The Nature of New Testament Theology

Essays in Honour of Robert Morgan

Edited by
Christopher Rowland and
Christopher Tuckett

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Chapter 1

History and Theology in New Testament Studies

John Ashton, Paris

At the height of the German Enlightenment many German thinkers were coming to attach increasing importance to history, and in 1787 J.P. Gabler, following the trend, sought to invest New Testament (NT) theology with respectability by giving it a properly historical dimension. He advocated a two-stage process to ensure for theology, or rather dogma, a solidly established foundation. Yet at the same time he continued to apply the term 'biblical theology' to the first, preliminary stage of historical enquiry. This was a potential source of confusion; and when William Wrede, more than a century later (1897), argued that in his own field of the New Testament the term 'New Testament theology' should be replaced by a title indicating more accurately the true nature of the scholarly enterprise, he helped to perpetuate the confusion by continuing to employ the term he deprecated until the very last page of his long essay 'On the Task and Method of so-called New Testament Theology'. So, for instance, he writes: 'I have called the separation of the New Testament writings from those related to them . . . downright mistaken in biblical theology' (Morgan 1973, p. 191 n. 62). What he means, of course, is that such a separation is mistaken in the history of early Christian religion. Somewhat surprisingly he leaves a place for theology, albeit a small one, in his proposed title, which reads, in full, 'the history of early Christian religion and theology' (p. 116). This was no doubt because, as he freely admits, there are properly theological elements at least in Paul and John. Nevertheless the addition is in one respect unfortunate because it has allowed the confusion between the two quite distinct disciplines of history and theology to persist. It is one thing to include some treatment of Paul's theology as part of a general

history of the breakaway of the Christian movement from Judaism, asking, for instance, as Wrede did, how his 'Pharasaic Jewish theology became, through the experience of his conversion and what followed it, transformed into his Christian theology' (p. 107), quite another to isolate it for special treatment and use it as a sort of compendium of subsequent Christian doctrine, a tendency whose origins lie deep in the Protestant Reformation. Albert Schweitzer, writing in 1911, says of Reformation exegesis, that 'it reads its own ideas into Paul in order to receive them back clothed in apostolic authority' (Schweitzer 1912, p. 2). This is just what Wrede was complaining about in his own predecessors and contemporaries, but it is a practice that still lives on.

Wrede's seminal essay remained untranslated into English until 1973 when it was published by Robert Morgan along with a strong rebuttal of Wrede's key thesis by Adolf Schlatter and a magisterial introduction by Morgan himself. The purpose of the present chapter, written with admiration and respect in honour of Robert Morgan, is to suggest in a friendly way (for he is one of my closest friends) some of the limitations and possibilities of the project of a full-scale New Testament theology that is so close to his own heart. (By New Testament theology I mean an interpretation of the NT designed to be religiously significant to present-day readers – roughly what Morgan calls the strong sense of theology.)

In adding the term 'theology', almost as an afterthought, to his general title, Wrede was already, as I have suggested, conceding too much. For in speaking blithely of 'the theology' of this or that NT author, scholars are enabled to ignore the properly *religious* aspect of their writings and of the experiences they record. The two founders of Christianity, Jesus and Paul, were not in the first place religious *thinkers* but religious figures; and the only words Jesus is said to have written (in a spurious insertion into John's Gospel) were in sand. Nowadays, not only his miracles but also the amazing religious experiences attributed to him in the Gospels, his baptism and transfiguration, are generally dismissed as legendary. Even the Apocalypse, reporting what on the face of it are religious experiences of a truly astonishing kind, is often – when discussed at all – drained of life by being placed on the same dusty shelf as the letters of Peter and James, as if apocalypse was nothing more than yet another literary genre. Klaus Berger, one of the very few NT scholars to have taken Wrede's admonitions seriously, nevertheless entitles his big book *Theologiegeschichte des Urchristentums* (Berger 1994), perhaps because he felt uneasy with the alternative: *Religionsgeschichte*.

If, despite Wrede's powerful arguments against allowing dogmatic interests to intrude upon their academic study of the New Testament, theology has continued to play a major role in the work of the majority

of biblical scholars, it is equally true that history has occupied an important place in works designated NT theologies. It is not altogether clear whether Wrede himself agreed with Gabler in thinking that after the history there was further work to be done. He was certainly not interested himself in theology in the strong sense of applying lessons learned from a study of the Bible to the life of the Christian community.

By far the most important New Testament theology in the twentieth century, as is commonly agreed, is that of Rudolf Bultmann, and for the purposes of the present chapter some consideration needs to be given of the ways in which Bultmann succeeded in muddying the waters still further. In a foreword to a collection of his own essays published in 1967, Bultmann agrees with the editor's assessment of his career: 'He rightly stresses as the dominant characteristic of my work that I have been resolutely concerned to effect a unity between exegesis and theology, but in such a way that exegesis in fact takes precedence' (Bultmann 1967, p. vii).

There can be no doubt that exegesis, rigorously conducted as an exercise in historical criticism, was an art in which Bultmann excelled; but many of his readers might well feel that in his work as a whole theology has had the upper hand. At any rate his New Testament theology is a strange mixture of history and theology of the kind that Wrede deplored. The book opens with the notorious assertion that 'the message of Jesus is a presupposition for the theology of the New Testament rather than part of that theology itself.' This of course is only true if Jesus' preaching is levered out of the Gospels in which it has come down to us and forced to stand, somewhat uncertainly (for no two scholars reconstruct it in quite the same way), on its own. Each of the Synoptic Gospels, including its record of Jesus' message, remains an important document in the history of the early church. For the historian it is equally important to attempt a reconstruction of what Bultmann calls 'the kerygma of the earliest church (*Urgemeinde*)', but this belonged to a period that preceded the first writing of the New Testament, Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, and so it is hard to see why it is included in a theology of the *New Testament*, There is no reason why a New Testament theology rightly understood should begin with history, every reason why it should begin with the Gospels. Taken as a whole, moreover, the first part of Bultmann's book cannot be said either to be fully consonant with Wrede's proposals for a history of early Christianity, since in a major section on 'the theology of the Hellenistic church aside from Paul' Bultmann brings in a number of writings that were composed after, in some cases long after, all the authentic letters of Paul. Historically speaking this makes no sense.

The Problem of the Canon

At some point or some period between the second and the fourth centuries, the 27 writings that go to make up the little book Christians call the New Testament were accepted by the church as canonical, that is to say as authoritative records of their own faith. In spite of some disagreements and adjustments they have remained so ever since.

The problem for scholars interested in the early history of Christianity, a problem highlighted by Wrede, is that there are many other noncanonical writings, no less important for the understanding of the history of the period, that historians need to take into account. The writings of the NT itself are burdened, Wrede points out, with dogmatic predicates like 'normative' that say nothing about their character as documents: 'no NT writing was ever born with the predicate "canonical" attached' (Morgan 1973, p. 70). What is more, some of them – 1 Peter, 2 Peter, along with James and Jude – are too small to serve as sources for any significant doctrinal material. It would be stupid to suppose that all an author's thoughts could be contained in what is little more than a snippet of a letter.

These, however – and this must be stressed – are not problems for the theologian, for whom the canon remains a valid concept and its writings 'normative' in a sense that cannot be predicated of any others. Preoccupied as he was with the need to correct the dogmatic prejudices of his own contemporaries, Wrede did not even consider the possibility that some of them might wish to carry on with theology in the strong sense and use historical studies, as Gabler had suggested, simply to provide their theological reflections with a solid basis in scholarship.

Wrede at one point reinforces his argument with the disparaging comment that 'anyone who accepts without question the idea of the canon places himself under the authority of the bishops and theologians of these [the second to fourth] centuries' (Morgan 1973, p. 71). Morgan responds that this is 'by no means obviously true' (Morgan 1973, p. 5). But Wrede is right here, and he might have added to the bishops of the second and fourth centuries the whole subsequent tradition of the Christian Church, East and West. But why should this worry someone who is engaged *ex professo* in theology rather than history? The discomfort arises from trying to wear two hats at the same time. A theologian who puts history before theology in more than a merely temporal sense runs the risk of subordinating the NT witnesses to extraneous considerations that may obscure the message they continue to carry for Christian readers.

In my view the problem of the canon is a pseudo-problem, one that disappears before a clearly drawn distinction between history and theology.

The Old Testament

Morgan comments that the question of 'how [a Christian] reading of the OT is related to the NT is by no means easily answered' (Morgan 1995, p. 129). But this is perhaps because it is the wrong question. I do not know when Christian scholars began to devote to the OT the kind of specialized and undivided attention that would result in a work meriting the name of a Christian reading of the Old Testament. But this was certainly not how the first Christians looked at it.

Once again we may start by distinguishing history from theology. Historically speaking the two Testaments belong quite literally to different eras. In any *history* of early Christianity the OT's relevance is restricted to the light it can shed upon the attitudes and behaviour of the men and women, Jews and Christians, who lived centuries after it was composed.

For NT *theology* its relevance is much greater, because with the solitary exception of James (and who knows how he would have answered the question?) the OT, mostly in the Greek translation we call the Septuagint, is for the authors of the NT what gives intelligibility to their faith in the crucified Messiah: think how often the little word *dei* occurs in the Gospels in connection with the fulfilment of prophecy. As theologians themselves, the NT writers drew lessons from what was still to them the only Scripture they knew (*he graphe*) and applied these to their own faith in ways that can seem peculiar and disconcerting to an attentive reader versed in the principles of critical exegesis. Matthew, for instance, in one of his fulfilment prophecies, explains Jesus' eventual return from the flight into Egypt by quoting Hosea: 'out of Egypt I have called my son' (Hos 11:1; Matt 2:15). A Jewish reader might well feel astonished, even offended, by this seemingly trivial application of Hosea's pithy summary of the grand events of the Exodus. Equally, however, Matthew is prepared to apply to Jesus' healing miracles a line from Isaiah to which later Christian writers would attach a different and much more sombre meaning: 'he took our infirmities and bore our diseases' (Isa 53:4; Matt 8:17).

It is clear from these two examples that in many cases a historical critical reading of the OT is of no help whatever in interpreting the NT. A further point may be made, this time from Paul. In Galatians Paul

attaches an enormous amount of emphasis to the word *sperma*, which occurs often in the early chapters of Genesis in reference to the seed of Abraham. He insists that 'the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings", referring to many; but, referring to one, "And to your offspring", which is Christ' (Gal 3:16). Yet the Hebrew word translated as *sperma never* has a singular reference: when used of a human individual it *always* refers to his descendants in their entirety. Here and often elsewhere in the NT the interpreter will benefit much more from a knowledge of the exegetical practices of the rabbis, who base their own interpretations of the sacred text (*midrashim*, rereadings) upon this and other such grammatical peculiarities, not upon a critical study of the OT itself. A few verses further on, stressing that God's covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15) was based on a promise, not a contract, Paul exhibits breath-taking chutzpah by deliberately avoiding all mention of Genesis 17, in which an alternative version of the covenant with Abraham stipulates that all his descendants should be circumcised. To have introduced this text here would have left Paul's original argument in tatters.

Morgan is no doubt right, then, to assert that 'a NTT that did not speak of the OT would be inadequate both to the NT authors' witness to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and to most modern interpreters' understanding of this'; but wrong to conclude, as he does, 'We are forced back upon the misleading phrase *biblical theology*' (Morgan 1995, p. 129). NT theologians do not need to be OT theologians also.

The Historical Jesus

With one important exception NT theologians are content to employ historical methods and conclusions as external aids to interpretation. The exception is the historical Jesus, or (as it has been called since the publication in 1910 of an English version of Albert Schweitzer's famous book) 'the quest of the historical Jesus'.

Many discussions of the legitimacy and possibility of the quest are vitiated by a failure to observe the crucial distinction between the Jesus of history who lived and died in Palestine in the first century of the Common Era and the historical Jesus as hypothetically reconstructed by historians. The former is remembered in the pages of the Gospels, the latter is an artificial construct of modern research. One example of this confusion may suffice. Ernst Käsemann, one of the initiators of the New Quest, responding angrily to the rejection of the whole project by his teacher, Bultmann, puts the question, as he says, in a nutshell: 'does the

NT kerygma count the historical Jesus among the criteria of its own validity?' (Käsemann 1968, p. 48). This question he answers himself with a resounding Yes, as if no other answer was conceivable. But we must distinguish: 'historical Jesus' could mean simply 'Jesus of Nazareth as he figures in the pages of the Gospels'. In that case the answer is plain enough, for a No would amount to a rejection of the Gospels themselves. But it could equally well mean, especially in the context of Käsemann's article 'Jesus as an object of historical research'. If so, the answer is surely that, with the possible exception of Luke (not an ally whom Käsemann would welcome), neither the NT nor its authors show any interest in historical research.

What Schweitzer said of the nineteenth-century quest seems to me equally true of the twentieth: 'it was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created him in accordance with his own character. There is no historical task which so reveals a man's true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus' (Schweitzer 1910, p. 4). Yet the difficulty (I would say impossibility) of arriving at a picture of Jesus that would satisfy everybody qualified to assess it has left dozens of would-be biographers undeterred. Historians (and others) continue to argue with one another whether Jesus was really a homespun Cynic philosopher, a social reformer, or an eschatological preacher deeply sympathetic to the Pharasaic culture all around him. And in any case the virtual impossibility of writing a reliable biography of Jesus does not mean that nothing at all can be said with any assurance about his life and teaching.

When we turn to theology, however, the picture changes. In 1892 strong objections against favouring what he called the so-called historical Jesus over the true biblical Christ were put forward by Martin Kähler. He pointed out that faith cannot be founded on historical research, which is always in principle subject to revision. The liberal theologians, who were still interested in scraping off the dogmatic overlay that had in their view obscured the Jesus of Christian faith, ignored Kähler's arguments. For them true Christianity consisted in the acceptance of Jesus' message of God's fatherly love for mankind and the moral teaching that went along with it (summed up by Harnack as 'the higher righteousness'). This watered-down version of the Christian faith was scornfully dismissed by the dialectical theologians who came to the fore in Germany after the First World War. They replaced it by what is commonly called a kerygmatic theology, which holds that the true object of Christian faith is not the Jesus of history but the Risen Christ, Messiah and Son of God, as proclaimed by Paul (and John). For the purposes of New Testament theology, by far the most significant of the dialectical theologians is Rudolf Bultmann, who added to Kähler's arguments against the questers the more profound

theological objection that reliance upon historical research amounts to an offence against the Lutheran principle of justification by faith alone.

Whatever the merits and relevance of Bultmann's high-minded Lutheranism in this matter, he is surely right to insist that the Christ of the kerygma is not a historical figure which could enjoy continuity with the Jesus of history. This is a key feature of his theology, and one that more conservative theologians not surprisingly jib at. It depends upon the perception that whereas the Jesus of history is a flesh-and-blood human being, the kerygmatic Christ is a mythical figure inaccessible to human reason. It may be possible to replace the challenging term 'mythical' with one less offensive to pious ears, but Bultmann's basic point is surely correct. He is right too to point out that the Synoptists, in combining as they do historical report and kerygmatic Christology, are not aiming to give historical legitimacy to the Christ-kerygma but the other way round: by viewing the history of Jesus in the light of the kerygma (i.e. of the proclamation of faith in the Risen Lord) they are purposely giving their Gospels legitimacy as vehicles of that proclamation (see Bultmann 1964, pp. 24–5).

From an admittedly rather cursory survey of the vast array of attempts to further research into the life of Jesus, my own impression is that none has succeeded in proving convincingly the *theological* relevance of this research. Nils Dahl, one of the few really great twentieth-century scholars, responded to Bultmann by asserting that 'though the Gospels may be proclamation and witness it would be *contrary to the intention of the evangelists* to declare inquiry into the history of the narratives as irrelevant' (Dahl 1991, p. 103, my italics). Had this been so one would expect the many detailed disagreements between the Gospels to have provoked an immediate debate about which of them was right in each instance. Quite the opposite occurred: the grander differences of theme and emphasis between the Gospels prompted Irenaeus, in the middle of the second century, to insist that all four had to be read together in order to provide a fully rounded picture of Jesus as man, prophet, priest and Son of God.

'Because of the special authority ascribed to the words of the Lord in the New Testament,' argues Dahl, 'we cannot regard the question of the genuineness or nongenuineness of a word as completely irrelevant for theology' (1991, p. 108). But does not the very fact that they have been included in the Gospels or elsewhere in the NT *as* the words of Jesus bestow a special authority on them? 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' (Acts 20:35), a saying of triply dubious authenticity, is surely no less precious or powerful for that. Suppose for a moment that we had the means of distinguishing with certainty between all the authentic and inauthentic sayings attributed to Jesus. This would no doubt involve the

use of such a fine and discriminating homing device that the results of the search would look pitifully meagre, and some of them (for example the divorce saying in Mark 10:1–12) difficult to live with. And what in any case should we do with the great bulk number of sayings that had slipped through the net, including all the long discourses in the Fourth Gospel?

Though he rejects any continuity between the Jesus of history and the kerygmatic Christ, Bultmann does nevertheless allow a continuity between the kerygma, which clearly presupposes the Jesus of history (without whom there would never have been any kerygma at all) and the activity, especially the preaching activity, of Jesus. Here are two historical facts: Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God; the first Christians proclaimed the Risen Christ. Generally reticent about what can be said with any assurance about the historical Jesus, Bultmann does admit 'somewhat cautiously' that we can say something. His list is not a long one but even so it includes some items (as do all such lists) that are contested by other scholars, such as Jesus' polemic against Jewish legalism and his eschatological message of the breaking-in of the kingdom. Then he adds an important rider. 'The greatest embarrassment to the attempt to reconstruct a portrait of Jesus is the fact that we cannot know how Jesus understood his end, his death. It is symptomatic that it is practically universally assumed that Jesus went consciously to his suffering and death and that he understood this as the organic or necessary conclusion to his activity. But how do we know this, when prophecies of the passion must be understood by critical research as *vaticinia ex eventu*?' (Bultmann 1964, p. 23). We do not even know, Bultmann concludes, whether he found any meaning in it himself: 'we may not conceal from ourselves the possibility that he suffered a collapse [*daß er zusammengebrochen ist*]' (p. 24).

All this is extremely contentious. But Bultmann is talking about possibilities here, not certainties. He is simply saying that there is no certainty to be had, and issuing a warning to prospective biographers of Jesus of the sheer precariousness of the whole enterprise. But have any of them listened? The proliferation of Lives of Jesus, from professional scholars and interested amateurs alike, continues unabated. To a disinterested observer there seems little significant difference between the original quest, the new quest, and the self-proclaimed third quest. Armed with the chisels and levers of critical exegesis, the would-be biographers industriously prise out from the pages of the Synoptic Gospels (and occasionally from the Fourth Gospel too and their own imagination) the material they need to enable them to piece together a convincing historical figure. Some of these, naturally, are more lifelike than others, but most of them are simply puppets dancing obediently to strings tugged by their creators.

One of the most impressive attempts to reflect theologically on the Synoptic Gospels is Bultmann's own *Jesus* (1926), translated into English as *Jesus and the Word* (1934). True, Bultmann does base himself here on what he considers to be the oldest layer of Jesus' sayings, but without pretending to confine himself to those whose authenticity he thinks he can prove. Moreover he deliberately eschews any attempt to offer a portrait of the personality of Jesus, pointing out that it is characteristic of all great men ('Plato or Jesus, Dante or Luther, Napoleon or Goethe') that they are more interested in their work than in their own personalities, and that in Jesus' case his work is chiefly to be found in his words. There are enough of these for Bultmann to present his own readers with a challenging interpretation of his own. A present-day theologian, modelling herself on Bultmann's example, would certainly offer a very different interpretation and a different kind of challenge. But this, surely, is the stuff of New Testament theology.

When, much later, Bultmann came to write his own monumental New Testament theology he omitted any direct treatment of the Synoptic Gospels because, as we have seen, he considered the message of Jesus to be simply a presupposition rather than a part of the theology of the NT. But it is only by making a bizarre and unacknowledged excision in what the term NT actually denotes that he can justify this omission, for the Synoptic Gospels occupy a substantial place in this little book. More importantly they also occupy a place in the kerygmatic message of early Christianity, proclaiming as they do, however paradoxically and contradictorily, the identity of the Jesus whose story they are telling with the Risen Lord whom Christians worship.

Just how, in what position and in what order NT theologians should deal with the Synoptic Gospels must be left to them to decide. But that they should be included somewhere in any New Testament theology with pretensions to completeness seems to me beyond question.

Applicatio

Any New Testament theology worth its salt must be seen to offer a meaningful interpretation of the NT to the community for which it is written. This is the aspect of theology traditionally called *applicatio*. History, including the history of the Christian religion, is interested in *meaning*, that is to say with understanding the period it is concerned with and the written documents that belong to this. Theology must go further: not just meaning but *meaning for*.

One reason why Bultmann's theology is so impressive is that he has managed to find in the Christian kerygma (Paul and John) the timeless challenges that will always confront human beings, in virtue of their sheer humanity. But precisely because they are timeless they fail to address the particular problems, moral, social, political, that continue to emerge from one generation to the next. A theology that does address these questions will have to sacrifice Bultmann's grand vision for something smaller and more fragmentary. What this would look like I cannot say.

All authoritative texts require interpretation. Luther's *Scriptura ipsius interpres* (Scripture its own interpreter) cleverly disposed of the dogmatic barnacles with which the Bible had become encrusted, but relied upon an assumption of the unity of Scripture (itself a dogmatic principle!) that proved in the long run unsustainable. So what could take its place? Recognising that the Bible itself could not be simply and simplistically identified with revelation, Bultmann substituted for Luther's *Scriptura ipsius interpres* his own principle of *Sachkritik*.

Sachkritik, Morgan tells us, 'has been variously translated into English as "content criticism, material criticism of the content", "objective criticism" (!), "theological criticism", "critical interpretation" and "critical study of the content"' (1973, p. 42). None of these translations is very perspicuous. *Sache* is a difficult word to render satisfactorily in English: it can mean subject matter, affair, concern, content, point, circumstance; it can also mean object, article, thing. *Bei der Sache bleiben* means to stick to the point. I guess that *Sache* corresponds quite closely to the Latin *res*, and that it lies behind Luther's brilliant epigram, *qui non intellegit rem non potest ex verbis sensum elicere*: you will make no sense of the words if you don't understand what they're all about: what the words are all about: the heart of the matter: *die Sache*.

As a principle of interpretation this sounds fine, but of course you first have to discover the central message, *die Sache*, and then you have to apply it. The search for the core message involves the putting into practice of another of Luther's principles. Since he was still able to conceive Scripture as a whole, for him it was the whole of Scripture that guides the understanding of each individual passage, yet at the same time the grasp of the whole can only be reached through the cumulative understanding of the individual passages in their entirety. This principle, known as the hermeneutical circle, is, I think, valid in itself, but even if one believes, as Luther did, that there is a single literal meaning ascertainable throughout Scripture, it is virtually impossible to apply it in practice. (In fact Luther used *Sachkritik* before the term had even been coined: *crux sola est nostra theologia* [our theology is the cross, and nothing but the cross].) We know now that the Old Testament was not written

with the New in mind, so in his own biblical theology Bultmann could quite reasonably devote all his attention to the New Testament. In fact he is much more selective than that. Because he mixes up history and theology he can and does treat different parts of the text differently. Of the three parts of his book, only the second, dealing with Paul and John, is theological in the strong sense. Many of his brief analyses of the other NT writings are shrewd and insightful, but he makes no effort to derive theological lessons from them. In the single page devoted to the Letter of James, for instance, he contents himself with pointing out that it is irreconcilable with the theology of Paul.

In spite of these serious difficulties there is still a lot to be said for the method of *Sachkritik*. As Morgan points out: 'if the aim of theological interpretation is to achieve some correlation between the theologian's apprehension of Christianity and what he finds in the tradition, then some method for rejecting tradition is inevitable, and there is no reason why it should not be used on biblical tradition, once it is agreed that this is not in itself revelation' (1973, p. 43). The problem lies in the phrase 'the theologian's apprehension of Christianity,' not because the use of the word Christianity implies that what is being considered here is much larger than a single little book (this seems to me inevitable), but because of the risk that any single theologian's apprehension of Christianity is in the nature of the case highly subjective and open to challenge by others. Morgan is alert to the danger of what he calls 'the premature application of a method which is all too likely to do violence to a historical text in making it correspond to the interpreter's own view' (ibid.) (I am not entirely clear whether he thinks that the risk of violence to the text is inherent in the method itself or simply in its premature application.)

It seems then that another hermeneutic is required, perhaps one in which the problems affecting biblical theology can be seen in a broader context. Just such a hermeneutic is urged very powerfully by H.-G. Gadamer in his classic study, now 45 years old, *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960) (ET *Truth and Method* 1975).

Theology has at least two lessons to learn from Gadamer. First, there is his convincing dismissal of the idea that it is possible to transport oneself back into the past as on a magic carpet, and once arrived survey the work one is studying through the eyes of its author. But he retains from this idea, which goes back at least as far as Schleiermacher and is still clearly present, say, in the second edition of Barth's commentary on Romans, the clear implication that an ancient text may continue to be have meaning for later generations.

Indeed the meaning of such a text, insists Gadamer, is indefinitely extendible, because its horizon (*Horizont*) ceaselessly edges outwards as

it impacts upon readers of later generations. Gadamer gives this unceasing outward movement the name of *Wirkungsgeschichte* (literally 'history of impact'), and the act or process whereby someone outside the circle of the work's original readers reaches an understanding of it he calls *Horizontverschmelzung* (fusion of horizons). A fusion is required because however much the horizon of the work may shift, the interpreter's own horizon is always different. 'The conscious act of this fusion', he says, is the task of *das wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein* (literally, the history-of-impact consciousness): 'it is, in fact, the central problem of hermeneutics. It is the problem of application that exists in all understanding' (Gadamer 1975, p. 274). (Gadamer's theory cannot be discussed in detail here; but the new model is certainly an improvement upon the magic-carpet theory it has supplanted.)

Gadamer immediately goes on to argue that the three skills required in the interpretation of an ancient text, to which German Pietism gave the names of *subtilitas intelligendi*, *explicandi* and *applicandi*, are really inseparable, three aspects of a single process which, he continues, may be seen to apply to the whole broad field of humanistic studies, including ethics, history (on which subject he appeals to Bultmann), literary criticism and, most significantly, law.

Here, in fact, is Gadamer's second notable contribution to the proper understanding of the true nature of biblical interpretation: his recognition of its structural resemblance to legal hermeneutics. In both cases we have to do with ancient authoritative texts that have a meaning in the present that cannot in the nature of the case have been envisaged by their authors. Judge or jurors on the one hand, theologians or preachers on the other, are confronted with the task of finding a new meaning: not, insists Gadamer, arbitrarily, but according to the right sense of the law. (One might have expected him to use a term like 'spirit of the law' here, but he avoids doing so, no doubt because the word 'spirit' is encumbered by too much philosophical baggage.)

Gadamer says of preaching (and he would surely say the same of theological interpretation of the Bible) that unlike a legal verdict, it is not 'a creative supplement to the text it is interpreting.... Scripture is the word of God, and that means that it has an absolute priority over the teaching of those who interpret it' (1975, p. 295). But he has failed at this point, I think, properly to unpack the term 'word of God'; moreover it is just as true of, say, the American Constitution as of Scripture that it has an absolute priority over the teaching of its interpreters.

For all his insights, Gadamer is far from offering solutions to all the problems confronting the NT theologian. For one thing, he is surprisingly optimistic about the likelihood that legal experts and (implicitly)

theologians and preachers will agree upon the significance of the text they are interpreting. The fact is that members of the Supreme Court on the one hand, and theologians on the other, can and do disagree among themselves. And there is nothing in *Truth and Method* to advise us on how to resolve these disagreements.

Given this situation, what sort of criteria can be found for assessing the rightness or wrongness of a particular interpretation? The answer, quite clearly, is None. Each and every proposed criterion is always open to challenge.

Is there any way out of this impasse? The history of bitter disagreements between theologians of different branches of the church over the centuries, often focused on a single verse or group of verses, suggests that the answer is No. In their reading of the Gospel of John the Eastern and Western churches continue to disagree on how much weight to put on John 16:7, the source of the famous *filioque* clause in the creed that is still a bone of contention between the Roman and the Eastern churches.

And what of the continuing row between two wings of the Anglican Communion on the subject of homosexuality? Rom 1:27, and just as clearly 1 Cor 6:9, which excludes active and passive homosexuals (*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*) from the Kingdom of God, may no doubt be disposed of by the dexterous employment of a little *Sachkritik*, an exercise which I will attempt in a moment. But this is not a solution that is likely to impress the conservative wing. Those who support homosexual rights generally appeal to the welcome Jesus extended to sinners (though he always told them to repent) and to the vulnerable and dispossessed.

Perhaps, however, there is something more to be said after all. Ed Sanders, introducing his book, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (1983), comments perceptively on the difficulty of 'distinguishing between the reasons for which he held a view and the arguments he adduces in favor of it' (p. 4). Not only is this distinction of crucial importance in itself, but it may be applied not just to Paul but to his successors, who, like him, constantly appeal to Scripture for support. In all cases if we manage to discover the reasons that lie behind the arguments actually alleged in support of a particular case, we are much closer to a proper understanding than if, scrabbling on the surface, we fail to penetrate beneath the words on the page.

What is more, in confronting disagreements, ancient or modern, between interpreters belonging to the same tradition, we should recognize that their appeals to the Bible are in themselves arguments, not reasons. Many of their reasons may proceed from motives that have nothing to do with the Bible or theology. But others (and it is important to acknowledge this) are to be found buried in an understanding of the

Bible that has come to them without their realizing it through a much more deep-rooted tradition. It may be true that in most cases when they turn to the Bible to bolster their case they already know what they want to find there. But this presupposition or prejudice, call it what you will, will often belong and stem from a *tradition* (something well spotted by Gadamer). No one has put the matter with more insight than Hugh Kenner, who speaks of 'the whispering forest of all traditional poetries, where the very words to which millions of minds respond have helped to form the minds that respond to them' (Kenner 1972, p. 521).

Consequently, turning back to Paul, we should not attach too much importance to his apparent misreadings of the OT. These texts are simply the arguments he has lying to hand: he uses them when it suits his purpose, to persuade his readers that the Crucified Messiah has superseded the Law. And if *this* is his message, is it not permissible to include in 'the Law' clauses that he himself, without giving the matter much thought, continued to regard as valid? The example that Sanders uses to illustrate his observation is Paul's teaching, in 1 Corinthians 11, that women should pray with their heads covered. Paul's arguments are abstruse, but the *reason* for his position, Sanders concludes, is simply that he was Jewish (Sanders 1983, 4). Nobody pays any attention to 1 Corinthians 11 nowadays, but Paul's reason for condemning homosexuality, along with a list of other sins, in 1 Cor 6:9 is the same: he was Jewish. Such a startlingly original thinker in many respects, Paul was a conservative when it came to morals, carrying most of his ethical teaching around with him in two bags, one labelled Jewish, the other Stoic, and opening them only when he needed a list of virtues or vices like the one in 1 Corinthians 6. (Another very radical thinker with surprisingly conservative moral views was René Descartes, as can be seen, Gadamer [1975, p. 248] points out, from his correspondence with Elizabeth, Princess of Bohemia.) Jesus, on the other hand, at any rate the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels, was a truly revolutionary moral thinker who, unlike Paul, always reflected upon the moral aspect of a situation; and so when it comes to moral issues, provided that they remember that Jesus too was a man of his time, New Testament theologians have better reasons for turning to him than to Paul.

Conclusion

This chapter has been largely dominated by the distinction between history and dogma so forcefully argued by Wrede. How do things look if we substitute exegesis (plus theology) for Wrede's dogma? It is often suggested that the two disciplines are intertwined, or that they have been

placed in adjacent, insufficiently watertight compartments. The picture of the two disciplines seeping unstoppably into the wrong box is unhelpful. Exegesis is the attempt to understand the meaning of a text; accounting for its genesis, a very different matter, is the business of history. The two disciplines often work with the same material, but their formal object, as the scholastics would call it, is different. Gabler realized that theologians have to start by being historians. As such they must follow the agreed procedures for historical study. In the case of the NT this may compel them to make use of a lot of extraneous material too. This was clearly perceived by Wrede. But when they turn to the actual practice of exegesis they are dealing with texts, and their approach must now be a literary one. In the past, I suspect, acutely aware (rightly so) that sound exegesis must be historically based, Morgan may have given his theology too much of a historical slant. In his recent writing, however, he shows that he now perceives his work as a New Testament exegete and theologian to require a more literary approach. Having grasped, as an exegete, the meaning of the NT writings in context, he can then, as a theologian, apply this to the present-day circumstances of the Anglican Communion to which he is proud to belong. He has my heartfelt good wishes in this ambitious enterprise.

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