

The following is the author's original article, which was published by the Journal of Theological Interpretation in issue 9.2 (Fall 2015): 299–311.

Is There a Kerygma in This Text?

A Review Article

David W. Congdon

IVP Academic

Beyond Bultmann: Reckoning a New Testament Theology. Edited by Bruce W. Longenecker and Mikeal C. Parsons. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014. 382 pp. ISBN 978-1-4813-0041-4. \$59.95.

It is fitting that a scholar who so consistently and profoundly confronted readers with the radical decision of faith expressed in the New Testament should himself force people to make a radical decision about his own work. Such is the case with the great Marburg theologian, Rudolf Bultmann. Few academic figures in the twentieth century were as polarizing or as influential. At the center of the debate surrounding his work is the so-called program of demythologizing, which he announced in a lecture in the spring of 1941. A decade later Bultmann was responding to multiple heresy trials. In 1964 Martin Heidegger expressed his hope to Bultmann that “your whole work might not remain entirely obscured by the label ‘demythologizing.’”¹ Unfortunately,

¹ Martin Heidegger to Rudolf Bultmann, 17 August 1964, in Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Heidegger, *Briefwechsel 1925–1975* (ed. Andreas Grossmann and Christof Landmesser; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 224.

Heidegger's wish was unfulfilled. That same year Jürgen Moltmann published his *Theology of Hope*, and Bultmann's dominating presence in the theological academy came crashing down almost overnight. Despite the publication of some highly significant primary texts in 1984—as well as a number of important secondary studies, particularly in German—Bultmann's name, especially in the English-speaking academy, remains inextricably bound up with his famous hermeneutical proposal.

Beyond Bultmann: Reckoning a New Testament Theology, edited by Bruce W.

Longenecker and Mikeal C. Parsons, thus comes as a breath of fresh air into a long-stale, mostly repetitive conversation.² The volume comes on the heels of a renewed investigation into the life and work of Bultmann taking place in Germany, thanks to the ongoing publication of documents from his archive (*Nachlass*). In 2002 his correspondence with Friedrich Gogarten was published, followed in 2009—the one-hundred twenty-fifth anniversary of Bultmann's birth—by the volume of letters with Heidegger and the magisterial biography by Konrad Hammann. The correspondence with Paul Althaus appeared in 2012 and the correspondence with Günther Bornkamm in 2014. All of this attests to the fact that a fresh hearing of Bultmann is starting to make its way through the academy. Perhaps now, fifty years later, Heidegger's wish is finally being fulfilled.

The Approach of the Book

Beyond Bultmann takes a unique approach. Rather than a collection of essays on various ideas or themes in Bultmann's body of work, the contributions to this volume are commentaries on his *magnum opus*, the *Theology of the New Testament* (hereafter *TNT*), originally released in

² Pages cited parenthetically.

three parts between 1948–1952 and translated into English in two volumes that were published in 1951 and 1955.³ It is appropriate that a book on arguably the twentieth century’s most significant New Testament scholar should take the form of a commentary. The eleven essays in part 1 cover the *TNT* in sequential order: Samuel Byrskog on “The Message of Jesus,” C. Kavin Rowe on “The Kerygma of the Earliest Church,” Udo Schnelle on “The Kerygma of the Hellenistic Church Aside from Paul,” Richard Hays on “Humanity Prior to the Revelation of Faith,” John Barclay on “Humanity under Faith,” Jörg Frey on “Johannine Christology and Eschatology,” Richard Bauckham on “Dualism and Soteriology in Johannine Theology,” Luke Timothy Johnson on “The Rise of Church Order,” James Dunn on “The Development of Doctrine,” Larry Hurtado on “Christology and Soteriology,” and Wayne Meeks on “The Problem of Christian Living.”

Like most commentaries, one learns as much about the commentator as one does about the subject matter, and that is especially the case here, with contributions from such well-established biblical scholars. This manifests itself especially in the way they come to conflicting conclusions regarding Bultmann. For example, Hays claims that Bultmann’s work involves “the reduction of theology to anthropology *simpliciter*” (75), while Barclay argues that “[Bultmann’s] anthropological starting point reflects his view that theology’s proper focus is not the propositional statements of the New Testament but the self-unfolding of faith that, under the impact of the gospel, has come to expression in those statements” (84). Watson similarly states that “Christology is not subordinated to anthropology any more than anthropology is subordinated to Christology; rather, they are *co*-ordinated with each other, and it is the task of

³ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols.; trans. Kendrick Grobel; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *TNT*, with the English page number followed by the German, citing the second edition of 1954. Revised translations will be marked as “rev.”

theology to elaborate that co-ordination” (266). There are many examples like this; the book is full of internal tensions regarding such things as the role of Gnosticism, the relation to Israel, and the influence of Heidegger.

Part of the draw of this volume is the chance to see these scholars spar with the great Marburger. One wishes they had the opportunity to spar directly with each other. The volume almost has the feel of a doctoral seminar put into print. Each essay reads like a seminar paper on that week’s reading; the only thing missing is the lively debate afterwards. Even without this, the essays are often quite illuminating. Barclay and Byrskog offer much-needed clarifications and defenses of Bultmann’s project. Dunn, Frey, and Johnson focus more on the descriptive task, while Hays, Hurtado, and Rowe use their essays largely to criticize Bultmann. Barclay, Bauckham, Hurtado, Meeks, and Schnelle offer constructive extensions or alternatives to Bultmann that demonstrate contemporary possibilities in New Testament theology. Bauckham and Schnelle mainly eschew the task of commenting on the *TNT* in favor of treating the theme in their own way; the result in both cases is highly interesting for students of the New Testament but less helpful for those seeking to understand Bultmann. Of the essays in part 1, Barclay’s contribution displays the most satisfying combination of appreciative description, thoughtful critique, and constructive development.

The commentary approach has the advantage of paying close attention to Bultmann’s text and providing an ideal supplementary textbook for use in graduate level seminars in New Testament. There are also two distinct disadvantages. First, by treating each section of the book independently, one sometimes loses the organic interconnectedness of the work as a self-contained whole. To be sure, several of the contributors draw on other parts of the *TNT* to clarify the assessment of their assigned section. But the main problem is that *Beyond Bultmann* is often

repetitive. This is to be expected, given the systematic nature of Bultmann's work, but the result is that certain points are made again and again. For example, almost every essay observes that Bultmann's reconstruction of the Gnostic redeemer myth lacks historical basis. Second, the commentary approach means that there is very little engagement those texts in Bultmann's corpus that are not connected in some clear way to the *TNT*. Consequently, there is a conspicuous absence of interaction with Bultmann's hermeneutical essays, especially those from the 1950s, many of which shed important methodological light on the exegetical decisions made in the *TNT*.

Unlike a typical biblical commentary, *Beyond Bultmann* places the historical and thematic prolegomena at the end. Part 2 thus contains two essays, one that examines the *TNT* in historical context and a final essay that reflects on the *TNT* as a work of theological interpretation of scripture. The volume editors state in their preface that "some readers . . . might prefer to begin their reading with those two essays, which can serve more as an introduction to the volume since they paint broad canvases against which the individual chapters of the book can be read" (ix). In the opinion of this reviewer, the editors' "might" ought to be a "should" that applies to all readers. The historical essay by Angela Standhartinger—one of three German essays, along with those by Frey and Schnelle, translated for this volume by Mark Biddle—is the standout piece of the entire volume, worth the price of the book alone. Her richly detailed contribution provides an essential supplement (even corrective) to Hammann's biography. The concluding essay by Francis Watson provides an excellent summary of Bultmann's theology, focused on the themes of fallenness, salvation-event, and faith—a summary all the more impressive for its brevity and clarity.

Despite the many disagreements between them, the contributors all agree that, as Barclay puts it, “Bultmann is self-consciously a theological interpreter” of Scripture, especially of Paul and John (84). The essays repeatedly refer to his brilliance as a systematic thinker who presents a coherent interpretation of the New Testament “as a comprehensive, integrated, and compact whole” (79). And yet it is precisely this theological coherence and compactness that many of the contributors find problematic about Bultmann’s *TNT*. Some of this, however, is due to misunderstanding. In what follows I will expound several key aspects of Bultmann’s theology in an effort to clarify his program of theological interpretation.

Kerygma and Self-understanding

Bultmann’s theology is a quest for the kerygma. In a letter to Martin Heidegger in December 1932, he writes: “It is becoming increasingly apparent to me that the central problem of New Testament theology is to say what the Christian kerygma actually is.”⁴ What the kerygma “actually is,” however, is a matter of some confusion in *Beyond Bultmann*, which is a problem given the centrality of this concept to Bultmann’s entire program. Rowe, for example, asserts that “the kerygma for Bultmann is finally an abstraction” and “is at bottom only the fictitious creature of his intellect” (33). Meeks says that “the kerygma becomes little more than a formal operator, a ghostly signal” (221). Watson, on the other hand, defines the kerygma more accurately as “the announcement that an *event* has occurred, originating in divine rather than human initiative, in which the situation of humanity vis-à-vis God has been transformed” (263). Bultmann’s clearest discussion of the kerygma is actually found in the epilogue to the *TNT*, originally published in a Festschrift for Maurice Goguel in 1950. Unfortunately, there is no

⁴ Rudolf Bultmann to Martin Heidegger, 14 December 1932, in Bultmann and Heidegger, *Briefwechsel 1925–1975*, 186.

detailed discussion of this essay in *Beyond Bultmann*; parts of it are quoted in various essays, but there is no sustained investigation of his argument.

In order to grasp Bultmann's New Testament theology, one has to understand that the kerygma refers to the *norm* of Christian faith and identity. As the normative element in Christianity, the kerygma cannot be identical with any specific theological claim, since Christianity can and does exist authentically with any number of different doctrinal formulations. The attempt to pin Christianity down to a single correct set of doctrines is not only historically impossible, but it also undermines the missionary potential of Christian faith to be translated into an infinite variety of sociocultural contexts and forms, a potential that we see actualized already within the New Testament itself in the early church's mission to the Gentiles—a mission that brought with it new theological conceptions and ecclesial practices. This is why Bultmann tells Heidegger that “the New Testament . . . does not directly contain the kerygma, but rather certain statements (such as the Pauline doctrine of justification) . . . are based on the kerygma and refer back to it.”⁵ If the kerygma were directly identifiable with any statement in the Bible, then divine revelation would be conflated with a particular historical situation. Meeks is correct when he says that “Bultmann resists defining the kerygma,” but it is not because the church's “creed-like statements . . . take the form of myths” (221), as if Bultmann would be happy to define the kerygma so long as he could find a nonmythical version of it. On the contrary, he resists defining the kerygma because it is essential to the Christian norm that it be open to ever new cultural forms. The “ever-newness” of faith requires an open kerygma—a kerygma defined by its unfinalizability.

⁵ Ibid.

The openness of the kerygma to new translations is also why Bultmann connects it to his notion of “self-understanding” (*Selbstverständnis*). But on this topic, too, we find significant misunderstanding among the essays in *Beyond Bultmann*. Hurtado claims that Bultmann replaces “Paul’s consistent and robust emphasis on the significance of Jesus Christ . . . with a rather more bland focus on believers’ ‘self-understanding’” (199). Hays similarly states that “Bultmann’s anthropological focus” turns “the gospel as the power of God . . . into a word about the possibility of a new self-understanding” (65). Bultmann supposedly converts “Paul’s proclamation of God’s eschatological triumph over evil . . . into a message about our human *Daseinsverständnis*” (64). The use of *Daseinsverständnis* as a synonym for *Selbstverständnis* is a mistake that reveals an underlying confusion about Bultmann’s theology. Bultmann uses the term *Daseinsverständnis* consistently to refer to what he usually calls “preunderstanding” (*Vorverständnis*), a term mostly absent from *Beyond Bultmann* that refers to the natural understanding of human existence belonging to persons in a particular context. If the kerygma is the announcement of an event that is permanently open to new contexts, then it follows that self-understanding is permanently differentiated from, even as it is related to, one’s preunderstanding. Faith as self-understanding “can be theologically explicated only in constant dispute [*Auseinandersetzung*] with the natural understanding of existence [*Daseinsverständnis*].”⁶

The problem with Hays’s statement cannot be fixed by merely replacing *Daseinsverständnis* with *Selbstverständnis*, because we only understand the latter in contradistinction to the former. Self-understanding, as Bultmann defines it, is *not* an understanding *of oneself*, as if the content of faith is one’s own isolated existence. In this sense the word is admittedly misleading. Instead, “one’s new self-understanding” is “that new

⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, “Das Problem der ‘natürlichen Theologie,’” in *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (4 vols.; Tübingen: Mohr, 1933–65), 1:311.

understanding of God, the world, and the human person given in faith” (*TNT*, 2:239; 579, rev.; emphasis added). The believer comes to understand that “I am I in my particular existence inseparably bound up with God and the world” (*TNT*, 2:239; 579). Robert Funk thus recommends replacing the term “self-understanding” with the word “world,” since Bultmann’s point is that, in faith, a person’s world is utterly transformed.⁷ The “self” in “self-understanding” does not identify *what* we understand but rather *how* understand—namely, by faith—which is why Bultmann can use *Glaubensverstehen* as a synonym for *Selbstverständnis*. As a Lutheran theologian faithful to the Reformation, Bultmann understands this faith as trust (*fiducia*) in the justifying word of God in Jesus Christ. It is not a rational assent to certain propositions about God. The understanding proper to faith is therefore inherently existential, meaning that it demands the personal involvement and “understanding participation of an addressee” (263). The kerygma names the saving-event in which a person comes to participate in the new world of faith through “complete submission under that which God has done in Christ.”⁸ Since this event happens again and again in ways that are unique to each concrete situation, the way this event comes to expression in words is also always new.

The kerygma is therefore “direct address,” according to Bultmann, meaning that it is the event of divine revelation in which both the divine subject (the addresser) and the human object (the addressee) are united in a single moment. Theology, by contrast, is “indirect address,” which is “a critical-polemical explication grounded in [one’s] historical situation and carried out with the use of a contemporary conceptuality.”⁹ Every statement in the New Testament belongs to the latter category. The Bible is not itself God’s direct address but a *witness* to it. It is Christ himself

⁷ Robert W. Funk, “Introduction,” in Rudolf Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 26.

⁸ Rudolf Bultmann, “Die Christologie des Neuen Testaments,” in *Glauben und Verstehen*, 1:260.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 263.

who saves, not our confession that Christ is Lord, as true as this statement may be, which is why Bultmann insists on keeping Christology and soteriology as a single entity.

There are two main threats to this unity of Christology and soteriology. The first danger is that believers will confuse the witness with the event to which it points. Bultmann calls this a “worldview” (*Weltanschauung*), and it is found especially wherever creeds and confessions are given timeless and universal validity. The second danger is that people will misunderstand the kerygma solely as a message about something in the past, or as something that can be generally observed, analyzed, and reconstructed on the basis of historical sources. Within his context, Bultmann associated the first danger with orthodoxy and the second danger with liberalism, given that the quest for the historical Jesus was then carried out by Protestant liberal theologians, in sharp contrast to the quests of today. Bultmann presents his account of the kerygma in opposition to both threats:

For the proclaimed word is neither an enlightening worldview flowing out in general truths, nor a merely historical account, which, like a reporter’s story, “reminds” a public of decisive but by-gone facts. Rather, it is kerygma in the real sense—authorized, plenipotent proclamation, sovereign edict. . . . So it is, by nature, personal address that accosts each individual, throwing the person into question by rendering one’s self-understanding problematic and demanding one’s decision. (*TNT*, 1:307, rev.)

Insofar as Bultmann’s New Testament theology is a quest for the kerygma, it is the ongoing attempt to interpret the New Testament so that the text becomes transparent to the direct, personal address of God. The task of theological interpretation is to differentiate critically between the kerygmatic address and its cultural-historical media. Bauckham is therefore not entirely wrong to say that “Bultmann’s theological approach is reductionist in the sense that it

deliberately . . . focus[es] exclusively on the divine word that challenges humans to faith” (139). Here we begin to see the internal connection between Bultmann’s core theological concepts—kerygma, revelation, faith, self-understanding—and his hermeneutical program of demythologizing, which brings me to the next topic requiring clarification.

Myth and Demythologizing

Given the conflict within *Beyond Bultmann* over the kerygma, it is only natural that there should be tension over the famous demythologizing program and its relation to the *TNT*. Hays, for example, claims that “Bultmann’s *Theology of the New Testament* . . . presupposes the necessity of such a program. The book therefore functions as a *performance*, an embodiment, of the sort of interpretation that Bultmann had advocated in his earlier essays on hermeneutics” (72). Watson, by contrast, tries to distance the *TNT* from the demythologizing essay as much as possible. The opening section of his contribution situates the 1941 lecture on “New Testament and Mythology” within its historical context in order to consign this lecture to the dustbin of history. “If Bultmann is to be rehabilitated as a theological interpreter of Scripture,” Watson claims, “this flawed wartime production must be dislodged from its central position in his oeuvre and replaced there with his real masterpiece, the *Theology of the New Testament*” (259). Both Hays and Watson agree that demythologizing is a problem, but they disagree on the extent to which this problem affects the *TNT*.

The central issue, as it usually is in discussions about Bultmann, is the role of existentialist philosophy in his work. Watson claims that Bultmann had a “naïve enthusiasm for his philosophical mentors” (258). Dunn calls Bultmann “a twentieth-century Heideggerian” who “concluded that existentialist philosophy was the ‘canon within the canon,’ or the hermeneutical

key for appreciating and interpreting the theology of the New Testament in contemporary language” (175–76). This widespread but mistaken view of Bultmann’s work was promoted in large part due to English-speaking interpreters who wanted to promote Heidegger’s importance for theology and conscripted Bultmann to assist them in this task. Unfortunately, in doing so they misrepresented Bultmann’s work. Standhartinger’s essay is a helpful antidote insofar as she documents the falling out between the two intellectual giants. Though the divide between them begins already in the late 1920s, after 1947 “Bultmann no longer wished to acknowledge connections between his philosophy and Heidegger’s” (237).

We can briefly develop this point further. All the elements of Bultmann’s later theology, including demythologizing, can be derived from the lessons he learned from his two most important teachers, Johannes Weiss and Wilhelm Herrmann: Weiss analyzed the disparity between early Christian eschatology and modern religion, while Herrmann developed the differentiation of faith from history and metaphysics. It is no surprise that we see the seeds of his mature views in his early writings. Already in 1917, a full six years before Heidegger would join the Marburg faculty, we find Bultmann stating that God is “wholly other . . . than the picture which we ourselves have made of God,” and thus our understanding of God is “never stagnant or at rest, but always ready to subject itself anew, to allow itself to be raised anew.”¹⁰ That same year he wrote an essay on “The Significance of Eschatology for the Religion of the New Testament,” where he argued that early Christian eschatological hope was intrinsically connected to the concept of God as transcendent, over against pantheism and the natural laws of the

¹⁰ Idem, *Das verkündigte Wort: Predigten, Andachten, Ansprachen 1906–1941* (ed. Erich Grässer and Martin Evang; Tübingen: Mohr, 1984), 139.

cosmos.¹¹ He would later make the same connection in 1952 as a presentation of his own theology.¹² His 1920 essay on “Religion and Culture” warned against the danger of the “absolutizing of culture.”¹³ And his 1922 engagement with Barth’s *Der Römerbrief* set the terms for his later hermeneutics.¹⁴ I could provide many more examples.

The point is that when Bultmann finally starts to interact with Heidegger, he does so as one who has already developed an existential, dialectical theology concerned with the hermeneutical distinction between eschatology and history. Heidegger provides Bultmann with a set of concepts that the latter deems to be less prone to miscommunication, but nothing essential rests on these terms. And given that Heidegger began his time in Marburg by attending Bultmann’s seminar on Paul’s ethics, it may be that Heidegger was more influenced by Bultmann than the converse. This is not a novel thesis. Roger Johnson already said as much in 1974.¹⁵ According to Anthony Thiselton, “neither the terms of the problem nor how Bultmann wishes to solve it has been dictated by Heidegger.”¹⁶ Christophe Chalamet has even stated that “Martin Heidegger . . . did not contribute in any significant way to Bultmann's theological

¹¹ Idem, “Die Bedeutung der Eschatologie für die Religion des Neuen Testaments,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 27 (1917): 86–87.

¹² Idem, “Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung,” in *Kerygma und Mythos, Band II: Diskussion und Stimmen zum Problem der Entmythologisierung* (ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch; Hamburg-Volksdorf: H. Reich, 1952), 197.

¹³ Idem, “Religion und Kultur,” in *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie* (2 vols.; ed. Jürgen Moltmann; Munich: C. Kaiser, 1962–1963), 2:28.

¹⁴ Idem, “Karl Barths «Römerbrief» in zweiter Auflage,” in *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie*, 1:119–42.

¹⁵ Roger A. Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing: Philosophy and Historiography in the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 175n1.

¹⁶ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 232.

program.”¹⁷ Unfortunately, the scholarly consensus regarding the genuine nature of Heidegger’s influence on Bultmann does not seem to have penetrated the guild of New Testament studies.

Returning now to Watson’s essay, the more important lesson to be learned here is that we cannot confine demythologizing to the 1941 lecture and so contextualize it away. The lecture on demythologizing was clearly shaped by its context, but the logic behind this program is interwoven throughout Bultmann’s entire body of work. Watson’s attempt to read the entire piece as a response to Wilhelm Kamlah is unconvincing. Watson even claims that, despite Bultmann’s sharp criticism of Kamlah in the lecture, “he does so from within the constraints of the National Socialist political order, and that, up to a certain point, he is able and willing to make common cause with one of its ideologues” (260). This would be rather surprising news to the man who was an unequivocal opponent of National Socialism from the very beginning, as Standhartinger documents in her essay. So on what grounds does Watson make this claim? He provides two pieces of support. The first is that Bultmann’s concept of faith, like Kamlah’s concept of commitment, opposes individual self-assertion, as if agreeing with what Kamlah rejects implicates Bultmann in Nazism. The second is that Bultmann’s talk of the New Testament’s “mythical world-picture” (Watson uses the word “worldview” but the German is *Weltbild*) at the start of his lecture “echoes” Kamlah, who also uses this phrase in the opening pages of his book (260). On this basis alone, Watson concludes that “it is as if the Christian theologian strives to outdo the post-Christian philosopher” and speculates that the demythologizing essay “expresses a desire to be treated as an equal by philosophers such as Kamlah, Heidegger, and [Karl] Jaspers, an aspiration to join an intellectual elite that looks with disdain on Christians who persist in believing the unbelievable” (260)!

¹⁷ Christophe Chalamet, *Dialectical Theologians: Wilhelm Herrmann, Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann* (Zürich: TVZ, 2005), 164–65.

What is most odd about these claims is not that they are false—which they are, as any reading of Bultmann will verify—but the way they are juxtaposed to a completely different set of claims in the second-half of the essay, in which Watson presents a magnificent summary of Bultmann’s theology. Are we to believe that Bultmann aspired to be a post-Christian philosopher during the war, but then became a commendable Christian theological exegete immediately after the war? The incongruity of Watson’s presentation suggests that his essay is driven by his stated agenda to dislodge the demythologizing lecture from its central place in Bultmann’s reception. Unfortunately, Watson does not consider the possibility that a more charitable reading of this lecture might demonstrate its continuity with the *TNT* and its discontinuity with the philosophers of his day.¹⁸

Theology and History

Underpinning the confusion and tension over kerygma and myth is the dominant theme in *Beyond Bultmann*, namely, the relation between theology and history. While the volume is ostensibly a reckoning with Bultmann, it is on a deeper level a reckoning with the very possibility of a theological interpretation of the New Testament.

The volume contributors fall into basically two camps: those who think New Testament interpretation is fundamentally New Testament *theology* (i.e., a coherent translation of the message for a contemporary context), and those who think it is first and foremost New Testament *history* (i.e., a description of the message in its original context). Barclay stands out as the most vocal proponent of the former, defending Bultmann’s program of *Sachkritik* (content

¹⁸ For an interpretation of demythologizing along these lines, see David W. Congdon, *The Mission of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann’s Dialectical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

criticism) as a requirement of any responsible interpretation of the text (cf. 90, 98). He adds that “most scholars after Bultmann aim only to render Paul comprehensible in his first-century context,” while “Bultmann pressed beyond this to theological interpretation” (92). Bauckham writes that “many scholars are simply not interested in a contemporary theological appropriation of Johannine theology, preferring to explore the thought-world of the Gospel in other ways, especially social-scientific ones” (139). He asks whether something important has not been lost as a result. Watson says that “for some, lacking theological interest or competence, the theological orientation [of the *TNT*] is already sufficient to call the whole work into question” (272).

Perhaps Barclay, Bauckham, and Watson had some of their fellow contributors in mind. Frey, for example, says “one can hardly characterize [Bultmann’s *TNT*] as exegesis. . . . Bultmann does inappropriate violence to the texts” (131). While Bultmann achieved coherence, Frey claims that “no interpretation of John can now attain such coherence if it takes seriously the texts as they are and in their historical context” (132), thereby pitting theological coherence and historically responsible exegesis against each other. Dunn is not as uncompromising as Frey, but he asks whether Bultmann “should first describe as sympathetically as possible what [the Evangelists] understood to be their task *before* he grappled theologically with them” (179, italics added). Meeks asks “whether the enterprise of constructing ‘New Testament theology’ is still viable or even desirable” (229). Hurtado rejects Bultmann’s program of *Sachkritik* and claims that “a serious study of New Testament theology should note differences and avoid a simplistic homogenizing or harmonizing of them” (200). He calls Bultmann’s hermeneutics “a curiously sectarian approach” (208). Johnson makes the distinction between theology and history

especially explicit. Moving “beyond Bultmann,” he says, requires keeping these two things separate:

One task is to attempt a historical description of the Christian movement from its diverse first-century beginnings to the time of its first real consolidation in the middle to late second century. Another task altogether is to engage theologically the understanding of church as it is found in the discrete compositions of the first and second centuries.

Although these two tasks intersect in many ways, they nevertheless require distinct modes of knowing and different methods of engagement. (169)

What Johnson and others are describing is the standard two-stage process that separates what a text “meant” from what a text “means.” According to Johnson, these two stages are not merely different objects of knowledge; they require different epistemologies. The historical task “is not fundamentally a theological enterprise” (169). It can and must be carried out, says Johnson, according to the rules of neutral historical description. One does not bring value judgments into play. History is “simply what happened” (170). As for theology, Johnson rejects the quest for the kerygma and instead argues that theological meaning arises from bringing diverse readers into conversation with the diverse canonical texts.

Given Bultmann’s commitment to a kerygmatic event in which the subject and object of knowledge are unified within the singular reality of God’s saving word in Christ, and given his conviction that the task of theology is to interpret (i.e., to demythologize) the text in such a way that readers are able to encounter this event today in the proclamation of the church, it follows that Bultmann cannot accept this bifurcation between history and theology. Indeed, many of his publications following the *TNT* are designed to make this very point. His 1955 Gifford Lectures, *History and Eschatology*, his 1955 essay, “Science and Existence,” and his 1957 essay, “Is

Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?” are the three most significant writings in this regard. In each he rejects the notion that history can be carried out in a neutral, objective manner without an existential engagement with “the subject matter [*Sache*] with which the text is concerned.”¹⁹ Attempting such a neutral engagement with history is like describing love as the increase in one’s heart rate that occurs in physical proximity to another person. Or to use a theological example, it is like answering the question “Who is Jesus of Nazareth?” by saying that he is the one narrated in the Gospels as having done X, Y, and Z, or that he is the one whom later church dogma describes as being fully divine and fully human in one person. But as Bultmann was often fond of saying, “even the demons believe” (James 2:19; cf. *TNT*, 1:120).

In contrast to those who would isolate theology as a secondary task only to be carried out after one has completed the work of historical description, Bultmann insists on a single epistemology—a kerygmatic epistemology—in which history and theology are paradoxically identical. Faith answers the question “Who is Jesus?” by answering Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s question, “Who is Jesus Christ actually for us today?”²⁰ Bultmann thus has to be counted among the great allies of theological interpretation of Scripture. He differs from most contemporary theological exegetes by making the kerygma, rather than the *regula fidei*, his hermeneutical norm. But he considers having such a norm to be entirely valid, even necessary. To borrow a Pauline expression, we might say that, for Bultmann, two-stage approaches to the New Testament that posit a separate historical epistemology seek to know the New Testament “according to the

¹⁹ Rudolf Bultmann, “Ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich?” in *Glauben und Verstehen*, 3:142.

²⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*, ed. Christian Gremmels, et al., Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke 8 (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser, 1998), 402.

flesh” (*kata sarka*).²¹ But like Paul’s knowledge of Christ and other people, Bultmann no longer knows the New Testament in that way.

Bultmann thus confronts the guild of biblical scholars with yet another decision: this time over whether “New Testament theology” is still possible in our day. While a few contributors to *Beyond Bultmann* still think it is, the overall sense from the volume is largely a negative one. The quest for the kerygma seems to belong to a bygone era, replaced today with literary, rhetorical, and social-scientific analysis. Perhaps *beyond* is the wrong word. Today, it seems, we need to go *back to* Bultmann.

²¹ Dunn incorrectly says that Bultmann reads *kata sarka* adjectivally rather than adverbially. See *TNT*, 1:238–39. Bultmann had argued for an adjectival reading in his early work but changed his mind by the time he wrote the *TNT*.