

---

# How to Approach a Strange Manuscript: A Novel('s) Look at the Historical Task

Michael Gilmour

Lecturer in New Testament, Providence College, Otterburne, MB

---

There are many obstacles standing in the way of an objective reading of individual New Testament (NT) documents. I will mention just two. First, analyzing a document that is part of a larger collection can be like trying to appreciate the distinctive sound of a lone soprano singing in a mass choir—naturally that single voice blends in with the others. Students of the NT experience something like this the moment they attempt to “specialize”; to focus on a specific text on its own apart from its canonical roommates (and this would also be true for other religious traditions whose sacred writings incorporate a wide variety of documents by different authors, e.g., Tanakh). And while attempts have been made to approach the history of early Christianity without attention to this “arbitrary limitation” on the evidence (cf. Räisänen 1990, 100–3), it remains that modern historians have inherited a canon, and to divorce one work from this larger group is not so easily done. A second obstacle stems from the fact that scholars are part of a tradition of interpretation. There are many opinions about the NT writings and these invariably influence students in their research. Not surprisingly, labels are often attached to texts on the basis of critical judgements, and so we here terms like deuterio-Pauline, pseudepigraphal, early catholic, and so on. Whether or not such categories do justice to the writings assigned to them is not at issue here. The point is simply that there is a unique challenge facing the NT scholar who wants to objectively analyze a NT writing on its own merit.

My own research at the present time does not involve one of the stronger voices in the NT choir. If Paul is a lead tenor, if the Gospel writers get the audience to their feet, 2 Peter is among the supporting chorus members, and one that, some feel, occasionally goes out of tune. There are a few reasons why its distinctiveness among the NT writings has not been appreciated. To begin with, many assume that it is not the work of the apostle Peter. For another, it appears to make extensive use of another minor chorus member (i.e., Jude). Finally, not only is 2 Peter not as prominent as Paul, some suggest it represents a falling away from those qualities that make Paul such a strong singer in the first place (e.g., Käsemann 1982, n. 7).

This is not the place to discuss any of these issues. What follows is an analogy—one that illustrates the value of silencing the din of such background noises that distract us from the object of our attention. Sometimes that object of study is so closely associated with other documents, or characterized by previous assessments about that writing's merit (or lack thereof), that a new way of looking at the subject matter is needed. Of course, recognizing relationships to others writings is important as well: 2 Peter is part of the Christian canon; source criticism demonstrates a literary relationship to Jude; it can be contrasted in some ways with Paul and other NT texts. These all assist the scholarly analysis of 2 Peter. But before we can make profitable use of comparing and contrasting 2 Peter with other early Christian writings, it is necessary to hear its *distinctive voice*. And so, if only for a moment, it must be removed from these "environments" and allowed to speak on its own.

In what follows I present a way of imagining the objective, pre-suppositionless approach to ancient religious texts.<sup>1</sup> My goal is to draw insights from a little-known novel by Canadian author James De Mille (1833–80), who, in addition to teaching classics, rhetoric, history, and literature at Acadia and Dalhousie Universities, was a prolific writer, with as many as thirty novels to his credit. It is his best known work, *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* (published posthumously in 1888), with which we are interested here.<sup>2</sup> It tells the story of four friends aboard a yacht who happen upon a container floating on the water. Inside is found a letter by one Adam More, an Englishman "carried by a series of incredible events to a land from which escape is as impossible as from the grave," and a remarkable narrative telling his story.<sup>3</sup> Intrigued by the discovery, the sailors take turns reading the story out loud to one another—this comprises the bulk of the novel—pausing at various points to provide

commentary and speculation with regards to the origin, intention, and meaning of Adam More's tale.

I am by no means a literary critic, and certainly no expert on De Mille's work. My comments do not even address the novel in its entirety, but only those sections where those who found the strange manuscript evaluate its contents, share views on what type of literature it is, and develop theories regarding its origin. And herein lies my interest: the process by which they approach a document of unknown background is not unlike that of the NT scholar (or the student of any ancient text for that matter) who is often confronted with writings providing precious little information regarding date, provenance, and authorship. For this reason, a few notes on De Mille's book may be of interest to those concerned with historical methodology. De Mille's expertise in a variety of areas (languages, history, literature), coupled with his skill as a story teller, provides an interesting vehicle for reflection on this subject.

Since many individual writings in the NT resemble Adam More's story (unknown origin, unknown age), and since the interpretation of this writing by those in the boat has parallels with the speculations of the academic community (is it a hoax? is it true? etc.), I will try to point out how their efforts to understand a strange manuscript provide a heuristic model for imagining the task of the biblical scholar. What is most intriguing of all is that the sailors' analysis of the manuscript lacks preconceived judgements—it literally floated to them while they were adrift at sea (5). Though of course we can not recreate this in our own analysis of strange manuscripts, we do ourselves a service at times by accepting the objects of our scholarly focus as appearing, as it were, from out of nowhere. Before looking at the sailors' strange manuscript, a few more words about those in the NT.

After "hearing" the voice of an individual writing—i.e., separating it from other voices—there is then a need to locate it within a historical context as best we can and to the extent that the available data allows. Not all NT texts are entirely unknown from the historian's perspective. Paul's writings, for example, can be placed by-and-large in a particular time and context with a fair degree of certainty. But many individual writings are either anonymous (e.g., Hebrews) or considered by many to be pseudonymous (e.g., 2 Peter). Furthermore, there is not sufficient information about the earliest years of the Christian movement to know precisely where to locate such writings. As a result, when attention turns to individual texts, there is a need to rely on the very subjective, though still necessary enterprise of reconstructing the context of the work in question. Possible clues

are assembled as various questions are asked: What historical events were known to the author? What events, had they been known, would likely have been included by the author? What indications are there of a geographical provenance? What writings did the author know and make use of? What other writings appear to have been familiar with this document? How does this writing resemble, differ from, show development from, other writings of approximately the same period and subject matter? And so on. Here again I circle back to De Mille's fascinating book. The men in the boat illustrate the process of historical inquiry. In what follows, I will briefly describe various steps they take when they happen upon Adam More's story, and comment on their "methodology."

### Approaching a Strange Manuscript

Lord Featherstone, owner of the yacht called the *Falcon*, takes a few of his friends on a cruise to the southern latitudes as he had grown "weary of life in England" (1). In discussing the strange manuscript, their individual areas of expertise are brought to light: Dr. Congreve is well-learned in such diverse areas as geography, paleontology, and botany; Noel Oxenden, "late of Trinity College, Cambridge," is a linguist; Otto Melick, the most sceptical of the bunch, is a *littérateur* from London. Featherstone himself, we are told, had "plenty of brain if he chose to make use of it" (60) though he seems content to listen to good stories and usually remains neutral in his conclusions (e.g., 155).<sup>4</sup> In their conversations about the discovery,<sup>5</sup> these wide-ranging talents are employed in the analysis of the strange manuscript.

1) The first step can be stated briefly. Naturally, as with the study of other manuscripts, the sailors have to consider the *physical evidence*. In doing so some clues are found that assisted their inquiry. As the copper cylinder which preserved Adam More's writings is pulled from the sea, it is observed that it "must have been floating for ages" (5). Later, it is concluded that the successive layers of barnacles on the cylinder "show a submersion of at least three years, perhaps more" (62). Also, it proves to be significant that the manuscript was written on papyrus, not regular paper. From this, the case for the narrative being an account of actual events is bolstered. As the doctor argues, "You can find but little [papyrus] in existence at the present day... Now, I hold that a sensation novelist would never have thought of papyrus. If he didn't wish to use paper, he could have found a dozen other things" (62-63; cf. 7-9).

The primary physical evidence in the study of the NT and Christian origins is obviously the text. In the case of the NT, however, we are not dealing with the original autographs but with later copies of them. Still, numerous manuscripts (many of them fragmentary) have to be reconstructed in order to determine what it was that Paul, or John, or Jude actually said. Only after we have given attention to the physical evidence can we take steps towards interpretation.

2) When first turning to the manuscript itself, the sailors (with the exception of Melick) *take the story at face value*. More's letter of introduction states his reason for writing: "Oh, unknown friend! whoever you are. I entreat you to let this message be made known in some way to my father" (8). For the most part, this motivation is accepted as is the narrative itself (cf. 229). Though some details pose "difficult questions," the doctor remains content to say "I see no reason why it should not be as More says" (69) and again (regarding a point of geography) "I see no reason to disbelieve it" (70).

NT scholars should also show respect to the authors of the primary sources. To automatically assume that Luke's portrait of the church must have been entirely without basis, or to say Paul or Jesus could not have said this or that, casts a shadow of uncertainty on the texts even before they are allowed to speak. With respect to 2 Peter, there has been a tendency to assume that its theological contribution is not significant.<sup>6</sup> However, such a judgement obviously reads the letter in contrast to other writings before listening to 2 Peter on its own. Though the seafarers make comparisons of the strange manuscript with other known writings (see point 3 below), these have no specific connection to Adam More's work and remain only a comparison. In the case of those scholars who measure 2 Peter's worth against Paul (e.g., Käsemann), there is the assumption that Paul represents a legitimate standard. If we let 2 Peter speak for itself, as the sailors were forced to let Adam More speak for himself, we are in a better position to make objective, unbiased assessments.

3) In the opening dialogue, entitled "Scientific Theories and Scepticism" (60–71), Dr. Congreve is unimpressed by Melick's claim that the manuscript is merely a hoax. As part of his response, he moves towards an analysis of *internal evidence*. This involves both the observation that More's geography is accurate, and that the presence of some fantastic elements in the story does not imply that the tale is a fiction.<sup>7</sup> In support of the author's accuracy, the doctor employs a tool frequently used in the historical task, namely, the observation of parallels. He points out that Adam More's description of the geography (Antarctica) resembles that of Captain James Clarke Ross which

(conveniently!) the doctor had just read. He begins: “mark the coincidence between Ross’s report and More’s manuscript” (64–65). By referring to the description of a known explorer, some confirmation of the accuracy of More’s presentation is provided.<sup>8</sup> The ensuing discussion allows for a few methodological considerations about what can be learned on the basis of parallels between authors.

a) First, Melick proposes that the story may have been written by one of Ross’s men who was thrown overboard (65). This would explain the similarities/accuracy More shares with Ross, and supports Melick’s theory that the author of the manuscript was a sensation-novelist (61–62, 65).<sup>9</sup> In effect then, Melick proposes that the descriptions of More and Ross were derived from a common situation. His theory is sharply challenged however because it is too difficult to support (65 and throughout).

b) Rather than a shared context, the doctor proves that More’s tale must have been independent of Captain Ross. Based on their prior evaluation of the physical evidence (62), he feels confident that “This [the strange manuscript] must have been written at least three years ago, and [therefore] the writer could not have known anything about Ross’s discoveries” (65). Independence of the separate accounts is therefore confirmed; Ross and More were describing the same thing without reference to one another.

c) A further parallel is proposed, namely, between More and an “American expedition” headed by Charles Wilkes. In this case, the parallel is shown to be unfounded as Wilkes was inaccurate. “I believe Wilkes’s antarctic continent will some day be penetrated by ships, which will sail for hundreds of miles farther south” (64). In other words, Wilkes did not find a continent, as More had done, and therefore the parallel is not legitimate.

De Mille reminds readers that caution in the use of parallels is necessary. One needs to be aware of chronological factors (could this writer have known that one?) before claiming a specific relationship, and acknowledge that similarities can turn out to be superficial (and therefore prove, or disprove, nothing). In NT studies there is frequent appeal to literary parallels. We are reminded that pitfalls exist, and that there is always a need to be aware of alternative explanations for similarities found between one author and another.

4) While respecting the author of the strange manuscript (cf. point 2 above), the doctor also recognizes *the limitations of the primary source*. At one point when asked a certain question about More’s narrative, he responds: “Unfortunately, More is not at all close or accurate in his descriptions; he has a decidedly unscientific mind, and so

one cannot feel sure" (144). Again later he says that More "is too general in his descriptions. He has not a scientific mind, and he gives but few data" (148). On another occasion, Dr. Congreve simply admits that an answer to a question asked is not possible on the basis of the evidence: "It is difficult to make it out accurately.... More gives no data" (65).

NT scholarship on the other hand has not been so willing to admit that at times conclusions must be reserved. Speculation in the form of elaborate hypotheses has become a common way of making the evidence say more than is there. The reserve of the sailors with respect to speculation is a splendid model for NT scholars who possess so little in the way of evidence.<sup>10</sup> We also find in the sailors' analysis of internal evidence the initial assumption that the simplest explanation is probably the best one (as in the previous note).<sup>11</sup>

5) The good historian knows how to *ask good questions*. While one must respect the evidence, it is still entirely appropriate to raise questions based on this evidence. In contrast to the optimistic tenor of much of the discussion regarding the manuscript, Melick's reservations stand out—he is "a professional cynic, sceptic, and scoffer," in Featherstone's words (145). He is the first to voice an opinion ("it's a transparent hoax", 61) and throughout the novel De Mille uses him as a foil to set-up further reasons in support of authenticity. We see this in the doctor's response to the view just mentioned: "you've a very vivid imagination [Melick]; but come, let us discuss this for a little while in a common-sense way" (61). So even though Melick's negative stance is regularly dismissed, it serves an important role in the structure of the novel, and indeed allows the narrative to move forward (meaning the narrative of the sailors' conversations, not the novel as a whole). But scepticism can be taken too far and De Mille seems to cast Melick in a negative light in this regard. He becomes the odd man out when "the others evidently sympathized with the doctor's view, and regarded Melick as carrying his scepticism to an absurd excess" (70).

There are no shortage of examples that could be cited from NT research of scepticism carried to an "absurd excess."<sup>12</sup> But it remains, nonetheless, that constant questioning forces the discipline to fine-tune its methods, and to move forward only with great caution toward larger reconstructions of the early church. There is such thing as a healthy scepticism even if, like those interrupted by Melick, some may find repeated challenges to surface-level readings of the data a little wearying.

6) Touching on all the previous comments is the issue of *genre* and it is at this point that the disagreements between Oxenden and Congreve on the one hand, and Melick on the other, come to the surface most clearly. The former two, being confident that the manuscript describes actual events, tend to focus on arguments justifying individual details: geographical accuracy, scientific explanations, proposals explaining the existence of a civilization at the south pole, and so on. Melick however takes the story as a whole and calls attention to similarities with other literature. At one point he offers the following objection: "I simply criticise from a literary point of view, and I don't like his underground cavern with the stream running through it. It sounds like one of the voyages of Sinbad the Sailor. Nor do I like his description; he evidently is writing for effect" (66).

In taking this route toward an explanation, Melick looks for the author's motive (to write a "sensation-novel")<sup>13</sup> and then his means of achieving this end (imitating conventions of such writings). This is developed throughout the debate. While criticizing the literary skills of the author, Melick again refers to the author's intentions:

His plan is one thing and his execution quite another. His plan is not bad, but he fails utterly in his execution. The style is detestable.<sup>14</sup> If he had written in the style of a plain seaman, and told a simple unvarnished tale, it would have been all right. In order to carry out properly such a plan as this the writer should take Defoe as his model, or, still better, Dean Swift. *Gulliver's Travels* and *Robinson Crusoe* show what can be done in this way, and form a standard by which all other attempts must be judged. But this writer is tawdry; he has the worst vices of the sensational school - he shows everywhere marks of haste, gross carelessness, and universal feebleness (228).

By placing this writing in a literary tradition or genre, the case for authenticity is, by Melick's reasoning, sharply undermined.<sup>15</sup> Melick also finds in the story "a good deal of quiet satire" (226) and a "perpetual undercurrent of meaning and innuendo...found in every line" (227) which implies the deliberate, creative work of the author, not the simple presentation of facts Oxenden suggests in the same conversation.

7) Needless to say, a group of people looking at the same evidence will often reach *different conclusions*. This is seen in a delightful exchange between two of the sailors.



"Do you mean to say that you still accept all this as *bona fide*?" "Do you mean to say," retorted Oxenden, "that you still have any doubt about the authenticity of this remarkable manuscript?" At this each looked at the other; Melick elevated his eyebrows, and Oxenden shrugged his shoulders; but each seemed unable to find words to express his amazement at the other's stupidity, and so they took refuge in silence (229).

But are their conclusions (and ours) reached on the basis of the evidence, or on the basis of presuppositions brought to the historical task? R. E. Watters (1969, xvii) summarizes the various views held by the sailors as follows: "The four men who find the manuscript disagree about how to classify it: a sensational novel, a satirical romance, a scientific romance, a satire on humanity, a plain narrative of facts, are all suggested in turn." This being the case it becomes imperative that the historian be aware of presuppositions and prejudices being brought to the evidence. "Every reader," continues Watters, "like the four who retrieved the manuscript, may readily discover his [or her] own interests and values reflected in the *Copper Cylinder*." Of course, what is true of sailors is equally true of readers of the New Testament.

## Conclusion

In what has been considered, De Mille's novel reminds us that the historian's encounter with a manuscript of uncertain origin represents an adventure. In Featherstone's words, "By Jove!...this is really getting to be something tremendous" (25). De Mille also reminds us that while some steps in the quest for answers are profitable, others are less constructive. But the key point I would like to make is this: our questioning, our analysis, our exploration of origins, must begin with the text itself, not (often theoretical) contexts. Some might question this. However it remains that for many early Christian writings we lack certain evidence of a specific context (such as 2 Peter). What is usually offered instead are hypothetical scenarios. Good as some of these may be, they are still just hypotheses. If we allow them to shape our conclusions before we listen to the text itself, we are already listening to the choir, not the individual singer we want to hear. Historians also resemble sailors on other levels. No final conclusions are reached by the four friends, a state of affairs students of the NT often have to accept. As seen, there are limitations on the historical task imposed by scant evidence, but human nature being what it is imposes others as well: "That's enough for to-day," says Featherstone,

in the closing words of this story, "I'm tired and can't read any more. It's time for supper" (269; also see 60, 143).

## Endnotes

1. Does such a thing exist? Alas, it does not, as we have been reminded so many times. In NT studies Bultmann's "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?" (1961) remains a classic statement on the matter. In the realm of imagination however, we can justify some reflection on an ideal situation.
2. According to Parks, writing over twenty years ago, this novel "is at last becoming recognized as a minor classic of Canadian fiction" (1976, 61).
3. De Mille 1986, 8 (this edition is referred to throughout). A fine biography of De Mille and discussion of his work is available in Monk 1991. See also R. E. Watters's introduction to the McClelland and Stewart edition (1969), and Parks 1976 and 1986, xvii–lix.
4. Featherstone is the picture of contentment as the story opens: "Suspended between the two masts, in an Indian hammock, lay Featherstone, with a cigar in his mouth and a novel in his hand, which he was pretending to read" (1–2).
5. The sections with which we are concerned, namely, the analysis of the manuscript, are found on pp. 1–9, 60–71, 143–55, 226–39, and 269.
6. E.g., Käsemann's well known essay on 2 Peter speaks of it as doing "discredit to its object," i.e., a defence of the primitive hope of Christ's return (Käsemann 1982, 169).
7. E.g., regarding a reference to sea-serpents the doctor says: "Some of these so-called fossil animals may have their representatives still living in the remoter parts of the world" (67).
8. E.g., "I can prove that the statements here are corroborated by those of Captain Ross in his account of that great voyage from which he returned not very long ago" (63). For background information on Ross's expedition, as well as Wilkes's voyage (referred to below), see Malcolm Parks's explanatory notes in 1986, 276–77.
9. Melick is quick to say: "If I'd been on that expedition I should probably have written it to beguile the time"; and again, "The fact is...it's not a sailor's yarn at all. No sailor would ever express himself in that way. That's what struck me from the first. It has the ring of a confounded sensation-monger all through" (65).
10. Commenting on the climate described, we see the doctor's reluctance to venture into the realm of theory: "In answer to that we must leave ascertained

facts and trust to theories, unless, indeed, we accept as valid the statements of this remarkable manuscript. For my own part, I see no reason why it should not be as More says" (69).

11. On the need to avoid excessive historical speculation, see Wisse 1992.
12. A dramatic illustration is found in those occasional scholars who question whether Jesus ever actually existed.
13. Once the story was discovered and gained attention, the author would then come forward and take credit for his creation—so argues Melick. "Some fellow wanted to get up a sensation novel and introduce it to the world with a great flourish of trumpets, and so he has taken this way of going about it...he has counted on its being picked up, and perhaps published" (61).
14. A playful self-critique by De Mille?
15. The influence of these and other writers on De Mille is discussed in Parks 1976, 64–66, 74, 77 n. 11; 1986, 301; and Woodcock 1973.

## Works Cited

- Bultmann, Rudolph. 1961. Is exegesis without presuppositions possible? In *Existence and faith*, translated by S. M. Ogden. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- De Mille, James. 1986. *A strange manuscript found in a copper cylinder*. Edited by Malcolm Parks. Ottawa: Carleton University Press.
- Käsemann, Ernst. 1982. An apologia for primitive Christian eschatology. In *Essays on New Testament themes*, trans. W. J. Montague. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- Monk, Patricia. 1991. *The gilded beaver: An introduction to the life and work of James De Mille*. Toronto: ECW Press.
- Parks, M. G. 1976. Strange to strangers only. *Canadian Literature* 70: 61–78.
- Räsänen, Heikki. 1990. *Beyond New Testament theology*. London: SCM Press.
- Watters, R. E. 1969. Introduction to James De Mille, *A strange manuscript found in a copper cylinder*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.
- Wisse, Frederik. 1992. Historical method and the Johannine community. *ARC* 20: 35–42.
- Woodcock, George. 1973. De Mille and the utopian vision. *JCF* 2: 174–79.