



THEOLOGY
OF THE NEW
TESTAMENT

UDO
SCHNELLE

Translated by
M. EUGENE BORING

THEOLOGY
OF THE NEW
TESTAMENT

Udo Schnelle

Translated by M. Eugene Boring


BakerAcademic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Contents

- Translator's Preface 9
Author's Preface to the German Edition 11
Abbreviations 13
1. Approach: Theology of the New Testament as Meaning-Formation 25
 - 1.1 How History Is Made and Written 27
 - 1.2 History as Meaning-Formation 33
 - 1.3 Understanding through Narration 36
 2. Structure: History and Meaning 41
 - 2.1 The Phenomenon of the Beginning 41
 - 2.2 Theology and the Academic Study of Religion 45
 - 2.3 Diversity and Unity 49
 - 2.4 New Testament Theology as Meaning-Formation 54
 3. Jesus of Nazareth: The Near God 61
 - 3.1 The Quest for Jesus 61
 - 3.2 Beginning: John the Baptist 72
 - 3.3 Point of Departure: The Coming of the One God in His Kingly Power 81
 - 3.4 Center: The Proclamation of the Kingdom of God 86
 - 3.5 Ethics in the Horizon of the Kingdom of God 111
 - 3.6 Jesus as Healer: God's Miraculous Power 121
 - 3.7 The Imminent Judgment: Nothing Is without Its Consequences 128
 - 3.8 Jesus and the Law: To Will the Good 133
 - 3.9 Jesus's Self-Understanding: More Than a Prophet 146
 - 3.10 Jesus's Destiny in Jerusalem: End and Beginning 155
 4. The First Transformation: The Emergence of Christology 163
 - 4.1 Jesus's Pre-Easter Claim 165
 - 4.2 The Resurrection Appearances 166

- 4.3 Experiences of the Spirit 169
- 4.4 The Christological Reading of Scripture 170
- 4.5 History-of-Religions Context 174
- 4.6 Language and Shape of Early Christology: Myth, Titles, Formulae, and Traditions 180
- 5. The Second Transformation: The Early Christian Mission without the Precondition of Circumcision 193**
 - 5.1 The Hellenists 193
 - 5.2 Antioch 195
 - 5.3 The Stance of Paul 198
- 6. Paul: Missionary and Thinker 203**
 - 6.1 Theology 205
 - 6.2 Christology 221
 - 6.3 Pneumatology 268
 - 6.4 Soteriology 275
 - 6.5 Anthropology 282
 - 6.6 Ethics 319
 - 6.7 Ecclesiology 328
 - 6.8 Eschatology 342
 - 6.9 Setting in the History of Early Christian Theology 359
- 7. The Third Transformation: Composition of Gospels as Innovative Response to Crises 363**
 - 7.1 Death of the Founders 363
 - 7.2 Delay of the Parousia 367
 - 7.3 Destruction of Jerusalem and the Earliest Christian Congregation 369
 - 7.4 The Rise of the Flavians 370
 - 7.5 The Writing of Gospels as Innovative Response to Crises 373
- 8. The Sayings Source, the Synoptic Gospels, and Acts: Meaning through Narration 377**
 - 8.1 The Sayings Source as Proto-Gospel 380
 - 8.2 Mark: The Way of Jesus 399
 - 8.3 Matthew: The New and Better Righteousness 429
 - 8.4 Luke: Salvation and History 463
- 9. The Fourth Transformation: The Gospel in the World 525**
 - 9.1 Social, Religious, and Political Developments 525
 - 9.2 Pseudepigraphy/Deuteronymity as a Historical, Literary, and Theological Phenomenon 534
- 10. The Deutero-Pauline Letters: Paul's Thought Extended 539**
 - 10.1 Colossians: Paul in Changing Times 539
 - 10.2 Ephesians: Space and Time 557
 - 10.3 Second Thessalonians: Date (of the End) as Problem 574
 - 10.4 The Pastoral Epistles: God's Philanthropy 578
- 11. The Catholic Epistles: Voices in Dangerous Times 603**
 - 11.1 First Peter: Testing by Suffering 603
 - 11.2 James: Acting and Being 617

11.3	Hebrews: The God Who Speaks	632
11.4	Jude and 2 Peter: Identity through Tradition and Polemic against Heresy	653
12.	Johannine Theology: Introduction to the Christian Faith	659
12.1	Theology	660
12.2	Christology	669
12.3	Pneumatology	704
12.4	Soteriology	712
12.5	Anthropology	716
12.6	Ethics	726
12.7	Ecclesiology	734
12.8	Eschatology	741
12.9	Setting in the History of Early Christian Theology	746
13.	Revelation: Seeing and Understanding	751
13.1	Theology	752
13.2	Christology	754
13.3	Pneumatology	759
13.4	Soteriology	760
13.5	Anthropology	761
13.6	Ethics	762
13.7	Ecclesiology	765
13.8	Eschatology	768
13.9	Setting in the History of Early Christian Theology	771
	Bibliography	773
	Index of Subjects	839
	Index of Greek Words and Phrases	853
	Index of Modern Authors	857
	Index of Ancient Sources	871

1

Approach

Theology of the New Testament as Meaning-Formation

Since a theology of the New Testament must both (1) bring the thought world of the New Testament writings into clear focus and (2) articulate this thought world in the context of a contemporary understanding of reality, it has to work with different temporal planes. Its task is to envision the past in view of the present, to explicate it in such a way that its future relevance can be seen. New Testament theology is thus linked into the question of the lasting significance of past events. So it is always a historical discipline, and as such it must participate in theoretical debates on the nature and extent of historical knowledge. Thus the discipline of New Testament theology is involved from the start in the deliberations of the philosophy of history, how history as past reality is grasped, and which categories play a central role in this process.

People can understand reality only within the human capacity for interpretation, that is, for channeling past events into the worlds of human experience and ascribing significance to them in different ways. These processes are also events of “meaning-formation,” for they always aim at establishing or maintaining a valid orientation to the world and to life. Meaning-formation can entail ascertaining the validity of one’s present orientation, or expanding it, or initiating a new departure. It confers meaning on both past and present. *Such constructions provide the sense-making capacity that facilitates the individual’s orientation within the complex framework of life.*¹ Meaning is an inherent

1. On meaning-formation as an aspect of historical theory, cf. Jörn Rüsen, “Historische Methode und religiöser Sinn,” in *Geschichte im Kulturprozeß* (ed. Jörn Rüsen; Cologne: Böhlau,

aspect of human existence as such. It emerges from events, experiences, insights, thought processes, and hermeneutical accomplishments, and it comes together in concepts. These concepts then can provide perspective on the central issues of life, bridging temporal gaps. They can be presented in a narrative mode, and they can generate normative statements and cultural models.²

The category *meaning*³ is particularly appropriate as a way of connecting the world of the New Testament and that of the present. In every age—including the Greco-Roman era—reality has been perceived through constant processes whereby religious meaning-formation happens in parallel with meaning-formation in other cultural domains: politics, philosophy, art, literature, economics, the natural sciences, and social structures. Human life is always a matter of the realization of meaning, so that the question is not whether human beings undertake meaning-formation but what resources, structure, quality, and argumentative force their efforts exhibit.

For a theology of the New Testament, the concept of meaning is key, for it enables divine and human to unite by encompassing the gift whereby God establishes meaning in Jesus Christ together with the testimony to that gift in the New Testament writings. The New Testament, as the basic documentary archive of Christianity, represents the formation of a meaning-formation or symbolic universe with an extraordinary history of effects. Early Christianity developed in a multicultural milieu with numerous, attractive, and competing religious and philosophical systems.⁴ On the foundation of the Jesus-Christ-history, narrated in numerous ways in the New Testament, it succeeded in building, inhabiting, and constantly adding on to a “house of

2002), 11; on the multilayered term “meaning-formation,” cf. E. List, “Sinn,” in *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* (ed. Günter Kehrer et al.; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1988), 5:62–71. [For a good introduction in English to “meaning-formation” as an aspect of historical theory, see Frank R. Ankersmit, “Three Levels of ‘Sinnbildung’ in Historical Writing,” in Jörg Rüsen, *Meaning and Representation in History* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006), 108–22. I have usually rendered *Sinnbildung* by “meaning-formation,” but note its relation to *Sinnwelt*, usually translated “universe of meaning” or “symbolic universe.”—MEB]

2. Cf. Jörn Rüsen and K.-J. Hölkamp, “Einleitung,” in *Sinn (in) der Antike* (ed. K.-J. Hölkamp et al.; Mainz: Von Zabern, 2003), 3: “The concept *meaning* may be defined as follows: It is a product of reflection on the connections within one’s experienced world that proves to be plausible and dependable, serves to make sense of the world, to provide orientation within it, to form one’s identity, and that leads to purposeful action.”

3. The German word *Sinn* (meaning), like the English word *sense*, is derived from the Indo-Germanic root *sent-*, which basically means to take a particular direction, to go along a particular way. There is a connection with the Latin *sentio* (feel, perceive), *sensus* (sense, perception, understanding), *sententia* (meaning, purpose, thought); Old High German *sin* (Sinn), *sinnan* (strive for, desire); cf. Julius Pokorný, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (2 vols.; Bern: Francke, 1959), 1:908.

4. Cf. the collection of texts by Malte Hossenfelder, ed., *Antike Glückslehren: Kynismus und Kyrenaismus, Stoa, Epikureismus und Skepsis: Quellen in deutscher Übersetzung mit Einführungen* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1996).

meaning” capable of grounding, establishing, and structuring human life as a whole. This meaning structure, or symbolic universe, obviously had tremendous hermeneutical potential at its disposal, and a theology of the New Testament must aim to ascertain and delineate the basic elements of its hermeneutical potential. The category *meaning* as the hermeneutical constant thus prevents a narrowing of the focus to issues of historical facts, for what is at stake is how we can appropriate the New Testament traditions historically and make them theologically accessible without violating their religious content and their formative power to generate meaning. The truth claim of these texts is not to be avoided, for “*truth*” is *meaning that makes a binding claim*. The goal is not a gutted Christian house, but an appreciation of this house that perceives its architecture, the load-bearing floors and walls, the doors and stairways that create connections between its components, and the windows that make it possible to look outside. At the same time, focusing on the category *meaning* opens to theology the possibility of entering into critical discourse with other academic disciplines devoted to meaning and truth, and doing so on the basis of its own normative tradition.

1.1 How History Is Made and Written

Jesus of Nazareth is a historical figure, and the New Testament is testimony to his impact on history. When a New Testament theology is written on this basis from a distance of two thousand years, the fundamental problems of historical inquiry and historical knowledge inevitably arise. How was history (*Geschichte*) made and how does research and writing about history (*Historie*) take place?⁵ What happens when a document from the past that makes a claim on the future is interpreted in the present? How do historical reports

5. Regarding terminology: I use the German terms “Geschichte”/“geschichtlich” to refer to what happened, and “Historie”/“historisch” to indicate the ways in which historians attempt to determine what this was. “Historik” refers to the philosophical theory of history. Cf. H.-W. Hedinger, “Historik,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (ed. Karlfried Gründer et al.; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974). “Geschichte” is never directly available except as “Historie,” but nonetheless the two concepts and terms must be distinguished, because the questions posed from the point of view of philosophical theories of history are not simply identical with “what happened” as that was understood by people in the past. [The German language has two words for “history,” while English has but one. Many German authors, including some quoted by Schnelle, use the two words interchangeably. The nuances distinguished by Schnelle are sometimes difficult to preserve in English. Since the context usually makes clear which meaning is intended, I have generally rendered both words by *history* and its cognates, though sometimes using *event* or *story* for *Geschichte* to preserve the author’s nuance, or rendering *geschichtlich* by *historic* in contrast to *historical*. See note 2 in §2.1 below. Here the original reads: “Wie entsteht Geschichte/Historie?”—MEB]

and their incorporation into the thought world of the historian/exegete relate to each other²⁶

Interest and Acquisition of Knowledge

From several points of view, the classical ideal of historicism—to present nothing more or less than “what actually happened”⁷—has proven to be an ideological postulate.⁸ As the present passes into the past, it irrevocably loses its character as reality. For this reason alone it is not possible to recall the past, in intact form, into the present. The temporal interval signifies a fading away in every regard; it disallows historical knowledge in the sense of a comprehensive restoration of what once happened.⁹ All that one can do is to declare in the present one’s own interpretation of the past. The past is available to us exclusively in the mode of the present, and only in interpreted and selected form. What is relevant from the past is not that which is merely past, but that which influences world-formation and world-interpretation in the present.¹⁰ The true temporal plane on which the historian/exegete works is *always the present*,¹¹ within which he or she is inextricably intertwined, so

6. Cf. Jörn Rüsen, *Historische Vernunft* (GH 1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983); Jörn Rüsen, *Rekonstruktion der Vergangenheit: Die Prinzipien der historischen Forschung* (GH 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986); Jörn Rüsen, *Lebendige Geschichte: Formen und Funktionen des historischen Wissens* (GH 3; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989); Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Umgang mit Geschichte: Eine Einführung in die Geschichtstheorie* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1995); Christoph Conrad and Martina Kessel, *Geschichte Schreiben in der Postmoderne: Beiträge zur aktuellen Diskussion* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1994). [Most of the works of Jörn Rüsen referred to here and in the following have not been translated into English, but his perspectives and major theses within the context of recent discussion are available in Jörn Rüsen, ed., *Western Historical Thinking: An Intercultural Debate* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002), and Jörn Rüsen et al., eds., *Studies in Metahistory* (Pretoria: HSRC, 1993).—MEB]

7. Cf. Leopold von Ranke, “Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494–1514,” in *Leopold von Ranke’s sämtliche Werke* (ed. Alfred Wilhelm Dove and Theodor Wiedemann; 3rd ed.; Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1875), vii: “People have conferred on history the responsibility of restoring the past, to make it useful for the instruction of years to come. The present work does not accept such a high office: it only wants to set forth what actually happened” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen [ist]*).

8. Cf. Goertz, *Umgang mit Geschichte*, 130–31.

9. Cf. Udo Schnelle, “Der historische Abstand und der Heilige Geist,” in *Reformation und Neuzeit: 300 Jahre Theologie in Halle* (ed. Udo Schnelle; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1994), 87–103.

10. Cf. Johann Gustav Droysen, *Outline of the Principles of History* (trans. E. Benjamin Andrews; New York: Fertig, 1893), 11: “The data for historical investigation are not past things, for these have disappeared, but things which are still present here and now, whether recollections of what was done, or remnants of things that have existed and of events that have occurred.”

11. Cf. Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* (trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer; 3 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3:145: “The first way of thinking about the pastness of the past is to dull the sting of what is at issue, namely, temporal distance.” Such thoughts are of course not new; cf. a comment by Aristippus (425–255 BCE), a student of Socrates, preserved in Claudius Aelianus, *Var. hist.* 14.6: “Only the present moment belongs to

that present understanding of past events is always decisively stamped by the historian's own cultural standards. The historian or exegete's social setting, traditions, and political and religious values necessarily affect what he or she says in the present about the past.¹² We are all committed to our various intellectual orthodoxies. Even the very preconditions of understanding, especially reason and the particular context in which it operates, are subject to a process of continuing transformation, inasmuch as historical knowledge is conditioned by the aims that direct the quest for knowledge in each period of intellectual history.

The writing of history is thus never an uncontaminated reproduction of "what happened." Rather, each act of history-writing includes something of its own history—the history, that is, of its writer! Insight into the historicalness of the knowing subject calls for reflection on his or her role in the act of understanding, for the knowing subject does not stand over history but is entirely interwoven within it. It is therefore altogether inappropriate to describe historical understanding in terms of a contrast between "objectivity" and "subjectivity."¹³ The use of such terminology serves rather as a rhetorical strategy of declaring one's own position as positive and neutral in order to discredit other interpretations as subjective and ideological. The object known cannot be separated from the knowing subject, for the act of knowing also always effects a change in the object that is known. The awareness of reality attained in the act of knowing and the past reality itself do not relate as copy and original.¹⁴ One should thus speak not of the "objectivity" of historical arguments but of their plausibility and fittingness.¹⁵ After all, those reports introduced into historical arguments as "facts" are as a rule themselves already interpretations of past events. Already interpreted as meaningful, they necessarily undergo further meaning-formation in order to continue to be history. The past event itself is not available to us, but only the various understandings of past events mediated to us by various interpreters. Things do not become

us; neither what one has already done, nor what one expects of the future. The one is already gone, and the other may not happen" (trans. MEB).

12. Cf. J. Straub, "Über das Bilden von Vergangenheit," in *Geschichtsbewußtsein: Psychologische Grundlagen, Entwicklungskonzepte, empirische Befunde* (ed. Jörn Rüsen; Cologne: Böhlau, 2001), 45: "Representations of events and developments do not deliver mimetic models of events that once happened, but perceptions of events bound to particular capacities of understanding and interpretation. Such interpretations are formed from the perspective of a particular present by particular persons, and are thus directly dependent on the experiences, expectations, orientations and interests of these persons."

13. Cf. Goertz, *Umgang mit Geschichte*, 130–46.

14. Cf. Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Unsichere Geschichte: Zur Theorie historischer Referentialität* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2001), 29.

15. Cf. J. Kocka, "Angemessenheitskriterien historischer Argumente," in *Objektivität und Parteilichkeit* (ed. W. J. Mommsen and Jörn Rüsen; Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1977), 469–75.

what they are for us until we ascribe meaning to them. History is not reconstructed, but unavoidably and necessarily *constructed*. The common perception that things need only be “reported” or “re-constructed” suggests a knowledge of the original events that does not exist in the manner presupposed by this terminology. Nor is history simply identical with the past; rather, it is always only a stance in the present from which one can view the past. Thus within the realm of historical constructions, there are no “facts” in the “objective” sense; interpretations are built on interpretations. Hence the truth of the statement: “Events are not [in themselves] history; they become history.”¹⁶

Reality as Given

And yet we by no means give up on reference to actual events; rather, we reflect on the conditions under which their reality is perceived. To say that history is constructed does not imply anything arbitrary or self-derived; we proceed according to method and on the basis of data.* We must connect data from the sources in a meaningful framework, necessarily remaining within the academic discourse that makes it possible to receive and discuss the data.¹⁷

16. Cf. Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik: Rekonstruktion der ersten vollständigen Fassung der Vorlesungen* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1857), 69. On the same page Droysen judiciously comments regarding historical circumstances: “They are only historical because they are interpreted historically, not objective realities in and of themselves, but in and through our observation and appropriation. We must, so to speak, transpose them into a different key.”

*[Schnelle is here opposing Radical Construction, a recent philosophical movement centered at the University of Vienna. The basic tenet of this view, popular among some postmodern authors, is that any kind of knowledge is constructed rather than perceived through senses. Among its leading proponents are Heinz von Foerster and Humberto R. Maturana. Maturana, as the founder of the epistemological theory of *autopoiesis*, focuses on the central role of the observer in the production of knowledge. For English introductions to the topic cf. Paul Watzlawick, *The Invented Reality: How Do We Know What We Believe We Know? Contributions to Constructivism* (New York: Norton, 1984), and Lynn Segal, *The Dream of Reality: Heinz von Foerster’s Constructivism* (2nd ed.; Berlin: Springer, 2001).—MEB]

17. Despite the unavoidable constructive character of history writing, these considerations allow us to reject the frequently made charge that the historian’s own will to power tends to dominate the objects of historical research. For a critique of the postmodern, radically constructivist theories of arbitrary historical construction, see Jörn Rüsen, “Narrativität und Objektivität,” in *Geschichte im Kulturprozeß* (ed. Jörn Rüsen; Cologne: Böhlau, 2002), 99–124; and Jörn Rüsen, ed., *Kann gestern besser werden?* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2003), 11–12: “Even if, in the turbulent time of our own present, history is at our disposal, so we, the interpreters, are always already at its disposal. We, the ones who ‘construct,’ are as history’s constructors always in the situation of already having been constructed by history itself.” Günter Dux, *Historisch-genetische Theorie der Kultur: Instabile Welten: Zur prozessualen Logik im kulturellen Wandel* (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2000), 160: “The blind spot in logical absolutism, as we have known it in the postmodern understanding of Constructivism and the theoretical system associated with it, consists in the fact that Constructivism does not understand itself to be subject to any systemic complex of conditions.”

Everything we say is always bound up in existing general understandings of time and reality;¹⁸ without these preunderstandings, meaningful construction and communication would not be possible. Every human being is genetically preconstructed and is constantly being coconstructed by sociocultural dynamics. Reflection and construction are always later actions that refer to something already given. Thus self-consciousness is never based on itself but necessarily requires reference to something beyond itself that grounds it and makes it possible. The fact that the question of meaning is even possible, and that history can be seen as meaningful, points to an “unimaginable reality,”¹⁹ preceding all being, that gives it reality. The fundamental principle is that history originates only after the event on which it is based has been discerned as relevant for the present, so that necessarily history cannot have the same claim to reality as the events themselves on which it is based.

Language and Reality

In addition to these epistemological insights we now come to *reflections on the philosophy of language*. History is always mediated to us in linguistic form; history exists only to the extent that it is expressed in language. Historical reports become history only through the semantically organized construction of the historian/exegete. In this process, language not only describes the object of thought accepted as reality but also determines and places its stamp on all perceptions that are organized as history. For human beings, there is no path from language to an independent, extralinguistic reality, for reality is present to us only in and through language. The past event is thus available only as memory, a reality that is mediated and formed by language. Language itself, however, is in turn culturally conditioned and subject to constant social

18. L. Hölscher, *Neue Annalistik: Umrisse einer Theorie der Geschichte* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003), 44, emphasizes this aspect: “Were it not for the relative stability of the categorical apparatus of basic models of reality, temporal though they are, historians could not even relate different portrayals of history to each other. It is the relative constancy of temporal categories that first makes possible the historical evaluation and balancing of different portrayals of [the same] history.”

19. Cf. Jörn Rüsen, “Faktizität und Fiktionalität der Geschichte—Was ist Wirklichkeit im historischen Denken?” in *Konstruktion von Wirklichkeit: Beiträge aus geschichtstheoretischer, philosophischer und theologischer Perspektive* (ed. Jens Schröter and Antje Eddelbüttel; TBT 127; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), 31: “What makes meaning work? The fact that reality already impresses itself into historical thinking is a meaning-event, an event that generates historical meaning. Apart from this unimaginable reality it could not determine historical thinking so in the mental operations of historical consciousness, as is necessary for the fulfilling of its cultural orientation function. The awareness of this meaning as an element of unimaginable reality within one’s life-world of human suffering and action is a procedural factor that binds secular and religious thinking together. Religion gives this unimaginable reality its own quality of meaning. Secular historical thinking hesitates to take this step but ultimately draws from similar wellsprings of meaning.”

transformation. It is not surprising, then, that historical events are construed and evaluated differently in situations shaped by different cultures and values. Language is much more than a mere reflection of reality, for it regulates and places its own stamp on the appropriation of reality, and thereby also on our pictures of what is real. At the same time, language is not *the* reality itself, for language too first comes into being in the course of human history, and in the personal history of every human being within the framework of his or her biological and cultural development. This means that in this process it is decisively influenced by the varieties of human cultures and individual lives. This constant process of change to which language is subject can be explained only in relation to the different social contexts by which it is conditioned.²⁰ This means that the connection between the symbol that signifies and the reality signified must be maintained if one does not want to surrender reality itself.

Facts and Fiction

History is thus always a selective system by means of which interpreters order and interpret not merely the past but especially their own world.²¹ The linguistic construction of past events always therefore takes place as a meaning-creating process that confers meaning on both past and present; such constructions provide the sense-making capacity that facilitates the individual's orientation within the complex framework of life. Historical interpretation means the creation of a coherent framework of meaning; facts become what they are for us only by the creation of such a historical narrative framework.²² In this process, historical reports must be made accessible to the present and expressed in language, so that in the presentation or narration of historical events, "facts" and "fiction"²³—data and

20. Goertz, *Unsichere Geschichte*, 50–51.

21. Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 191: "History is not knowledge of external facts or events; it is a form of self-knowledge."

22. Cf. Chris Lorenz, *Konstruktion der Vergangenheit: Eine Einführung in die Geschichtstheorie* (trans. Annegret Böttner; Cologne: Böhlau, 1997), 17ff.

23. "Fiction" is not here used in the popular sense of "unreal" or "untrue," but is intended in the functional-communications sense, and thus approaches the original meaning of "fictio": "construction," "formation." [Cf. the use of "fabrication" in English.—MEB] Cf. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 54: "If it [fiction] is not reality, this is not because it lacks the attributes of reality, but because it tells us something about reality, and the conveyer cannot be identical to what is conveyed. Furthermore, once the time-honored convention has been replaced by the concept of communication, attention must be paid to the hitherto neglected recipient of the message. Now if the reader and the literary text are partners in a process of communication, and if what is communicated is to be of any value, our prime concern will no longer be the *meaning* of the text (the hobbyhorse ridden by the critics of yore) but its *effect*. Herein lies the function of literature, and herein lies the justification for approaching literature from a functionalist standpoint."

the creative-fictive work of an author—are necessarily combined. In that historical reports are combined, historical gaps must be filled in, reports from the past and their interpretation in the present flow together to produce something new.²⁴ Interpretation inserts the past event into a new structure that it did not previously have.²⁵ There are only potential facts, for experience and interpretation are necessary to grasp the meaning-potential of an event.²⁶ “Bare” facts must have a meaning attached to them, and the structure of this process of interpretation constitutes the understanding of facts.²⁷ It is the fictional element that first opens up access to the past, for it makes possible the unavoidable rewriting of the presupposed events. The figurative, symbolic level is indispensable for historical work, for it develops the prefigured plan of interpretation that shapes the present’s appropriation and interpretation of the past. This brings us to the second part of our reflections: the necessarily and inevitably constructive character of history is always part of meaning-formation.

1.2 History as Meaning-Formation

Human existence and action are characterized by their capacity for *meaning*.²⁸ No form of human life can be defined “without reference to meaning. It makes sense [*Sinn*] to understand meaning [*Sinn*] as the fundamental category of

24. Cicero, *Or.* 2.54: The historian Antipater is singled out for praise, because “he imparted to history a richer tone,” while “the rest did not embellish their facts, but were merely chroniclers”; Luke 1:1–4; Plutarch, *Alex.* 1.1 (οὔτε γὰρ ἱστορίας γράφομεν ἀλλὰ βίους, “for I am not writing history but portraying lives”). These texts unmistakably illustrate that ancient authors too had a clear awareness of these connections (see further Thucydides, *Hist.* 1.22.1; Lucian, *Hist. conscr.* 51; Quintilian, *Inst.* 7.3.70).

25. Cf. the discussion in Goertz, *Unsichere Geschichte*, 16ff., oriented to how these issues have been dealt with in the history of scholarship. See further M. Moxter, “Erzählung und Ereignis,” in *Der historische Jesus* (ed. J. Schröter and R. Bruckner; BZNW 114; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), 80: “One must say that the narration of the event already goes beyond the event itself on the basis of the temporal gap that separates them.”

26. This constructive aspect of the knowledge process also applies to the natural sciences. Constructiveness and contextuality determine the fabrication of knowledge; the natural sciences are always an interpreted reality that increasingly reflects the invisible currents of political and economic interests that involve us both individually and globally. Cf. K. Knorr-Cetina, *Die Fabrikation von Erkenntnis: Zur Anthropologie der Naturwissenschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991).

27. Cf. Goertz, *Umgang mit Geschichte*, 87: “It is thus not pure facticity that constitutes a ‘historical fact.’ Rather, it is the significance of an event, which is only gradually perceived and adopted, and which otherwise would have sunk unnoticed into the past, that confers this special quality upon it. Not in its own time, but only after its time does a ‘bare fact’ become a historical fact.”

28. Basic work: Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (trans. George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert; London: Heinemann, 1972), 2:99–157.

human existence.”²⁹ The insights of cultural anthropology have made it clear that meaning-formation is a necessary consequence of the ability of human beings to transcend both themselves and the life-world of their society and culture.³⁰ Meaning-formation is not an option that human beings may choose or decline, but something inevitable, necessary, and natural. Moreover, human beings are always born into a world of meaning.³¹ The drive to make sense of things is an unavoidable part of human life, for the human life-world must be thought about, disclosed, and appropriated in some meaningful way—only so is human life and action possible in this world.³² *Every religion—including early Christianity and the theologies that developed within it—is a form of meaning-formation and thus is such a process of disclosure and appropriation.* Concretely, this process of disclosure and appropriation takes place as historical meaning-formation. Historical meaning is constituted from the “three components of experience, interpretation, and orientation.”³³ The meaningfulness of an event cannot be derived from its facticity alone; it still needs the experience of a particular person or persons before its meaning potential can be actualized.

Meaning and Identity

Meaning-formation is always bound to the projection of identity and succeeds only by projecting a convincing identity.³⁴ Human beings attain their identity above all by giving their lives an enduring orientation that connects all of their diverse desires and intentions into a stable, coherent, and intersubjectively defensible whole. Identity develops as a constant negotiation between the

29. Günter Dux, “Wie der Sinn in die Welt kam und was aus ihm wurde,” in *Historische Sinnbildung: Problemstellungen, Zeitkonzepte, Wahrnehmungshorizonte, Darstellungsstrategien* (ed. Klaus E. Müller and Jörn Rüsen; Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1997), 195.

30. Cf. Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life-World* (trans. Richard M. Zaner and H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr.; 2 vols.; NUSPEP; Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973–83), 2:99–158. Their point of departure is the undeniable experience of everyday life that always necessarily transcends that of any individual, which means that existence is not livable without transcendence: we live in a world that was here before us and will be here after us. Reality almost always retreats from our efforts to grasp it, and the existence of other people, whose inner selves can never be truly known, provokes the question of our own selfhood.

31. Cf. Thomas Luckmann, “Religion—Gesellschaft—Transzendenz,” in *Krise der Immanenz: Religion an den Grenzen der Moderne* (ed. Hans-Joachim Höhn and Karl Gabriel; Philosophie der Gegenwart; Frankfurt: Fischer, 1996), 114: “Meaning-traditions transcend the mere natural state of the newborn.”

32. Jörn Rüsen, “Was heißt: Sinn der Geschichte?” in *Historische Sinnbildung: Problemstellungen, Zeitkonzepte, Wahrnehmungshorizonte, Darstellungsstrategien* (ed. Klaus E. Müller and Jörn Rüsen; Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1997), 38.

33. *Ibid.*, 36.

34. Cf. Thomas Luckmann, *Die unsichtbare Religion* (2nd ed.; Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1993), 93, who explains “worldview” as the matrix of meaning that forms the framework within which human organisms formulate their identity and thereby transcend their biological nature.

processes of positively defining oneself and coming to terms with experienced differences.³⁵ An identity is not formed in a vacuum; rather, an existing identity is taken up and transformed into a new one that is perceived as an improvement and strengthening of the previous self. This is why identity can never be grasped as a static entity, for it is part of an ongoing process of reformation, since “as unity and selfhood of the subject” identity is “conceivable only as a synthesis of different, heterogeneous elements that must be brought into relationship with each other.”³⁶ The process of identity-formation is determined by three equal factors: (1) perceiving one’s distinctness from the surrounding world; (2) bumping into boundaries, both self-imposed and externally determined; and (3) thus coming to an awareness that one actually exists as a discrete self. So also collective identities are formed by the processing of differentiating experiences and feelings of commonality. Symbols play a decisive role in this process, for only with their help can collective identities be created and maintained. Universes of meaning must be articulable in the world of secular reality and while keeping their content communicable. To a considerable extent this happens through symbols, which function in the life-world to build bridges “from one province of reality . . . to another.”³⁷ Particularly in the processing of the “great transcendencies”³⁸ such as sickness, crises, and death, symbols play a fundamental role, for they belong to another level of reality and are themselves bearers of that reality, and thus can establish a relation with that level of reality. Symbols are a central category for the communication of religious meaning. Identity-formation is thus always integrated into a complex process of interaction between the individual or collective subject, its experience of differentiation and boundaries, its perception of self and nonself.

The respective determinations of identity are necessarily achieved through *universes of meaning* or *symbolic universes*, which as social constructions make interpretive models available for the meaningful experiencing of reality.³⁹ Symbolic universes are objectified as signs and symbols, and thus represent reality in

35. On the concept of identity cf. B. Estel, “Identität,” in *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* (ed. Günter Kehrer et al.; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1988), 3:193–210; for an introduction to the current ways of posing the issues in the widespread debate over “identity,” cf. Jürgen Straub, *Erzählung, Identität und historisches Bewußtsein: Die psychologische Konstruktion von Zeit und Geschichte* (2nd ed.; Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000); Heidrun Friese, ed., *Identities: Time, Difference, and Boundaries* (Making Sense of History 2; New York: Berghahn Books, 2001).

36. J. Straub, “Temporale Orientierung und narrative Kompetenz,” in *Geschichtsbewußtsein: Psychologische Grundlagen, Entwicklungskonzepte, empirische Befunde* (ed. Jörn Rüsen; Cologne: Böhlau, 2001), 39–40.

37. Schutz and Luckmann, *Structures*, 2:117.

38. *Ibid.*, 99–134.

39. On the terms “universe of meaning” and “symbolic universe,” cf. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Random House, 1966), 73ff.

a communicable form. Among other things, symbolic universes legitimize social structures, institutions, and roles; that is, they explain and provide the basis for things as they are.⁴⁰ In addition, symbolic universes integrate these roles into a meaningful whole within which individual persons or groups can act. They enable both synchronic coherence and the diachronic placement of individuals and groups in an overarching historical framework; that is, they provide a framework of meaning. *Religion* simply constitutes *the* symbolic universe as such.⁴¹ Far and away more than law, philosophy, or political ideologies, religion claims to represent the one, all-encompassing reality that transcends all other realities: God, or The Holy. As the all-encompassing reality within which every human life is lived, religion presents a symbolic universe that, especially by means of symbols, integrates both individuals and groups into the wholeness of the universe, interprets the phenomena of life, offers guidelines for conduct, and ultimately opens up perspectives beyond death.⁴² Understanding history in terms of meaning-formation and the formation of identity raises the question of mode: how does this understanding work in practice?

1.3 Understanding through Narration

A historical event is not meaningful in and of itself, nor does it play a role in the formation of identity, until its meaning potential has been inferred and established. This potential must be transferred from the realm of chaotic contingency into “an orderly, meaningful, intelligible contingency.”⁴³ The fundamental construct that facilitates this transfer is *narration*,⁴⁴ for narrative sets up the meaning structure that makes it possible for human beings to come to terms with historical contingency.⁴⁵ *This is the form in which both*

40. *Ibid.*, 42–43, 48–50, 86.

41. Cf. Luckmann, *Die unsichtbare Religion*, 108.

42. Cf. Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 32: “The tenuous realities of the social world are grounded [by religion] in the sacred *realissimum*, which by definition is beyond the contingencies of human meanings and human activity.”

43. Paul Ricœur, *Zufall und Vernunft in der Geschichte* (Tübingen: Gehrke, 1986), 14.

44. Here we presuppose a broad understanding of narrative that is not bound to particular literary genres. Proceeding from the fundamental insight that experience of time must be processed in the narrative mode, to interpret “narrative as a meaning- or sense-laden linguistic form, or one that creates sense or meaning. That is to say: the narrative form of human thematizing makes sense of and confers meaning on the happenings and actions—independently of the particular content of the narrative presentation” (Straub, “Bilden von Vergangenheit,” 51–52). For a broad concept of narrative, cf. also Roland Barthes, *The Semiotic Challenge* (trans. Richard Howard; New York: Hill and Wang, 1988), 95–135.

45. Cf. Straub, “Temporale Orientierung,” 26–27; D. Fulda, “Sinn und Erzählung—Narrative Kohärenzansprüche der Kulturen,” in *Handbuch der Kulturwissenschaften* (ed. Friedrich Jaeger; 3 vols.; Stuttgart: Metzler, 2004), 1:251–65.

the innermost human self and external events can be expressed. Narrative secures events in a temporal framework and gives permanence to the unique incident; only then are the formation, transmission, and reception of tradition possible. Narrative brings things into a factual, temporal, and spatial relationship; “it arranges things *ex post facto* in a plausible structure that shows they necessarily or probably happened that way.”⁴⁶ A narrative establishes insight by creating new connections and allowing the meaning of the event to emerge. The processing of religious experiences occurs in a twofold manner, namely in/through narratives and ritual(s).⁴⁷ The religious experiences of groups or individuals trigger processes of meaning-formation that find expression in narratives and rituals⁴⁸ and thus lead also to the composition of texts, so that they can be further communicated. In the face of the cross and resurrection, meaning-formation was inevitable. All early Christian authors were faced with the task of fitting the chaotic contingency of the crucifixion and resurrection into a meaningful theological structure—and they did this through narrative.

Functions of Narrative

The first and fundamental function of narrative is *to constitute reality by setting it within a temporal framework*.⁴⁹ Narratives order reality in a particular way without which the communication of this reality would be utterly impossible.⁵⁰ A further function of narratives consists of the *formation and transmission of knowledge*. Narratives report, describe, and explain events, increase knowledge, and form a worldview within which human beings can orient themselves. Narratives establish relations and causal connections that make understanding possible.⁵¹ Oppositions are broken down and new relationships are determined—the absolute and the finite, the temporal and the eternal, life and death.

A particularly important feature of narratives is the capacity to form, present, and stabilize *identity*. Narratives establish and authenticate a complex

46. Straub, “Temporale Orientierung,” 30.

47. Cf. Luckmann, “Religion—Gesellschaft—Transcendenz,” 120.

48. Cf. Aleida Assmann, *Zeit und Tradition: Kulturelle Strategien der Dauer* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1999), 15: “As actions intended to be repeated, rites secure continuity and duration by establishing the identical in the course of a changing world. They do not eliminate time, but constitute it by creating continuities.”

49. Cf. *ibid.*, 4: “Horizons of meaning are established through temporal constructions.”

50. Cf. Jürgen Straub, “Geschichten erzählen, Geschichte bilden: Grundzüge einer narrativen Psychologie einer historischen Sinnbildung,” in *Erzählung, Identität und historisches Bewußtsein: Die psychologische Konstruktion von Zeit und Geschichte* (ed. Jürgen Straub; 2nd ed.; Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000), 124ff.

51. Cf. K. J. Gergen, “Erzählung, moralische Identität und historisches Bewußtsein,” *ibid.*, 170–202.

of meanings that leads through particular instances of identification to the formation of identity. Narratives evoke and convey memories, without which there can be no enduring identity. In particular, narratives function to sort out and process collective experiences, and evoke personal identification in members of the group, which then become orientations for life and action. This *orientation-formation* is one of the fundamental practical functions of narratives. Narratives open and close possible courses of action and provide structure for the free space in which decisions must be made. Narratives thus also always have a normative dimension; they function to orientate one's ethical perspective. An additional function of narratives is the *mediation of values and norms*, the provision or revision of standpoints. Since narratives mediate experiences and expectations, values and orientations, they contribute to the formation of an ethical and pedagogical consciousness. When the proposals presented in narratives are accepted and shared, they create the basis for common judgments and a common social world. Narratives bind people together in one sociocultural fabric and lay the foundation for joint action in the present and a common perspective on the future.

At the same time, narratives deliver the *basis for the formation of tradition*, of which they themselves are part, in that they generate and secure continuity, so that information, interpretations, values, and particular ways of life can be handed on through time.

Narration and Narratives in Early Christianity

The fundamentally constructive character of historical meaning-formation is clearly seen in the New Testament authors: especially with the help of narrative units, key terms, and symbols, they create symbolic universes that integrate individuals and groups into the wholeness of the cosmos, interpret the phenomena of life, offer guidelines for conduct, and ultimately open up perspectives that transcend death. Narratives are always concerned with memories, with interpreting experiences through time. Memory is the definitive reference to the experience of time. The New Testament narratives about Jesus Christ express a memory process, and they form a consciousness of history: they proclaim the meaningfulness of God's act in Jesus of Nazareth for past, present, and future. All the New Testament authors use narrative to establish an inner coherence between interpretation of the past, understanding of the present, and perspective on the future, so that those who receive the narrative receive the event that it preserves. Events are made present, given form in the process, resulting in meaning-formations as narratives. To connect times and topics into a coherent whole is to create a narrative.

All these functions of narrative make clear that the effort to make a clear distinction between fictional and nonfictional narration does not work. Because the memory-preserving narrative is always oriented to understanding and act-

ing in the present, fictional and nonfictional elements flow together in every narrative. *Narrative theory thus a priori prohibits the alternative “historical Jesus”—“Christ of faith,” for there cannot be any access to Jesus of Nazareth that excludes his significance for the present.* Narration is what opens up spaces for reception and interpretation in the first place, making possible the kind of transformations that lie before us in all New Testament writings.

The above considerations apply to oral as well as written narration, which in early Christianity should not be understood as mutually exclusive alternatives, since for a long time they existed alongside each other, with much cross-fertilization. Nonetheless, putting the narrative in writing gave it new accents, a process that demonstrably was already beginning in Paul’s time and accelerated with the gospels. The written medium lessened the (emotional) immediacy of communication while creating some distance between the contents of the history and the way it was communicated. This distance created new potentialities for thought, interpretation, and transformation, and permitted the kind of dissociation, even alienation of effects that can occur in the theater; these are all inevitable when events are described, recorded, communicated, and received. Writing unburdened the memory, fixed the events in a particular form, abstracted them from the necessity of an immediate response, and thus created the room necessary for objectifications and interpretations of the narratives. As narrators became authors, hearers/readers could become critical in their reception; they could establish normative interpretations by arranging explanations, establishing terms and concepts, and making moral appeals.

After-as-Before

We have no records that come directly from Jesus or from his immediate associates but only testimony from a somewhat later time.⁵² This is in no way a lack, for the posteriority⁵³ of memory signifies no epistemological loss, since the significance of an event is not really seen until viewed in retrospect. The past always exists only as present appropriation, and in the context of present identity it is repeatedly perceived and made accessible. Only within such an ongoing process can we recognize the relevant past, communicate it, and discern its significance. The distance of posteriority creates room for thinking things through in new and transformative ways. This allows the de-

52. In this regard Jesus of Nazareth finds himself in good company, for there are also no written traditions directly from Socrates. For Dio Chrysostom, *Orationes* 55.8–9, this is no deficiency but evidence of Socrates’ powerful personality.

53. Eckart Reinmuth, “Neutestamentliche Historik,” *TLZ* 8 (2003): 47–55, uses the term *Nachträglichkeit*, “supplementary-character” that memory adds to the event in the process of remembering. [Schnelle had used *Nachzeitigkeit*, translated *posteriority* above. In grammar, the term refers to the action of a subordinate clause that takes place later than the action of the main clause, e.g., “I know what you will do.”—MEB]

velopment of the metaphorical potential inherent within the event itself and makes understanding possible. We will see how creative and multifaceted—how astute, incisive, and enduring—the later New Testament narratives of the Jesus-Christ-history proved to be.

Summary

We have reflected on fundamental issues concerning the origin of history, historical knowledge as the product of meaning-formation, and narrative as the primary form of perceiving, representing, and communicating historical events. What is the significance of these reflections for a theology of the New Testament?

1. Theology in general and New Testament theology in particular are no worse off epistemologically than any other domain of knowledge. All knowledge is a construction bound to particular standpoints and perspectives. Every academic discipline has its own appropriate object of study. For the discipline of theology as a whole, the object of study is God as the bearer and final ground of all being; for the theology of the New Testament, the object is the manifold witness of the New Testament.
2. Like all other academic disciplines, New Testament theology participates in the prior meaningfulness of all being, which is the basis upon which the posing of systematic questions and the formation of meaning are even possible in the first place.
3. Methodologically, the category of meaning is particularly important for grasping the work of New Testament authors, i.e., for interpreting it and presenting its contemporary significance.
4. Faced with the cross and resurrection, efforts at meaning-formation were unavoidable. New Testament authors responded in a variety of ways, as they all narrated the Jesus-Christ-history from their own perspective, in their own way, for their own community of faith.
5. The task of a theology of the New Testament is to apprehend these achievements of meaning-formation and to present them in their theological, literary, and history-of-religion dimensions. The aim is to facilitate authentic reception of the New Testament's meaning-formation in the present.

2

Structure

History and Meaning

Once we have decided what the task of New Testament theology is, we have to ask how to carry it out. What is the best starting point? How are theological perspectives to be related to the academic study of religion? Does it make sense to limit the scope of study to the canonical texts, and is it even possible to do so? How should we handle the issue of plurality and unity? Treating these necessary questions regarding the internal structure of a theology of the New Testament will lead us to our own methodological approach: *New Testament theology as meaning-formation*.

2.1 The Phenomenon of the Beginning

The approach chosen for access to a subject is always a heuristic move; every beginning point already promises to define the way forward for hearers and readers. This observation applies to the New Testament documents themselves as well as to New Testament theologies.

The Discontinuity Model

Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) begins his New Testament theology with a programmatic statement:

The message of Jesus is a presupposition for the theology of New Testament rather than a part of that theology itself. For New Testament theology consists in the unfolding of those ideas by means of which Christian faith makes sure of its own object, basis, and consequences.¹

Bultmann thus accepts the consequences of the nineteenth century's "quest of the historical Jesus," whose contradictory results *Martin Kähler* (1835–1912) had already attempted to overcome by his distinction between "the so-called historical Jesus and the historic biblical Christ." Kähler distinguishes on the one hand between "Jesus" and "Christ," and on the other between "historical" (*historisch*) and "historic" (*geschichtlich*; see note 5 in §1.1 above). By "Jesus" he means the man from Nazareth, by "Christ" the Savior proclaimed by the church. By "historical" he means the pure facts of the past, by "historic," that which has enduring meaning. His basic thesis: Jesus Christ can be apprehended only as he is portrayed in the gospels, not by means of academic historical reconstruction. Kähler considered it historically impossible and theologically illegitimate to make the historical Jesus the starting point for faith. "Certainly faith does not depend upon a christological dogma. But it is just as erroneous to make it depend on uncertain statements about an allegedly reliable picture of Jesus that has been tortuously extracted by the modern methods of historical research."² Bultmann was able to combine this position, which was in equal parts exegetical, theological, and epistemological, with the historical skepticism of form criticism, which he had himself definitively shaped. We have no reports that come from Jesus's own hand; rather, we know him only through the gospels, which are not biographies but testimonies of Christian faith. They contain much material that is secondary and reformulated, a considerable part of which originated in the post-Easter Christian communities. We know Jesus only as already clothed in the mythical trappings of early Christian faith; it is not really possible to penetrate behind the post-Easter kerygma. The consequences of these facts must be pursued radically. "I do indeed think that we can know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary; and other sources about Jesus do not exist."³ Thus for a theology of the New Testament, the

1. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (trans. Kendrick Grobel; 2 vols.; New York: Scribner, 1951), 1:3.

2. Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* (Seminar Editions; trans. Carl E. Braaten; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), 72–73.

3. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (trans. Louise Pettibone Smith and Erminie Huntress Lantero; New York: Scribner, 1958), 8. It may be surprising that Bultmann himself could nevertheless write a book about the historical Jesus. His point of departure: what we can know about the historical Jesus is not important, for this Jesus of Nazareth was a Jewish prophet—a prophet who, with all his challenges and perspectives, still stands within the framework of Judaism. Thus for Bultmann the history of Jesus stands within the history of Judaism, not that of Christianity.

preaching of Jesus is one presupposition alongside others. These other factors can be just as important, such as the Easter experiences of the disciples, Jewish Messianic expectations, and the myths of the surrounding Gentile world. Like Kähler, Bultmann sees in efforts to reconstruct the historical Jesus an insolvable problem and unfruitful enterprise. Like Kähler, Bultmann believes that faith must not be grounded on the uncertainties of historical research. Therefore, New Testament theology must take its signals from Paul and John, who had already accepted the distinction between the historical Jesus and the post-Easter proclamation of the Christ, the kerygma.⁴

The Continuity Model

While it is indeed impossible to write a biography of Jesus in the modern sense, there are nonetheless compelling grounds for beginning a theology of the New Testament with a delineation of the message of the pre-Easter Jesus of Nazareth.

1. The sources themselves prohibit a restriction to the post-Easter kerygma. Every verse of the gospels shows that their authors saw the origin of Christianity not in the kerygma but in the advent of Jesus of Nazareth. In comparison with other movements, the constant reference to the person of Jesus is striking. To a very considerable extent, the Jesus tradition has no other purpose than to present the person of Jesus himself. So also the post-Easter proclamation of the Christ points back at every turn to something prior to itself. It constantly refers to a historical event, and at its core lies the interpretation of something that actually happened (1 Cor. 15:3b, 4a: “died . . . and buried”).
2. It is likewise impossible, from the point of view of narrative theory, to make a neat separation between the historical Jesus and the kerygma (see above, §1.3). Even Bultmann could not absolutely deny a connection between these two, but reduced the significance of Jesus of Nazareth for the kerygma to the “that” (*das Dass*) of his appearance in history.⁵

Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), where the preaching of Jesus is dealt with under the rubric of “Judaism.”

4. Both Hans Conzelmann and Georg Strecker regarded themselves as especially committed to the Bultmannian approach. Cf. Hans Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament* (trans. John Bowden; New York: Harper & Row, 1969), xiii–xviii, 1–8; and Georg Strecker, *Theology of the New Testament* (trans. M. Eugene Boring; New York: de Gruyter, 2000), 1–8.

5. Cf. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2:66, in reference to the Gospel of John: “John . . . presents only the fact [*das Dass*] of the Revelation without describing its content [*ihre Was*].” In fact, Bultmann thereby advocates a substitution theory: cf. Rudolf Bultmann, “The Primitive Christian Kerygma and the Historical Jesus,” in *The Historical Jesus and the Kerygmatic Christ: Essays on the New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (ed. and trans. Carl E. Braaten and Roy A. Harrisville; Nashville: Abingdon, 1964), 41: “If it is true that the kerygma proclaims

Such a reduction to a completely abstract kernel makes its reception impossible.⁶ The mere “That” of a person’s appearance in history is so unclear that it can neither be communicated nor received; it cannot be narrated, at the most, can only be stated. The multiplicity of post-Easter narratives about Jesus Christ cannot be explained without a connection to the riches of the pre-Easter narrative world.

3. Finally, from the perspective of meaning theory it is clear that the alternative “historical Jesus—kerygma” is not possible and should be abandoned. The preaching of Jesus of Nazareth can be understood as a comprehensive example of meaning-formation. Jesus interpreted afresh the present activity of God as salvation and judgment, and placed them in a unique relation to his own person. Jesus’s self-understanding cannot be made dependent on the use or nonuse of particular titles, but his advent and claim as a whole allow only one conclusion: he himself ascribed to his own person a unique role and office in the eschatological drama in which God was active. Jesus’s own meaning-formation provides the foundation and point of departure for those formations of meaning that, though they probably had already begun before Easter, continued after Easter when changed conditions for understanding them prevailed.⁷ A deep historical and theological chasm between a purportedly unmessianic self-understanding of Jesus and the christologically packed kerygma never existed.⁸

Among those who, with varying arguments, have committed themselves to the continuity model, we may mention especially J. Jeremias, L. Goppelt,

Jesus as the Christ, as the eschatological event, if it claims that Christ is present in it, then it has placed itself in the place of the historical Jesus; it represents him.”

6. Cf. Hans Blumenberg, *Matthäuspasion* (4th ed.; Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1993), 221, who in reference to the kerygma formulates the issue as follows: “The reduction to this hard inarticulate kernel destroys the possibility of its reception.”

7. This meaning-forming dynamic of the beginning speaks against the thesis of J. Schröter, that an outline of the ministry and message of Jesus could not provide the basis for a theology of the New Testament, since within a New Testament theology Jesus is only important from the perspective of the witnesses of faith, though New Testament theology cannot be independent of Jesus. See J. Schröter, “Die Bedeutung des Kanons für eine Theologie des Neuen Testaments,” in *Aufgabe und Durchführung einer Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (ed. C. Breytenbach and J. Frey; WUNT 205; Tübingen: Mohr, 2007), 155.

8. That such a break existed is the real foundation of Bultmann’s theses. Cf. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 1:32: “It was soon no longer conceivable that Jesus’s life was unmessianic—at least in the circles of Hellenistic Christianity in which the gospels took form.” The decisive advocate of the unmessianic life of Jesus at the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century was William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret* (trans. James C. G. Greig; Library of Theological Translations; London: James Clarke, 1971), although he later revised his view, at least in part. In a letter to Adolf Harnack in 1905, he wrote: “I am now more inclined than previously to believe that Jesus chose to regard himself as the Messiah” (H. Rollmann and W. Zanger, “Unveröffentlichte Briefe William Wredes zur Problematisierung des messianischen Selbstverständnisses Jesu,” *ZNTbG* [2001], 317).

W. Thüsing, P. Stuhlmacher, U. Wilckens, and F. Hahn.* Jeremias works with the model “Call of Jesus—answer of the community”; Goppelt chooses the terminology of the New Testament “fulfillment event” as his hermeneutical starting point; Thüsing develops a highly complex system of “quest for Jesus” that sees Jesus’s centeredness on God as the beginning point and inner kernel of all New Testament theology; Stuhlmacher works out a continuity of tradition and confession between the Old and New Testaments within the framework of a “biblical theology”; Wilckens sees the unity of (biblical) theology in the reality of the one God; and Hahn chooses the concept of revelation as the hallmark of continuity in the mighty acts of God (see below, §2.3).

Easter denotes neither the beginning nor an *absolutely* new quality of meaning-formation within God’s new history instituted with the advent of Jesus of Nazareth, for Jesus’s unique relation to God is the basis of all affirmations about him, both before and after Easter (see below, §2.4).⁹ A distinction between pre- and post-Easter is certainly appropriate, if the differing time periods, the content of the respective calls to faith and obedience, and theological conceptions are to be rightly expressed. However, this does not justify the acceptance of a fundamental discontinuity, for the ministry of Jesus and its lasting effects stand at the beginning of the theology of the New Testament and are at the same time its continuum.

2.2 Theology and the Academic Study of Religion

In his programmatic essay of 1897, *William Wrede* (1859–1906) defined the task of historically oriented exegetes as follows: “The scholar must be guided by a purely objective interest in the discovery of new knowledge that accepts every result supported by compelling evidence.”¹⁰ The scholar must not be

*[Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (New York: Scribner, 1971); Leonhard Goppelt and Jürgen Roloff, ed., *Theology of the New Testament* (trans. John E. Alsup; 2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981); Wilhelm Thüsing, *Die Neutestamentlichen Theologien und Jesus Christus* (3 vols.; Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1981, 1988, 1999); Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (2 vols.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992, 1999); Ulrich Wilckens, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Band 1, *Geschichte der urchristlichen Theologie*, Teilband 1, *Geschichte des Wirkens Jesu in Galiläa* (2nd rev. ed.; 1a; 4 vols.; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2005); Ferdinand Hahn, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (2nd ed.; 2 vols.; Tübingen: Mohr, 2005).—MEB]

9. The statement of Hahn, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 1:20, is to the point: “The beginning point for the discussion of the relation of the pre-Easter tradition and the post-Easter kerygma must be that with Jesus’s life and ministry the kingdom of God is already breaking in. Thus already in the pre-Easter time it is a matter of the presence of salvation and its ultimate future.”

10. William Wrede, “Über Aufgabe und Methode der sogenannten Neutestamentlichen Theologie,” in *Das Problem der Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (ed. Georg Strecker; WdF 367; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), 84.

influenced by the concept of the canon or any other dogmatic construction. The object of his or her study must be the whole field of early Christian literature, which is to be read as testimony to a religion that was lived out in practice. Thus the appropriate designation for this field of study should be “The History of Early Christian Religion” or “History of Early Christian Religion and Theology.”¹¹ In the present discussion, which tends to be critical of theology, and in which methodological pluralism and an attitude of “tolerance” prevail, Wrede’s position has again become prominent.¹² H. Räisänen explicitly attaches himself to Wrede, renounces canonical boundaries, and postulates a history of early Christian theology on purely history-of-religion terms that proposes to deliver “matter-of-fact information on the character, background, and origin of the early history of Christianity.”¹³ He advocates strictly historical work, with philosophical-theological questions explicitly deferred to a second phase of the project. The highest goal of such a presentation is that it be fair to all concerned, both to the New Testament authors and to the competing religious systems in their context (Judaism, Stoicism, the cults of the Hellenistic world, the mystery religions). The perspective of the churchly insider is to be consciously avoided, and the material is to be regarded exclusively from the spectator standpoint of the outsider, so that the thought world and interests of early Christianity itself can be brought into clear focus. Exegetes must not adopt the religious standpoint of the material they are studying, for then they would be acting as preachers rather than scholars.¹⁴ So also G. Theissen orients his work explicitly to the program of W. Wrede, which exhibits six distinctive qualities:¹⁵ (1) distancing from the normative claims of religious texts; (2) ignoring canonical boundaries; (3) emancipation from the categories “orthodoxy” and “heresy”; (4) recognition of pluralism and contradictions in early Christian theological schemes; (5) the explanation of theological ideas from within the contexts of their own life-world; (6) an openness to the history-of-religions approach. Theissen specifically advocates an external perspective, wanting to keep access to the New Testament open for secularized contemporaries. He thus writes not a theology in the confessional sense but a theory of early Christian religion based on the generally accepted categories of the history of religion. He proceeds on the basis of the thesis: “Religion is a cultural sign language which promises a gain in life

11. *Ibid.*, 153–54.

12. On this point, cf. the discussion of the works of Räisänen and Theissen by Andreas Lindemann, “Zur Religion des Urchristentums,” *TRu* 67 (2002): 238–61.

13. Heikki Räisänen, *Neutestamentliche Theologie? Eine religionswissenschaftliche Alternative* (SBS 186; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2000), 75.

14. *Ibid.*, 72ff.

15. Gerd Theissen, *The Religion of the Earliest Churches: Creating a Symbolic World* (trans. John Bowden; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 323–24.

by corresponding to an ultimate reality.”¹⁶ This semiotic approach considers religion as a cultural system of signs expressed in myth, ritual, and ethos. Myths elucidate in narrative form the reality that fundamentally determines the world and life (see below, §4.6). Rituals are paradigmatic acts by means of which human beings break through their everyday behavior as a way of representing the Other Reality expressed in the myth. Every linguistic system of religious signs ultimately includes a corresponding ethos; in both Judaism and Christianity all conduct is organized with reference to the will of God. On this basis Theissen charts the transformation of early Christianity from an inner Jewish movement to an independent religious community, a transformation process that manifests both continuity and discontinuity with the Jewish system of signs.

Does the attempt to view the materials from the perspective of the academic study of religion in fact offer a neutral external perspective that can analyze the subject matter impartially and without ideological shackles? This question must receive a clear negative answer, for several reasons:

1. Considerations from the philosophy of history and identity theory have shown that it is not possible to assume a “neutral” position abstracted from one’s own life history (see above, §1.1). The postulation of a neutral, value-free perspective, frequently made by historians of religion over against theologians, is itself an ideological instrument designed to bring other positions under suspicion. There is no no-man’s-land in which one may take up a position. It is not possible to bracket out one’s own history with all its values, in terms of either life history or methodology.
2. A central element of one’s own life history is questing after and relating to God. The person who does not believe in God, no less than the person who does believe in God, necessarily brings this presupposition into his or her work. The insistence that the world be explained in terms of itself, without God, is by no means a “criterion of objectivity” but is essentially a decision of the will conditioned by one’s life history, an act of volition, a supposition.¹⁷ The nonexistence of God is no less an assumption than the existence of God! The will and suppositions of others do not provide sufficient grounds for theologians to bracket out their ideas of God from their theological and historical work. All historical

16. *Ibid.*, 2.

17. Adolf Schlatter, “Atheistische Methoden in der Theologie,” in *Die Bibel Verstehen: Aufsätze zur biblischen Hermeneutik* (ed. Adolf Schlatter and Werner Neuer; Giessen: Brunnen, 2002), 137, appropriately comments: “Every act of thought includes an act of will, so that what appears in our scholarship is what ‘we will.’ This does not mean that any of us ascribe to ourselves a sovereign ability to suppose anything we want, free from the necessity to give reasons and justification for our statements.”

work unavoidably takes place within an overarching framework, so that desired objectivity and actual partiality must not be understood as mutually exclusive alternatives. “Partiality and objectivity are inseparably entwined . . . and suspended between the poles of theory construction and exegesis of sources. It is futile for research to attempt to have the one without the other.”¹⁸ In order to be able to write history at all, the theologian/historian of religion needs a theory of history that does not attempt to exclude the religious, cultural, and political values acquired in the experience of life—for indeed it cannot do so.

3. Religious movements and their texts can be adequately grasped only when one enters into some relation with them. Every interpreter stands in such a relation, which cannot be reduced to an ideologically conceived insider or outsider perspective. Rather, this relation is due to the life history of the interpreter and the methodological decisions and standpoints from which he or she approaches the text. It is not a matter of neutrality, which the one claims and the other allegedly cannot, but is entirely concerned with having a methodology and way of posing questions that is appropriate to the texts. When religious texts by their very subject matter pose the question of truth, sidestepping this claim as an indication of alleged neutrality is utterly impossible, because every interpreter always already stands in some relation to the texts and the positions they affirm.
4. The formation of the canon and the choices involved in this process are often regarded as demonstrating the ideological character of early Christianity. A canon, however, is not a matter of arbitrary decisions, either historically or theologically, but a natural factor within the process of identity-formation and self-definition of a religious movement. As a cultural phenomenon, it is by no means limited to early Christianity.¹⁹ Since written documents are a presupposition for the survival of a movement, the formation of a canon cannot be understood as a repressive act, but represents an entirely natural development. It was not external (ecclesiastical) decisions but primarily internal impulses that led to canon formation.²⁰ Moreover, the demand for removal of canonical boundaries fails to recognize the function of a canon as the space where memory is cultivated in a way that generates meaning and provides norms, a space into which the members of the group may

18. R. Koselleck, “Standortbindung und Zeitlichkeit,” in *Theorie der Geschichte* (ed. R. Koselleck et al.; Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1977), 46.

19. Cf. the reflections of Jan Assmann, “Fünf Stufen auf dem Weg zum Kanon: Tradition und Schriftkultur im alten Israel und frühen Judentum,” in *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis: Zehn Studien* (ed. Jan Assmann; Munich: Beck, 2000), 81–100.

20. Cf. Udo Schnelle, *The History and Theology of the New Testament Writings* (trans. M. Eugene Boring; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 349–64.

repeatedly enter to receive assurance, answers, and orientation. Commitment to a canon as a given historical reality and essential element of a religious movement in no way means that the concept of a canon becomes the key to New Testament theology or that extracanonical writings and questions posed by a history-of-religions approach are to be ignored. Materials and issues from these areas, however, do not constitute the primary reference points for interpretation, and neither do they determine its scope.²¹

Since, then, there is no outsider or insider perspective, and since abandoning the concept of God provides no enhancement of neutrality or scholarly discipline, but is itself nothing more than a supposition, or an accommodation to the ideologies of others, the theological standpoint must not, cannot, and need not be replaced by a history-of-religions approach. Neither theology nor the historical study of religions is better nor worse, more or less neutral or ideological; *they pose questions and work in different ways*. This difference is grounded in their object of study, for the historical study of religions deals with the forms of religious phenomena, while Christian theology deals with the God who has revealed himself in the history of Israel and in Jesus Christ.²²

2.3 Diversity and Unity

One of the main problems in presenting a theology of the New Testament is the question of diversity and unity. No one denies the historical and theological diversity of the individual New Testament writings. The question is this: is there a unity that transcends these differences, and, if so, how can it be substantiated and presented? Bultmann responds in the negative; he casts his vote against a New Testament “dogmatics” and advocates for diversity in its development. “By this choice the opinion is expressed that there can be no normative Christian dogmatics, in other words, that it is not possible to accomplish the theological task once for all—the task which consists of unfolding

21. On practical grounds, some limitation on the extent of material dealt with must also be made by those who insist on the abrogation of the canonical limitation. The criteria for this are not easy to determine, for restricting the scope of study to literature from Christian circles cannot be done on the basis of history-of-religions or history-of-culture criteria, and the whole realm of Jewish and Greco-Roman materials would need to be included. Therefore, every author/reader/exegete must draw some sort of canonical grounds for himself or herself. Even for Philipp Vielhauer, *Geschichte der urchristlichen Literatur: Einleitung in das Neue Testament, die Apokryphen und die Apostolischen Väter* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975), 1–8, the attempt to make a selection on purely form-critical grounds includes some violence!

22. Ingolf U. Dalferth, “Theologie im Kontext der Religionswissenschaft,” *TLZ* 126 (2001): 14: “Thus for theology, God is not one theme among others, but the horizon within which all phenomena of life are to be understood, if they are to be understood *theologically*.”

that understanding of God, and hence of the world and man, which arises from faith—for this task permits only ever-repeated solutions, or attempts at solution, each in its particular historical situation.”²³ The opposite position has multiple forms that follow two basic patterns:

1. The unity of the New Testament is found in its concentration on a person, a basic idea, or an especially clear thought pattern. Of special importance is the argumentation of Martin Luther, who understood Jesus Christ to be the “midpoint of Scripture”: “All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach and inculcate [treiben] Christ. And that is the true test by which to judge all books, when we see whether or not they inculcate Christ. For all the Scriptures show us Christ, Rom. 3[:21]; and St. Paul will know nothing but Christ, 1 Cor. 2[:2]. Whatever does not teach Christ is not yet apostolic, even though St. Peter or St. Paul does the teaching. Again, whatever preaches Christ would be apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod were doing it.”²⁴ With this as his reference point, Luther develops an immanent biblical criticism with a christological orientation that especially values the Gospel of John, the letters of Paul, and 1 Peter but casts a negative light not only on James, but also on Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation. Luther’s approach, in varied forms, has continued to this very day.²⁵ E. Käsemann sees in the justification of the godless the midpoint of Scripture and of all Christian proclamation. “Because in it Jesus’s message and work as message and work of the Crucified One, his glory and lordship, stand out unmistakably from all other religious affirmations, it must be considered the canon within the canon; it is quite simply the criterion for testing the spirits, including Christian preaching of the past and present.”²⁶ Within the framework of a biblical theology, P. Stuhlmacher sees the concept of reconciliation as the central focus of Scripture: “As lived out by Jesus, modeled by the proclamation of Paul, and thought through by the Johannine school in the power of the

23. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2:237. To be sure, in practice Bultmann advocates a “canon within the canon,” by the dominant place he gives Paul and John as the center of his *Theology*.

24. Martin Luther, *Preface to James and Jude* (LW 35; St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 395.

25. A survey of research up to the 1970s is found in Wolfgang Schrage, “Die Frage nach der Mitte und dem Kanon im Kanon des Neuen Testaments, in der neueren Diskussion,” in *Rechtfertigung: Festschrift für Ernst Käsemann zum 70. Geburtstag* (ed. Johannes Friedrich et al.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), 415–42; for a review and documentation of the more recent discussion, see P. Balla, *Challenges to New Testament Theology* (WUNT 2.95; Tübingen: Mohr, 1997); Hahn, *Theologie*, 2:6–22; C. Rowland and C. M. Tuckett, eds., *The Nature of New Testament Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

26. Ernst Käsemann, *Das Neue Testament als Kanon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), 405.

Spirit, the one apostolic gospel of God's reconciliation with human beings through his only begotten Son Jesus Christ is quite simply the message of salvation for the world."²⁷

2. The question of diversity and unity is not reduced to key concepts, but is understood as an independent and necessary element of the theology of the New Testament. According to H. Schlier, the task of theology is achieved only "when it also succeeds in making the unity of the different 'theologies' visible. Only then does it make sense to use this term and the contents it designates. Regarded theologically, this unity includes the different basic theological concepts and affirmations in a way that is not ultimately contradictory. It is a presupposition of the inspiration and canonicity of the New Testament, indeed for the whole Bible."²⁸ F. Hahn takes up these proposals and moves them to the center of his New Testament theology. Since a history of early Christian theology can only show the variety of New Testament thought patterns, there is need for a demonstration of the inner unity of the New Testament, carried out within the framework of a thematic development.²⁹ On the basis of the Old Testament and New Testament canon, only one comprehensive thematic category can fulfill this role: the concept of revelation. Hahn holds that making revelation the guiding concept means starting with the revelatory acts of God in the Old Testament, then following the revelatory event in the person of Jesus Christ, and from there moving on to soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology in light of God's revelatory acts in Christ. He deals with New Testament ethics in connection with ecclesiology.³⁰

The objection to accepting a "midpoint" of the New Testament is that it becomes an unhistorical abstraction that does not do justice to the individual documents. One concept, such as the doctrine of justification found in Galatians and Romans or the concept of reconciliation, cannot even cover all of

27. Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 2:320.

28. Heinrich Schlier, "Über Sinn und Aufgabe einer neutestamentlichen Theologie," in *Das Problem der Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (ed. Georg Strecker; WdF 367; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), 338–39. Schlier sees unity already in the old creedal formulations; they are to be developed by means of the great themes of God, God's kingdom, Jesus Christ, resurrection, Spirit, church, and faith.

29. Cf. also Wilckens, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* 1:53, who divides his work into a historical and a systematic part, and states with regard to the second part: "There the task is to find the unifying basic motifs in the variety of the different traditional material. These motifs contain theological conceptions that partially stand in contradiction to each other. It was these conceptions that gave the early Christian movement, in its positively eruptive beginning period, its immense persuasive and expansive power."

30. Ferdinand Hahn, "Das Zeugnis des Neuen Testaments in seiner Vielfalt und Einheit," *KD* 48 (2002): 253.

Paul's theology, much less the New Testament as a whole! If Jesus Christ himself is seen as the "midpoint," then such a concentration on the highest level is less meaningful, since it fits everything and thus cancels itself out. A "biblical theology" is not possible, because (1) the Old Testament is *silent* about Jesus Christ, (2) the resurrection from the dead of *one who was crucified* cannot be integrated into any ancient system of meaning-formation (cf. 1 Cor. 1:23), and (3) while the Old Testament can well be thought of as the most important cultural and theological context for understanding the New Testament, it is by no means the only one.³¹ If the unity of the New Testament is required by the concept of the canon, both theoretical and practical problems arise: how is the process of canon formation related to the understanding inherent in each of the individual writings, which are now subjected to a new, later, and foreign framework within which they must be understood? How is the relation between variety and unity to be represented: Is unity the overlapping of the two categories of material? Is variety completed and fulfilled in unity? Is unity the repetition of variety under changed conditions?³²

Canonization as Certification of a Limited Variety

In answering these questions, we must note first that the variety point of view follows logically from the methodological approach taken in this book and from the historical evidence: because all New Testament authors, as narrators and interpreters, bring their own history and the current situation of their community into *their* Jesus-Christ-history, and thus each carries out his own process of meaning-formation, *variety clearly has the precedence*, and there can be no such thing as *the* New Testament theology in the singular.³³ Each New Testament writing is an independent linguistic and hermeneutical world, and thus an independent symbolic universe that is to be understood

31. See Christoph Dohmen and Thomas Söding, eds., *Eine Bibel, zwei Testamente: Positionen biblischer Theologie* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1995) for a survey of the pros and cons of a biblical theology.

32. Here is where I see the problem of Hahn's delineation; he deals with variety and unity in equally extensive ways, which necessarily leads to considerable overlappings and repetitions under different contexts; cf. for example his treatment of "the law in Paul," Hahn, *Theologie*, 1:232–42; 2:348–55.

33. Differently *ibid.*, 2:2: "The delineation of variety in the sense of a theological history of early Christianity is a necessary part of the project, but in and of itself is only a fragment. Only in connection with the effort to refer the different theological programs to each other and to inquire as to their unity can we speak of a 'theology of the New Testament' in the strict and authentic sense." Hahn uses the term *unity* to refer to an abstraction, which is *not* found in the texts in this way, and claims at the same time that this is the only possible way to achieve a theology of the New Testament in the singular. On the whole issue see James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (3rd ed.; London: SCM, 2006), and James D. G. Dunn, *New Testament Theology: An Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009).

in its own terms. Variety is not the same as boundless plurality without any contours but is related strictly to the witness of the New Testament writings. There is variety in the New Testament, but only on a clear basis: the experience of God's eschatological act of salvation in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The individual New Testament authors necessarily work out the meanings of this basic experience, each in his own way, so that the predominant feature is not antithesis but polymorphy. Moreover, we may ask whether the term *unity* is appropriate after all as a response to the question that has been posed. Unity is a static concept dealing with a totality, with a tendency to unify by smoothing out differences. After all, the question of (theological) unity is alien to the New Testament authors themselves; it does not appear in the texts, and the history of early Christianity is anything but the history of a united movement!

The canon represents the final stage of a long process of canonization.³⁴ In turn, canonization is a natural and necessary element in identity-formation and clarification. Within every developing movement it is necessary to determine "the regulations for a particular segment of society that shares the same meaning-formation; this is done through the drawing of boundaries and the establishment of rules."³⁵ Canonization by no means speaks against an emphasis on variety; it expresses this variety. The process of canonization makes clear that the originating event both enables a variety of possible interpretations and limits their range. At the same time, it remains true that *for the process of canonization, the central issue regarding variety and its boundaries is not a question regarding individual New Testament writings*. A canon is always an end product; canonization is a continuing process that begins with the New Testament writings but is not identical to them. Moreover, the New Testament writings ground and represent their status from within themselves and need no later canonization to confer this status on them. For the most part, they came into the canon because they already possessed this status; they did not receive this status by being accepted into the canon.³⁶ Finally: a theology of the New Testament canon as a task that is necessarily related

34. On the origin and development of the canon, cf. Theodor Zahn, *Geschichte des Neutestamentlichen Kanons* (2 vols.; Leipzig/Erlangen: Deichert, 1888, 1892); Johannes Leipoldt, *Geschichte des Neutestamentlichen Kanons* (2 vols.; Leipzig: Heinrichs, 1907, 1908); Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (trans. John Austin Baker; London: Adam & Charles Black, 1972); Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), an important collection of essays.

35. Thomas Luckmann, "Kanon und Konversion," in *Kanon und Zensur* (ed. Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann; BALK 2; Munich: Fink, 1987), 38.

36. In Paul's letters this is obvious, for example in 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Cor. 10:10; Gal. 1:8–9; and the deutero-Paulines passim. So also the gospels (cf. Mark 1:1; Matt. 1:1–17; Luke 1:1–4; John 1:1–18), Acts, Revelation and all the longer letters legitimate themselves by their own claim;

both to exegesis *and* church history is not the same thing as a theology of the New Testament writings or theology of the New Testament. The number and order of the writings in the canon is not the work of the New Testament authors but represents the theological understanding of others.³⁷ Their view prevailed for good reasons but is not the view of the individual New Testament writings. As a collection that established the horizon of interpretation and facilitated group identity, we can speak of a canon only from the time in which its core contents existed as a collection: ca. 180 CE. Thus in relation to the individual writings, the canon is a secondary metalevel, which cannot really grasp either the particular historical perspective or the specific theological profile of a New Testament document taken in its own context. Neither does the canonical level illuminate the contribution of a particular author to the formation of early Christian identity.

Nonetheless, considered as a natural and historical development as well as from a theological point of view, the New Testament canon is the appropriate result of a centuries-long process of formation and selection, a historical reality that determines the scope of the materials with which New Testament theology must be concerned.

2.4 New Testament Theology as Meaning-Formation

The preceding considerations provide the methodological approach and the structure for this theology of the New Testament.

Methodological Approach

The writings of the New Testament are the result of a comprehensive and multilayered process of meaning-formation. Religious experiences of groups and individuals always generate such processes of meaning-formation, and these are then expressed in narratives, rituals, and the composition of texts to facilitate their communication. So in the face of the reality of the cross and resurrection such acts of meaning-formation were inevitable. *The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead was a revelatory event that opened up the meaning of his life. Such an event called for acts of meaning-formation from those who believed it!* All early Christian authors were faced with the task of bringing the unique events of the cross and resurrection, which transcended

differently Schröter, “Bedeutung des Kanons,” 137–38, who distinguishes strictly between the historical and canonical status, and considers the latter as definitive.

37. Entirely different is the judgment of J. Schröter, *ibid.*, 154: “The historical and theological significance of the canon is first seen to be valid when the canon is validated as a document of the theological history and the writings it contains are interpreted *on the basis of their canonical context and relations.*”