidence that suggests aqueducts may have brought better water from nearer by, a possible play on words by the name of a donor whose funds helped build the first-century water system, and a fifth-century inscription.⁹ He does not interact with the clearly antecedent evidence Porter points to, but in any case agrees that “cold” and “hot” are both positive metaphors as in the drinking of most liquids.¹⁰

2 Epistles

Much external evidence involves pre-Christian Jewish sources, from the apocrypha, pseudepigrapha, and Dead Sea Scrolls. Back in the 1970s, R. T. France was excoriated in certain circles for being the first prominent evangelical to agree with the conclusions of Dalton’s 1965 *Forschungsbericht* on 1 Pet 3:18–22.¹¹ Today, virtually all commentators agree that *1 Enoch* provides the extra-canonical evidence to help decipher the exegetical conundra of the passage that has been the most influential in the history of the church in supposed support of the eighth-century addition to the Apostles’ Creed, which says Christ “descended into hell.”¹² Throughout *1 Enoch* there are numerous references to imprisoned fallen angels in language reminiscent of this passage in 1 Peter, with 12:4–5 providing a particularly close parallel with its command to Enoch to preach judgment to these angels in their prison, which is clearly distinct from *Sheol*, the abode of dead human beings. First Peter 3:19 is thus best taken of Christ’s announcement of victory over the demonic realm, not of some “harrowing of hell,” as in classic medieval thought. Yet, scholars as well as laypeople still seem surprisingly unwilling to settle for this solution.¹³ First Peter 4:6 complicates matters, but should probably be taken as preaching the gospel to those who died as Christians.¹⁴ Similar imagery as in 3:19 recurs in Jude 6 and 2 Pet 2:4, so it obviously was familiar enough in Peter’s milieu that he could expect

8 E.g., Walvoord, Fee, Roloff, Caird, Beasley-Murray, Murphy, Hughes, and Ladd.

9 Koester, *Revelation*, 337.

10 *Ibid.*, 344.

11 France, “Exegesis in Practice”; Dalton, *Christ’s Proclamation to the Spirits*.

12 One notable exception is Grudem, *1 Peter*, 203–39.

13 Cf. e.g., Westfall, “Relationship between the Resurrection, the Proclamation to the Spirits in Prison and Baptismal Regeneration.”

14 For a lingering protest against this consensus, see Horrell, “Who Are the ‘Dead.’”

his addressees to recognize it, whether or not they had ever actually read *1 Enoch*.

Appealing to indisputably pre-Christian sources like *1 Enoch* is always safer than utilizing post-Christian writings, even when they are known to have codified earlier oral traditions. The classic example here involves the use of the rabbinic literature, which spans the second through tenth centuries. The earlier the rabbinic document or the rabbi to whom a given tradition is ascribed, the more likely the tradition *is* ancient, but even then it is hard to know whether it is old enough to be relevant to first-century writings.¹⁵ Still, some parallels seem so close and fit so well as plausible background for a New Testament passage that it is worth exploring them. James 2:1–13 is filled with legal imagery and v. 6 explicitly refers to the rich dragging the poor into court. Two late rabbinic texts condemn partiality toward the rich in a synagogue-as-courtroom context (*Deut. Rab.* 5,6 and *b. Sheb.* 30b–31a) in language very reminiscent of vv. 2–4, making it very attractive to infer that James is picturing not a worship service here but a Christian courtroom scene, especially since he reflects early, conservative Jewish Christianity. If this background is correct, then it is almost certain that the rich man shown such deference is a member of the community of believers rather than a visiting outsider, a significant conclusion in a letter where it has been alleged there are no references to people who are both rich and Christian.¹⁶ Dale Allison has pointed out how the courtroom interpretation was a frequent approach in Protestant literature from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries that was somehow forgotten until Roy Ward resurrected it in an article in 1969.¹⁷ Still, many recent commentators have been slower to accept it than they probably should be.¹⁸

From external *Jewish* evidence, we turn to Greco-Roman examples. Christian Smith has recently poured scorn on Tit 1:12 and commentators' almost universal failure to address the moral problem associated with it.¹⁹ How could Paul, even quoting the Cretan philosopher Epimenides, speak so disparagingly of Cretans as *always* "liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons"? Is this not a classic example

15 Cf. Young, *Meet the Rabbis*, 109.

16 See further Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 110–11.

17 Allison, "Exegetical Amnesia in James"; Ward, "Partiality in the Assembly." Cf. also Davids, *James*, 109; Johnson, *James*, 221; Hartin, *James*, 117–18.

18 Recent commentators who reject the courtroom context include Moo, *James*, 103; Brosend, *James and Jude*, 61–64; and McCartney, *James*, 138–49. McKnight, *James*, 181–86, admits being very tempted to accept this view but ultimately decides that an early messianic Jewish congregation or assembly can adequately account for the terminology.

19 C. Smith, *Bible Made Impossible*, 72–73.

of racial or ethnic profiling of the worst kind, especially since Paul was not a Cretan himself? Patrick Gray, in part following Anthony Thiselton, has shown, however, that discussions of the liar's paradox, of which this forms one classic example, were common in the Greco-Roman world of Paul's day.²⁰ Why does Paul add in v. 13 the words, "This saying is true" (not just "trustworthy" or "faithful" as so often elsewhere in the Pastorals), employing an adjective (ἀληθής) he uses nowhere else in the Pastorals and only three times in his entire epistolary corpus (Rom 3:4; 2 Cor 6:8; Phil 4:8)? Might this not be yet another of Paul's masterful uses of irony? Or as Gray puts it, "the desire of most commentators to absolve or to convict the author of the sin of stereotyping Cretans diverts attention from what he is really doing in Titus. Rather, the author springs this syllogistic trap—on himself—in order to highlight the counterproductive nature of the types of discourse Titus is told to discourage among his Cretan co-religionists."²¹ That the first audience for this letter is Paul's close companion, Titus, enhances the likelihood that he would have recognized the irony. But without Gray's demonstration of the frequency of the discussion of the liar's paradox in the most relevant external sources, the plausibility of this solution would be significantly decreased.

First Corinthians 11:2–16 and the issue of what men and women do or do not have on their heads during worship is indeed an exegetical crux.²² Yet we may at least observe that all of the external evidence proposed as relevant points to some kind of sexual or religious infidelity being suggested by not following cultural convention at this juncture.²³ What often gets short shrift in the secondary literature is v. 7: "A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man." It is important to observe that Paul does not complete the parallelism by affirming that woman is the image of man; he knows that both genders were alike created in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27). But why is woman being the glory of man relevant to the issue of head coverings—whether long hair or an external cloth of some kind? Philip Payne persuasively appeals to abundant external evidence from Paul's day, in Greco-Roman (and even some Jewish) sources, that long, wavy hair on men was seen as effeminate.²⁴ Pseudo-Phocylides 210–14 proves particularly

20 Gray, "Liar Paradox"; Thiselton, "Logical Role of the Liar Paradox."

21 Gray, "Liar Paradox," 309.

22 An important but often overlooked study that focuses on external evidence, and that cogently defends the view that it is hair length or style that Paul is concerned about throughout the entire passage, is Blattenberger, *Rethinking 1 Corinthians 11:2–16*.

23 Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, 215.

24 Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, 142–45.

poignant: “If a child is a boy do not let locks grow on (his) head. Do not braid (his) crown nor the cross knots at the top of his head. Long hair is not fit for boys, but for voluptuous women. Guard the youthful prime of life of a comely boy, because many rage for intercourse with a man.” In other words, Paul is not as likely stressing woman as the glory of man rather than of God as he is indicating that woman, rather than *man*, is the glory of man.²⁵

A less disputed illustration of the value of external evidence in epistolary interpretation emerges from Rom 16:23b, written from Corinth: “Erastus, who is the city’s director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you their greetings.” Visitors to the ruins of Corinth today routinely see the stone slab on which the Latin words appear carved, announcing “Erastus the aedile laid [this pavement] at his own expense.” An aedile roughly corresponded to the οἰκονόμος τῆς πόλεως, the Greek expression used in the Romans passage. While some have pointed out the possibility of two men with the same name holding the same kind of position in Corinth at different times, the name was not a particularly common one, so that it seems likely that the same person is in view in both references.²⁶ Again, this would show that a reasonably wealthy person could be part of the early Christian movement and, unlike the rich man in James’ courtroom, be viewed positively. It also reminds us of the importance of studying inscriptions as part of the external evidence we consult when trying to corroborate or interpret the New Testament.²⁷

Each of these examples from the apocalyptic and epistolary books of the New Testament likewise supports, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, the traditional ascriptions of authorship, provenance, addressees, date, and so on. If Paul really wrote a given letter in the mid-first century in a Hellenistic milieu, we would expect to see evidence of issues and influences of particular pertinence to that context. If James wrote to a Jewish-Christian audience at roughly the same time, we would expect similar phenomena. We are not arguing in a hermeneutical circle but in a spiral. Testing the hypotheses of what the church has long believed about the “introduction” to a given book

25 Another possibility is presented by Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 570–72, who contrasts the animals Adam names but that do not provide him with the glory of being his equal or partner the way Eve does. Cf., similarly, Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 833–37.

26 For an appropriately cautious and nuanced discussion, see Gill, “Erastus the Aedile.”

27 Welborn, *End to Enmity*, 260–82, examines the evidence in even more detail and, while acknowledging the ambiguities, determines that equating the figure mentioned in Romans with the man in the Corinthian inscription is the most probable conclusion. He also responds in detail to the most common objections to this equation.

of the Bible involves seeing how much external evidence fits the postulated context. The more we find, the more we have confidence in those traditional hypotheses. At least as important, we move closer and closer to the most probable interpretation of passages and are able to exclude less likely ones.

3 Acts

Once we turn to the historical genres of the New Testament, the amount of relevant external evidence grows exponentially. Colin J. Hemer's magisterial work, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, remains unsurpassed, though it needs to be supplemented by select articles from the five-volume series edited by Bruce W. Winter, *The Book of Acts in Its First-Century Setting*, James D. G. Dunn's *Beginning from Jerusalem*, and Eckhard Schnabel's two-volume *Early Christian Mission*. More difficult to use because of its sheer size but containing a wealth of external evidence deeply embedded within it is Craig S. Keener's massive four-volume commentary on *Acts*. Indeed, the amount of supportive external evidence for Acts threatens to overwhelm the researcher; we can select only a handful of dozens of possible examples. Often times the only "urban legend" that needs debunking is not a specific interpretation of a given passage but the skepticism that alleges Luke was not writing reliable history.²⁸ Theological and literary motives abound, but not so as to undermine historical ones. In other instances, exegetical insights emerge as well.

That Luke uses the appropriate titles for civic leaders despite their wide variety depending on location and era affords one important illustration. Thus the Cypriot ruler Sergius Paulus is correctly identified as a proconsul (Acts 13:7), the Philippian authorities are magistrates (16:20), the Thessalonian leaders are politarchs (17:6; NIV "city officials"), the Areopagus meets only in Athens (17:19), Corinth has the proconsul Gallio (18:12), the Asiarchs belong to Ephesus (19:31; NIV "officials of the province"), and Malta has a chief man (28:7; NIV "chief official").²⁹ The verisimilitude of the voyage and shipwreck of Paul in Acts 27 led James Smith already in the nineteenth century to be convinced that it had to be based on eyewitness reports; more recent studies have

28 Exacerbated by Pervo, *Acts*; Pervo, *Profit with Delight*. For a convenient summary of views, though completely without documentation, see D. E. Smith and Tyson, *Acts and Christian Beginnings*.

29 These are a minute portion of the hundreds of examples Hemer (*Book of Acts* 108–58) lists of what he calls "specific local knowledge" on Luke's part in Acts. Porter helpfully reminds us of a number of these throughout his *Paul of Acts = Paul in Acts*.

only reinforced this conviction.³⁰ Ongoing excavations at Pisidian Antioch have already discovered the synagogue there—probably the one in which Paul preached, and have given a plausible explanation of why Paul turned to the central Anatolian plateau, diverging from the major highways he followed for all of his other missionary travels. Rulers in that community were relatives of Sergius Paulus's family in Paphos. One can easily imagine the Cypriot proconsul requesting Paul to share the gospel with his relatives in Pisidian Antioch just as he had done with him.³¹

For years, we had no inscriptional evidence for the locations of Lystra and Derbe. Now we do, and the stone slabs containing them can be viewed in the courtyard at the museum in Konya (ancient Iconium), Turkey.³² We can explain the odd use of the singular “region” in the expression “the region of Phrygia and Galatia” (Acts 16:6; note the same combination in the reverse order in 18:23). The two territories were combined together under Roman provincial administrative reconfiguration in 25 BC, though ethnic Galatians would not have approved and a writer of fiction aiming at historical verisimilitude would probably not have utilized the less common identification.³³ Luke's usage of the combined provincial name also strengthens the case for a South Galatian hypothesis and therefore for an early date (c. 49) for the writing of Galatians, after Paul's first missionary journey through cities not part of ethnic but only provincial Galatia (Acts 13–14).³⁴ The Gallio inscription at Delphi, of course, not only dovetails with Luke's reference to that proconsul in Corinth (Acts 18:12) but also enables us to date much of Paul's missionary travel by adding or subtracting years based on the internal evidence in Acts and Paul's letters.³⁵

Why is it that, of all Jesus' apostles and other close associates, the only one to appear in Josephus' works is his half-brother James? Richard Bauckham has persuasively argued that we have typically underestimated this James' role as the leader of the early church in Jerusalem.³⁶ While it wreaks havoc with Roman Catholic hagiography about Peter, the role attributed to James in Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:1; 1 Cor 15:7, Gal 1:19; 2:9, 12, and in the letters of James and Jude certainly suggests that at the very latest by the time Peter left Jerusalem for good in about AD 42, James, the chief elder of the church there, was the most

30 J. Smith, *Voyage and Shipwreck*; cf. Gilchrist, “Historicity of Paul's Shipwreck.”

31 Cf. Barrett, *Acts*, 195.

32 Fant and Reddish, *Guide to Biblical Sites*, 175, 230, 240–41.

33 Cf. Hemer, “Adjective Phrygia.”

34 Hemer, *Book of Acts*, 277–307.

35 For full details, see esp. throughout Riesner, *Paul's Early Period*.

36 Bauckham, “James and the Jerusalem Church.”

central and significant authority in the first generation of Christianity.³⁷ This could also explain the canonical ordering of the non-Pauline epistles besides Hebrews. They may well have been arranged in decreasing order of importance of their authors: James, Peter, John and Jude.³⁸

4 The Gospels

As with Acts, we can only just scratch the surface of examples of illuminating discoveries that bear on the historicity and/or the interpretation of the Gospels, even were we to limit our external evidence to archaeology alone. For years, critics doubted the existence of the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem; then it was discovered.³⁹ Much more recently, we have learned that what we thought was the pool of Siloam at the end of Hezekiah's tunnel was merely a smaller pool that opened into a much larger reservoir of water.⁴⁰ There is growing evidence as well to suggest that both pools were *mikva'oth*, used to help accommodate the many needs for ritual bathing, especially at the time of the pilgrimages that brought large numbers of Jews to town. Bethesda on the north and Siloam on the south may have been the most prominent places where new arrivals to Jerusalem could purify themselves before entering the temple precincts.⁴¹ These two pools, of course, both play a central role in the healing miracles of John 5 and 9. In one case, Jesus heals a lame man who cannot get to the pool for its believed therapeutic benefits. In the other, he tells a blind man to wash in the pool so that his sight may be restored. As with other miracles, and as with Jesus' declaration that people's sins were forgiven, it is becoming increasingly clear that it was not his claims and powers themselves that so offended the Jewish leadership but his bypassing the temple "establishment" and its rituals, especially the purification rites, that put him more and more at odds with the authorities around him.⁴²

Nazareth was one site skeptics loved to lampoon. It was never more than a small village in antiquity to begin with, and there was no evidence at all of a settlement there in the first century. Remains from earlier and later centuries

37 Cf. also Varner, *James*, 18–23.

38 Perhaps also based on the sequence, "James, Peter and John" in Gal 2:9, itself a probable testimony to order of importance. See Wall, "Significance of a Canonical Perspective," 540.

39 See esp. Jeremias, *Rediscovery of Bethesda*.

40 Shanks, "Siloam Pool."

41 von Wahlde, "Pool(s) of Bethesda"; von Wahlde, "Pool of Siloam."

42 Perrin, *Jesus the Temple*, 140.

made it reasonable to assume a continuous settlement, but enough exceptions due to the natural or human destructions of towns in the ancient world gave critics fodder for their skepticism.⁴³ Then just before Christmas in 2009, it was made public that some walls of a first-century home had been unearthed in Nazareth.⁴⁴ Even more recently, the discoveries of what appears to be a separate village adjacent to Magdala have raised the question of whether this might be the mysterious Dalmanutha of Mark 8:10.⁴⁵ The ongoing excavation of the much larger, neighboring Sepphoris has gone through two discrete phases of interpretation as well. Initially, archaeologists imagined a highly Hellenistic community surrounding the political capital of Galilee under Herod Antipas prior to it being moved to Tiberias.⁴⁶ Further digging, however, has shown that the artifacts and remains (such as the absence of pig bones) match those of other fully Jewish communities.⁴⁷ Indeed, given the intrusions of Hellenism into portions of the Jewish aristocracy in Jerusalem, whatever exposure Jesus had to Greco-Roman culture may well have come more in that city than in Galilee.⁴⁸ It may not be coincidence that the largest cluster of Jesus' uses of the term "hypocrite" (a Semitic loan-word taken from the practice of play-acting in the Hellenistic theater) comes in his conversations in Jerusalem (Matt 22–24), not in Galilee, where many scholars not too long ago argued he would have learned it from the theater in Sepphoris.⁴⁹

One of the more puzzling comments right in the middle of those conversations comes in Matt 23:2–3. Before unleashing his woes against the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees in his temple audience, Jesus declares, "The teachers of the law [i.e., scribes] and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach." How can Jesus command obedience to all that these leaders teach, given that his conflicts with them elsewhere are not limited to their inconsistent behavior but strike at the heart of the oral Torah ("the traditions of the ancestors") as well? And what does it mean that they sit

43 Strange, "Nazareth."

44 Hadid, "First Jesus-Era House."

45 Ngo, "Has Dalmanutha from the Bible Been Found?"

46 See esp. Batey, *Jesus and the Forgotten City*.

47 See esp. Chancey, *Myth of a Gentile Galilee*.

48 See esp. Hengel, "Hellenization" of *Judaea*; Collins and Sterling, *Hellenism in the Land of Israel*. Challenging the extent but not the fact of this Hellenization is Feldman, "How Much Hellenism?"

49 On the other hand, Lichtenberger, "Jesus and the Theater," challenges the consensus that there was a theater in Jerusalem when Jesus was an adult. It is, of course, always possible that Jesus simply learned of the concept without having attended a theater anywhere.

on Moses' seat? Moses' seat was a large chair at the front of the synagogue from which the Torah would be read. A clear example of the remains of one is found in the excavations of the synagogue at Chorazin.⁵⁰ Jesus is not commending all of the Pharisaic interpretations of the Law but is endorsing the truth and sanctity of the Law itself. Synagogue-goers might or might not be supposed to follow any given Pharisaic interpretation of the Law but they were to continue following the Law.⁵¹ Of course, after the inauguration of the new covenant, that Law is fulfilled in Christ and many of its applications change. But in the context of Matt 23, Jesus' words now prove intelligible.

A final example involves the imagery in one of Jesus' parables. It has often been noted that the biggest way in which Luke's parable of the pounds or minas (Luke 19:11–27) differs from Matthew's parable of the talents (Matt 25:14–30) is that it contains what could easily be viewed as part of a separate story about a throne claimant. It has at times also been observed that this man strikingly resembles Archelaus, son of Herod the Great, who ruled over Judea and Samaria from 4 BC to AD 6. After his father's death, Archelaus went to Rome to receive his "kingdom" but was opposed by a Jewish embassy because of his cruelty. The petition not to instate Archelaus was denied and retribution was exacted when Archelaus returned to Judea (Josephus, *Ant.* 17:299–323; *J.W.* 2:80–100). Picturing God as in some way parallel to such a harsh king has offended enough recent interpreters as to lead to some very fanciful interpretations of the parable.⁵² But Jesus' point need not be that God's judgment is unjust, merely that it is strict and inevitable against those who implacably oppose him. Still, one wonders what led Jesus to employ such imagery. Recent excavations just outside Jericho have disclosed the foundations and various artifacts of Archelaus's vast palace and its precincts there, and Jesus had just been in the vicinity of Jericho for his encounter with Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10). The pieces of the puzzle come together; of all people likely to catch the allusion Jesus is making, the inhabitants of Jericho would have been best positioned.⁵³

50 Murphy-O'Connor, *Holy Land*, 258.

51 Powell, "Do and Keep." Jewish New Testament scholarship has increasingly been arguing that the New Testament writers and speakers did not envision Jewish followers of Jesus taking all Pharisaic *halakah* as optional, against which see Blomberg, "Freedom from the Law."

52 See esp. Dowling, *Taking Away the Pound*. Cf. also Vinson, "Minas Touch."

53 Schultz, "Jesus as Archelaus."

5 Conclusion

A short essay can at best just whet one's appetite for the wide-ranging possibilities of external evidence for confirming both the historicity and the authenticity of New Testament documents and for interpreting them. In fact, external evidence has been a staple of New Testament scholarship from its inception. But precisely because there are so many examples, one has to be intentional about consulting the best and most current scholarship if one is to avoid as many gaffes as possible. Stan Porter throughout his prolific publishing career has often enjoyed questioning ill-founded consensuses on numerous topics, including at times the kinds of examples raised in this chapter. Most of the time, his skepticism has been justified, and often his proposed alternatives have proved compelling. I am delighted to dedicate this short offering to him in appreciation of thirty years of friendship and massive amounts of scholarly stimulation through his many writings.⁵⁴

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