In *Is Scripture Still Holy*, A. E. Harvey, former lecturer in theology at Oxford University and current fellow at the George Bell Institute, considers the continuing relevance and authority of the New Testament. This short, readable book aims to provide a theology of the New Testament that is fully conversant with several challenges to its claim to holiness raised since the Enlightenment.

In this work, which originated as a collection of sermons commemorating Robinson’s *Honest to God*, Harvey asks whether or not he has become “honest” to the New Testament (vii). The preface identifies Harvey’s intended audience as nonspecialists. To engage this wider readership, Harvey abstains from the use of bibliographic notes throughout the book. It is worth noting here that, although “scripture” is in the title, Harvey’s analysis concerns exclusively the writings of the New Testament. Harvey focuses his attention on the gospels, Acts, and Paul’s more theological letters (e.g., 1 Corinthians and Romans). Some New Testament compositions are disregarded entirely (e.g., 1 Peter and Revelation), while others are mentioned in only one place (Hebrews, James, and 1 John).

Harvey’s study contains seven chapters in addition to the preface. The first chapter, “Coming of Age,” provides the theoretical underpinnings and analytical focus for the rest
of the book. In this chapter Harvey presents those factors of critical scholarship that might call into question the modifier “holy” in reference to the writings of the New Testament as well as the fundamental criteria by which the holiness of the New Testament might be measured. Because this chapter is of central importance for the rest of the book, I will engage it more fully before summarizing the topics and contributions of the remaining chapters.

The title of the first chapter stems in part from Bonhoeffer’s reflections on the theological consequences of moderns having “come of age.” Coming of age, for Bonhoeffer, means that God’s existence and activity in the world can no longer be taken for granted. Rather, authentic witness and proclamation must persuade modern people of the reality of God’s noncoercive presence in the world. Harvey extends Bonhoeffer’s reflection to a discussion of the modern person’s engagement with the New Testament. This chapter highlights how the previously unassailable view of scripture as holy, inspired, and authoritative began to crack under the weight of critical scholarship in the wake of the Enlightenment. Harvey considers problems caused by the textual transmission of scripture, scientific discovery, and the use of scripture to support immoral ends (such as slavery or National Socialism).

Aware of the critical problems that have resulted in the demotion of the holiness of scripture, there is still a way in which the writings of the New Testament can be regarded as holy:

he grounds on which they may still be called “holy” are that, however imperfectly, they mediate to us some moment of experience in the past when the transcendent God in whom we believe intervened in the universe he created in such a way as to influence his human creatures without ever coercing them or limiting their freedom of choice; and that the record of this intervention continues to beckon its readers and hearers toward a fuller understanding of the mystery of God and the nature of his expectations of us. (19)

By calling attention to the manner in which scripture mediates moments of experience in history and beckons readers to a fuller understanding of God, Harvey presents a notion of holiness more in terms of the New Testament’s functional qualities than its ontological: scripture is holy because of what it does, not simply because of what it is.

Outlining the authority of the New Testament in matters of conduct, belief, and religious practice, however, depends on criteria that originate from outside of scripture. As Harvey explains, the holiness of scripture must be constantly reassessed against “newly emerging critical, literary, and moral criteria” (19). It is possible to discern two distinct, though
related sets of criteria for evaluating the holiness of scripture: one related to moral
criterion, the other to critical and literary criteria.

The first set of criteria, which elaborates the moral criterion of holiness, has three
components, which I will term the ethical, theological, and martyrological criteria. The
ethical criterion states that scripture is holy insofar as it does not promote immoral
practices. The theological criterion regards scripture as holy when it points to “an
essentially non-coercive God” revealed “to an indifferent and unresponsive world” (16).
Finally, scripture is holy when it is witnessed and embodied by those who faithfully live
by it (the martyrological criterion).

The second set of criteria assesses scripture’s holiness on the basis of critical and literary
analysis. Within this set, Harvey identifies five criteria: (1) when scripture claims to
provide historical information, it must adhere to the credentials of ancient
historiography; (2) it must be intelligible and consistent as a foundational document for
religion; (3) it must nourish liturgical and devotional life through its linguistic and
imaginative depth; (4) it must act as an ethical guide in moral issues; (5) and it must relate
the reader both to her past and her hoped-for future (18).

Though the first set of criteria (ethical, theological, and martyrological) emerges in select
places in the chapters that follow, Harvey is more concerned with the critical and literary
criteria. In the chapters that follow, Harvey analyzes several New Testament compositions
to see how they measure up to the criteria he has identified. The second, third, and fifth
chapters consider the historical reliability of the Synoptic Gospels, Acts, and John as well
as the historical figure of Jesus. The fourth chapter likens the writings of the New
Testament to a moral compass that guides ethical decision making. The sixth chapter
surveys the writings of Paul and evaluates their functional significance in matters of
liturgical life, moral discernment, and hope for the future. The final chapter offers further
reflection on how the New Testament provides hope for the future, what Harvey terms
“biblical expectancy” (131). The central notion of this expectancy is not the imminent end
of life as we know it but rather a vigilant waiting and living as if the promised future were
already taking place.

Limits of space preclude a full analysis of the arguments and conclusions of each of these
chapters. The interested reader may consult those chapters of greatest interest. A few
comments about the general tenor and method of these chapters are in order, however.

First, Harvey is to be commended for how gracefully he moves through some of the
knottier issues in the critical investigation of the New Testament. In large part, he has
succeeded in writing for his intended audience: his analysis provides a clear and
accessibly summary of the challenges raised by critical scholarship for nonspecialists. These summaries are nuanced and even-handed. His assessment of how these challenges threaten the authority of the New Testament is less nuanced, however. Harvey’s analysis tends to minimize or negate the impact of these challenges to the extent that they appear not to be real problems at all. Rather, they are the natural consequence of the human element in the creation, transmission, and interpretation of the New Testament, or they result from some other form of misunderstanding. Harvey’s explication and simplification of the critical problems of the New Testament often comes at the cost of recognizing its diversity and complexity.

Second, although it is apparent that holiness is a complex and sometimes ambiguous concept for Harvey, this ambiguity leads to a lack of precision that obscures his argument. Holiness often functions as a cipher for a larger constellation of terms, including truthfulness, reliability, and authority. As the book progresses, Harvey’s initially robust sets of criteria for determining holiness are reduced to questions of authority and truthfulness, both of which depend almost entirely on questions of historical reliability.

Third, and most important, Harvey’s failure to engage the New Testament’s witness to the resurrection of Jesus in any significant way is problematic. While most subject indexes are admittedly minimalistic, it is revealing that Harvey’s contains no reference to the resurrection as a general term or as a term related to Jesus. I can count only a handful of references to the resurrection of Jesus, most of which concern the gospels as witnesses or accounts of the resurrection of Jesus along with his life and death. Harvey even refers obliquely to the “alleged resurrection” of Jesus in one place (89). Certainly the resurrection of Jesus is one of the central claims of the New Testament, and it is one that should be vetted against Harvey’s understanding of holiness. Whether in the critical account of Reimarus, the rationalizing response of Paulus, or the history of religion approach of Bousset, the resurrection of Jesus became a source of contention following the Enlightenment, and critical scholarship in the twenty-first century has continued to reflect on this central datum. Harvey’s omission leaves void any consideration of one of the focal points in which modern readers of the New Testament struggle to “come of age.”

Readers of Is Scripture Still Holy? will find a readable and engaging discussion of many significant problems critical New Testament scholarship poses to people of faith. Harvey provides one explanation for how scripture can continue to play an authoritative role in the lives of modern Christians who cannot disregard some of its problems. Use of this book would be appropriate in upper-division undergraduate classes or seminary classes related to modern theologies of scripture, alongside, for example, Sandra Schneiders’s The Revelatory Text or John Webster’s Holy Scripture.