Wielding Occam’s Razor: Frederik Wisse’s Scholarly Contributions

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When compiling this bibliography, two comments made by Dr. Frederik Wisse during my time at McGill University came to mind. The first occurred in a University chapel session when he pronounced that the task of New Testament studies had largely been completed. Needless to say this was a little unsettling for those of us in the midst of doctoral programs, just setting out on careers in the field. Is it really possible that centuries of intense scrutiny of the meager literary remains of earliest Christianity have yielded all they can?

... virtually the only evidence available to the historian for the first hundred years of the Christian church are later copies of literary texts, many of them anonymous or pseudonymous, with no hint of the date, place and historical circumstances of their original composition. By their very nature they are ill suited to furnish the historian with the kind of data which is necessary for historical reconstruction. ... Under such circumstances the historian may well decide that the evidence does not allow a critical historical reconstruction of the period, but the scholarly interest in Christian origins is too great to give up.¹

There is, to be sure, more to motivate than mere academic curiosity. Doctoral dissertations (original contributions to knowledge) need to be written, tenure committees pressure young scholars to produce, and publishers want to sell books. How does one make original and meaningful contributions to scholarship, when traveling the well-worn path that is New Testament and Early Christian studies?

The second comment was made in a less formal setting. During one of our many conversations in his office, Fred expressed appreciation for Umberto Eco’s brilliant novel Foucault’s Pendulum. In this story, the main characters—all scholars—engage in playful historical research reflecting far more interest in speculations about the Holy Grail,
Templar Knights, and Gnostics (!) than historiographical sophistication. As they did so, guided by their fascination with hermeticism and occultism, Drs. Belbo, Casaubon, and Diotallevi found relationships between dates, names, events, numbers, and texts and in the light of these not only studied history, but rewrote it. The result was a grand narrative, created out of random bits of information, coincidences, unbridled imaginations, and a healthy appreciation for the power of a good conspiracy theory. In Casaubon’s words, “wanting connections, we found connections—always, everywhere, and between everything.” For one of these scholars—Dr. Belbo—this careless approach to history proved disastrous.

It occurs to me now that both comments point to a recurring concern in Fred’s academic writing. For many, the pressure is great to allow imagination and speculation more space in research than is warranted—wanting connections, finding connections— to the point where, like Casaubon, they find themselves “lulled by feelings of resemblance: the notion that everything might be mysteriously related to everything else.” But if the bulk of the work has been completed, and if the texts available are not suitable for historical inquiry, and if we are to be suspicious about elaborate historical hypotheses, how can we proceed? Borrowing from the canons of textual criticism, Fred has on occasion called scholars to consider the simplest solution, explicatio simplicior potior, or said differently, Occam’s Razor. Though reasonable, “there is a powerful scholarly bias against it, and particularly in historical studies it is violated with impunity.” As historians, the alternative is to find ourselves hanged, as it were—like Belbo—on Foucault’s Pendulum. These important warnings will be missed in the classroom.

I am pleased to be a part of this Festschrift and join with others in congratulating Fred on the occasion of his retirement. As part of this celebration, I have attempted to compile a reasonably full list of his work, organized under broad headings. We find here evidence of a full and productive academic career, one modeling methodological caution and historiographical integrity.
New Testament Textual Criticism


New Testament and Early Christianity; Historical Methodology


New Testament and Gnosticism


Gnosticism and The Nag Hammadi Library


• pages 104–23, introduction to and translation of The Apocryphon of John (II,1, III,1, IV,1, and BG 8502,2)
• pages 208–19, introduction to and translation of The Gospel of the Egyptians (III,2 and IV,2), with Alexander Böhlig
• pages 312–17, translation of The Concept of Our Great Power (VI,4)
• pages 341–61, translation of The Paraphrase of Shem (VII,1)
• pages 434–37, translation of The Letter of Peter to Philip (VIII,2)
• pages 503–08, introduction to and translation of The Sentences of Sextus (XII,1)
• pages 509–10, introduction to and translation of Fragments (XII,3)


**Selected Book Reviews**


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1974  Review of Hans Quecke, Das Markusevangelium saidisch: Text der handschrift Palau Rib Inv-Nrr m182it den Varianten der handschrift M569. CBQ 36: 288–89.


Other


Selected Unpublished Works


1981  “En克拉tism and Gnosticism.” AAR/SBLA. S66.9


Introduction to the New Testament As Scripture and as Historical Source. [Class notes; monograph in progress]

“A Critical Evaluation of the Literary and Archaeological Evidence for Jewish Christianity.”

Research in Progress

Collaborator in the preparation of a complete edition of the works of Shenoute (specifically Canon 7).

Selected Scholarly Responses to / Dialogue with Frederik Wisse’s Research


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Notes


2. Umberto Eco, Foucault’s Pendulum, trans. William Weaver (New York: Ballantine, 1989; original Italian version, 1988), 384. Eco, a professor of semiotics at the University of Bologna, has continued to explore the blurred
lines between fact and fiction in his most recent novel *Baudolino*, trans. William Weaver (Orlando: Harcourt, 2002; Italian original, 2000).

3. *Foucault’s Pendulum*, 139. When this is the case, a further methodological misstep is possible. Scholars are often skilled in explaining away discrepancies between their treasured historical hypotheses and the available evidence: “Our speculations about ancient affairs always seem to be able to overcome the objection posed by the available data. They are never truly at risk of being corrected or defeated by the facts. We allow so many variables and complexities in our theories that we can account for anything real or imagined. Miraculously our hunches always fit, or rather, we make them fit by explaining away any objections” (Frederik Wisse, “Historical Method and the Johannine Community,” ARC 20 [1992]: 36).


5. “After the *Synopsis*,” 142.

6. Though only a selection of book reviews are included.

7. Naturally there is overlap between these categories.


10. As listed in Scholer, *Nag Hammadi Bibliography*, 308.