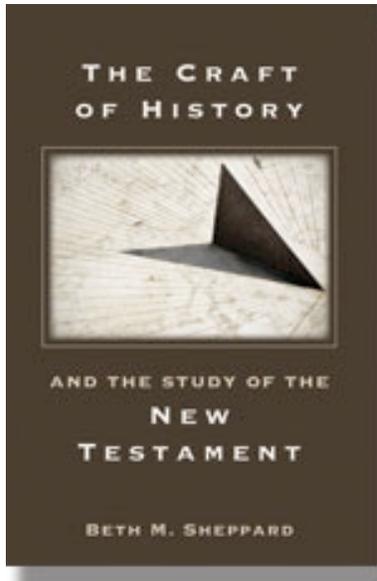


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Beth M. Sheppard

The Craft of History and the Study of the New Testament

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Beth M. Sheppard's *The Craft of History* is designed to help New Testament specialists understand and appropriate methods and theories from the discipline of history. Her book aptly appears at a period in New Testament studies when some in the field are engaging frontally with the ideas of historians.¹ *The Craft of History* consists of ten chapters, organized into three parts, plus an introduction and an epilogue. Sheppard claims that the book was written for "biblical scholars and graduate students taking courses in biblical studies" (15), but at points she seems to tailor her analysis specifically to theologically conservative students and scholars.

After a brief introduction, Sheppard focuses her attention on the "theory" of history (chs. 1–4). In chapter 1 Sheppard discusses the similarities, differences, and the occasionally blurred lines between the fields of history and New Testament studies and provides definitions and discussions of key terms (e.g., "historian," "historiography," and "historical criticism"). Chapter 2 is a description of the various factors and assumptions that frame and limit the historian's work (e.g., one's view of time and the scope of the

1. E.g., Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010); and Susan Lochrie Graham, *The Flesh Was Made Word: A Metahistorical Critique of the Contemporary Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010).

historical project). In chapter 3 Sheppard treats differing perspectives on the role of history in human societies and on history's ability to predict future events. Sheppard concludes the first part of her book with chapter 4, which details various fallacies in the writing of history (e.g., logical, factual, and perspectival fallacies).

In the second part of her book (chs. 5–7), Sheppard offers a (mostly) chronological survey of movements and approaches in the discipline of history. This historiography spans from antiquity to the modern era (ch. 5), to interdisciplinary approaches (e.g., materialism, psychohistory, and economic history) in the mid-twentieth century (ch. 6), to more recent approaches to history, such as revisionist history, cultural history, postcolonial approaches to history, and even imaginative histories (ch. 7). Sheppard evaluates the strengths and weakness of these historical methods and approaches and, where applicable, highlights how New Testament scholars have utilized them.

In the third and final part (chs. 8–10), Sheppard provides three case studies that are designed to illustrate ways that history can be used in New Testament scholarship. In chapter 8 Sheppard demonstrates the value of economic and cultural histories for New Testament studies by analyzing references to clothing in the Gospel of Luke (e.g., Luke 3:11; 6:30; 19:36; 22:36). Situating such passages within the context of ancient clothing and textile manufacturing and usage, Sheppard challenges the prevailing assumption that Luke's audience (and the people mentioned in his Gospel) lived at a subsistence level. Instead, Sheppard argues that the level of access to clothing and materials presupposed in Luke suggest that such people, while not corresponding to the modern "middle class," were of modest means. She also cautions New Testament scholars against imposing facile notions of "poverty" and "wealth" onto their sources.

Chapter 9 offers a "revisionist" reading of John 4 that is designed to paint a more positive portrait of the "woman at the well." Sheppard contends that one should consider this story from a Roman perspective. She argues that, in light of the multiplicity of Roman marriages (and divorces) within elite circles as well as the diverse practices of Roman "betrothal" (e.g., *contubernia* and *concubinatus*), the Gospel's Roman readers may not have interpreted the woman's five marriages and her partnership at the time she encountered Jesus either as socially deviant or as the embodiment of sexual sin.

Chapter 10 uses medical history to interpret the clause "we are all made to drink of one spirit [*pneuma*]" (1 Cor 12:13). Marshalling a wide range of evidence (e.g., ancient medical handbooks, prophetic oracles, pharmacology, and votive offerings), Sheppard highlights the possible healing overtones associated with the Pauline clause. For Sheppard, Paul plays on well-known ideas of bodily healing through consumption of

medicinal potions to convey vividly the healing that the Corinthian congregation receives through the potion of the *pneuma*.

In an epilogue Sheppard encourages New Testament scholars to engage more frequently in interdisciplinary work with historians and classicists, warns of the dangers of historicism and historical positivism in New Testament studies, and urges biblical scholars to utilize more fully the rich resources that the Internet has to offer.

The Craft of History's potential contribution to New Testament studies lies primarily in its convenient packaging of historical theory, historiography, and applications of historical methods to New Testament texts. Most critical readers will find that the third part of the book (i.e., the case studies) is the strongest. While not all of Sheppard's claims and conclusions in this part will ultimately persuade every reader, she certainly demonstrates the ability to apply and illustrate select historical methods and synthesize a wide range of primary evidence and secondary scholarship. In addition, her warning to New Testament scholars to avoid historicism and historical positivism should certainly be taken to heart.

But this book has several shortcomings. First of all, Sheppard does not highlight one of the most important inferences from history for New Testament studies: the problems with the category "New Testament." Sheppard comes frustratingly close to this issue in her discussion of disciplinary canons (55–59); however, she emphasizes instead the value of alternative texts (e.g., the Nag Hammadi codices) solely for New Testament "backgrounds." Sheppard does not, therefore, detail the historical and hermeneutical problems endemic to the "New Testament" as a rubric for organizing and framing the diverse texts and traditions of the nascent "Christianities." She also misses the opportunity to explain that many historians—not only "revisionists"—would argue that New Testament studies, despite its discrete disciplinary status in several university religion departments, is a vestige of the confessional contexts out of which the academic study of the "Bible" emerged. By contrast, many New Testament scholars—and Old Testament scholars, for that matter—have acknowledged the ideological heritage of their discipline and have taken measures to reconfigure the parameters of the field accordingly.²

2. For instance, "noncanonical" texts are integrated into the New Testament introductions of Helmut Koester (*Introduction to the New Testament* [2nd ed.; 2 vols.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000]), Bart Ehrman (*The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* [4th ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007]), and Dale B. Martin (*New Testament History and Literature: The Open Yale Course Series* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012]).

Moreover, the organization and contents of Sheppard's historiography (part 2) warrant critical comment. Sheppard's decision to structure her survey exclusively according to the development of historical movements and methods, instead of around particular thinkers that engendered such items, results occasionally in superficial or convoluted explanations (see, e.g., her descriptions of new historicism and postcolonialism). This synthetic approach to historiography—perhaps coupled with her general disapprobation for historical methods and critiques generated by social and literary theorists—also means that several influential figures in the discipline of history are either mentioned with little to no additional comment (e.g., Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida) or are left out entirely (e.g., Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha). To be sure, Sheppard concedes that her historiography is not comprehensive and thus excludes several thinkers (96), but such major gaps certainly limit the utility of her historiographical sketch.

Furthermore, many of her proximate scholarly interlocutors are conspicuously absent. Most important, Sheppard fails to engage, cite, or even list in the bibliography Elizabeth A. Clark's *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004). Clark's book not only details the intersections of history, social theory, and literary theory in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—albeit the very exchanges that Sheppard eschews—but also highlights the usefulness of such junctures for the study of select issues in early Christian literature and history. The projects of Clark and Sheppard thus overlap considerably in terms of content, aims, and structure. In this vein, Sheppard also interacts very little with historians of religion, even specialists in early Christianity (post–New Testament). It is not surprising, therefore, that, in addition to her unproblematized “New Testament,” Sheppard classifies Marcion as a “heretic” and a “gnostic” (35).

In conclusion, New Testament students and scholars can learn much from “professional historians” (and vice versa). Sheppard's book certainly goes some way toward bridging their respective areas of study, but in the end New Testament specialists who want to develop a solid understanding of the many articulations of history and of their own field (in light of historical theory and method) will not be content with *The Craft of History*.