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, inscriptive, 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.

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.
6 Porter, “Why the Laodiceans Received Lukewarm Water.”
7 E.g., Boxall, Beale, Keener, Mounce, Osborne, Aune, Blount, Michaels, Witherington, Johnson, Trafton, and Smalley.