

From Jesus to the New Testament

Early Christian Theology and the Origin
of the New Testament Canon

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Contents

Editors' Introduction	vii
Preface to the English Edition	xi
Preface to the German Edition	xiii
Introduction	1

Part I Recollection and History in Early Christianity

1	New Testament Science beyond Historicism	9
2	Reflections on the Relationship between Historiography and Hermeneutics in New Testament Science	21
3	Construction of History and the Beginnings of Christianity	33
4	History in Light of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ	49

Part II Jesus—Paul—Luke

5	Beginnings of the Jesus Tradition	73
6	On the Historicity of the Gospels	95
7	The Unity of the Gospel	133
8	The Universalizing of the Law in Galatians	155
9	Metaphorical Christology in Paul	185
10	Luke as Historiographer	205
11	Salvation for the Gentiles and Israel	227

Part III On the Way to the New Testament

12	Jesus and the Canon	249
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13	The Acts of the Apostles and the Emergence of the New Testament Canon	273
14	“The Church Has Four Gospels, the Heresy Many”	305

Part IV

What Is “Theology of the New Testament”?

15	Particularity and Inclusivity in Early Christianity	317
16	The Meaning of the Canon for a Theology of the New Testament	329
	Bibliography	351
	Index of Ancient Sources	393
	Index of Modern Authors	407
	Subject Index	413

Introduction

From Jesus to the New Testament—this signals a development that led, in the first three centuries of the history of Christianity, to the formation of a distinct religious self-understanding. This was bound up with the emergence of a specific view of reality and history. With this we have already named an initial focal point of the studies presented here.

In recent decades, an intensive discussion has been conducted in the science of history on how the past is appropriated as history and becomes a common point of reference for a community—how it becomes their “cultural memory” (Jan Assmann). History—it thus became clear—emerges not simply through the passing of time but through formative events of the past becoming the foundation of the self-understanding of communities through interpretation, placement in larger contexts, and differentiation from competing interpretations.

Part I of this volume explores the relevance of this discussion for the history of early Christianity from a methodological perspective. In recent discussion within the theory of history, reference is often made to the identity-creating function of conceptions of history. In the process the key word “constructivism” has sometimes been brought into play. This should underline the fact that it is always thinking and acting human beings who appropriate the past—who “construct” it as history—in order to better understand better their present. The “constructivist” approach, however, has also led to irritations and misunderstandings, not least within theology. Therefore I will begin with a few observations in order to contextualize the remarks in the corresponding chapters of this book (in particular, see chapters 1–4).

I must first stress that the expressions “constructivism” and “construction of history,” which are only used sparingly in this volume, in no way deny that in the early Christian texts events and experiences are reflected, in many different ways, that were extremely important to their authors

and are also indispensable for today's engagement with the beginnings of Christianity. [2] Thus, in the aforementioned approach it is decidedly *not* a matter of wanting to relativize the value of the early Christian texts as historical witnesses, let alone to deprive them of such a value.

With this, however, the question of the *appropriation of the past as history* has not even begun to be answered, neither with regard to the events underlying these texts nor with respect to their later reception. For this we need instead to reflect on the process by which living history comes into being from the "historical material" (Droysen) through our engagement with it. If this process is reflected upon epistemologically and hermeneutically—this applies to antiquity just as it does to the modern science of history—then the interpretive character of historical work, which makes the witnesses of the past its own from the point of view of the respective present, comes into view. Therefore, it becomes evident that the appropriation of the historical material only reaches its goal when it learns to understand the present in light of the past. The concern then is with reflection on the process that always takes place, consciously or unconsciously, when we turn to the witnesses of the past—and therefore with an epistemological question that is fundamental for the science of history.

The first four chapters of this volume deal with this theme. Here the link to Johann Gustav Droysen, who reflected on the methodology of historical work in a fundamental way at the beginning of the modern science of history, plays an important role. According to Droysen, historical work is precisely not exhausted in the examination and critical evaluation of the material (for him these steps are called "heuristic" and "criticism"), but first comes to its goal in the "interpretation." This insight of Droysen into the character of historical work—which he simultaneously regarded as the fundamental difference from the approach of his historian-colleagues¹—is still relevant today.

Chapters 3 and 4 identify concrete areas in which this understanding is significant for a history of early Christianity. Here, consideration is given to the Gospels and Acts, writings that are dealt with in greater detail in part II of the volume. But the event of Jesus' death and resurrection as an event that is fundamental for a Christian understanding of history and reality also comes into view (chapter 4). The goal is to reflect in a manner informed by a hermeneutics of history on the beginnings of Christianity on the basis of these texts. [3]

From Jesus to the New Testament—this outlines a span of time that begins with the activity and fate of Jesus, then leads in the theology of Paul to a

¹ Droysen 1977, 22.

programmatic conception that had a lasting impact on the developments that followed, and is brought for the first time in the Lukan *Doppelwerk* (double work) into the form of a distinctive presentation of history that links Jesus and Paul with each other.

The contributions of part II are devoted to these three areas. Chapters 5 and 6 deal with the role of the Jesus tradition in early Christianity. First, the sayings tradition is considered; secondly, the biographical presentation of the activity of Jesus in the Gospels is taken into consideration. The sayings of Jesus show themselves to be part of a paraenetic-catechetical sphere of early Christianity, which also included quotations from the writings of Israel and the early Jewish tradition. Building on this, the Jesus narratives of the Gospels present “representations” (Ricoeur) of the activity and fate of Jesus, which they “stand for” through their narratives and thus bring into their own present.

Chapters 7 to 9 deal with Paul. In two studies on Galatians, which is perhaps the most important writing of Paul for the self-understanding of a community of Jews and Gentiles, it becomes clear how he defines the place of the believers in Christ beyond Judaism and Hellenism. The “New Perspective on Paul” (Dunn) has emphasized that Paul must be understood within a Jewish discourse, into which he intervenes with a pointed position, namely that the Christ event means a universalizing of the promises of God. Paul thereby develops the notion of respectively distinct ways for Jews and Gentiles to come to the community in Christ, but simultaneously holds fast to the unity of the gospel for Jews and Gentiles. The contribution on metaphorical Christology in Paul (chapter 9) then examines a few central christological metaphors from his letters.

The two following chapters are devoted to the Acts of the Apostles. For the line of questioning pursued here, two aspects in particular are of interest. First, the opposition “Luke as trustworthy historian or Luke as theologian of salvation history?” which for a long time played a (much too) determinative role in scholarship, has receded into the background in favor of a more differentiated view. Martin Dibelius had already quite rightly pointed out that Luke shows himself to be the “first Christian historian” precisely in the fact that he places a stamp on his material that permits it to be understood as the history of the earliest period of Christianity. This may not, however, be played off against his knowledge of events from the early period of Christianity or against his cultural knowledge about places and circumstances in the regions of the Roman Empire. Instead, Luke has reworked his historical and cultural [4] knowledge into a conception that allows the developments about which he reports to appear as a coherent complex of events directed by God.

According to Luke, the meaning of this complex of events—and this is the second aspect—consists in the implementation of the plan, which was conceived by God from time immemorial, of an opening up of the people of God for the Gentiles. The Gentiles do not thereby replace Israel as a “new people of God.” Rather, the *form* of the people of God changes so that now both Jews and Gentiles can belong to it. The regulations of the apostolic decree thereby present the basis for the people of God made up of Jews and Gentiles. However, at the time of Luke, on account of the rejection of the Christ message by the Jews, (almost) only Gentiles are still found in the people chosen by God (cf. Acts 15.14). As the end of Acts makes clear, precisely this was thus intended in the plan of God itself.

With this theology-of-history conception, Luke is situated in clear proximity to Paul. This again places the occasionally claimed disjunction between Luke and Paul (possibly also the so-called “we-reports”) in another light.

From Jesus to the New Testament—this refers to a process within which early Christianity created a binding collection of writings, a “canon,” which subsequently became the basis of its identity as a distinct faith community. The chapters in part III are devoted to this development. They consider once again from this perspective the Jesus tradition as well as Acts. The scope of the “authentic” Jesus tradition was not firmly delineated for quite some time. Both the sayings of Jesus quoted in the so-called “Apostolic fathers” and in the “Apocrypha” show this, but the tradition of the New Testament texts themselves also point in this direction. From this arose the necessity of differentiating the Jesus tradition that was to be regarded as binding. This differentiation took place in the process of the emergence of the New Testament through the formation of the “fourfold gospel” (Irenaeus).

The book of Acts also played an important role in the emergence of the New Testament canon. It served to relate the Gospels and the Letters of Paul to each other and in addition created the basis for also receiving additional apostle-letters—the so-called “Catholic Letters”—into the binding collection of early Christian writings. This process is investigated in chapter 13.

From Jesus to the New Testament—this raises the problem of how far the writings composed over a fairly long period of time and by different authors can be interpreted from a unified perspective. Such a perspective first allows it to appear meaningful to speak of a “theology of the New Testament.” How we might think of the way to the conception of such a theology is the theme of part IV. For this purpose the variety of the writings

gathered in the New Testament—a variety highlighted by historical-critical research—is made the starting point (chapter 15). Then the question of how to conceptualize a theology of the New Testament—starting from the discussion surrounding the meaning of the New Testament canon—is developed (chapter 16).

In this way the studies presented here especially aim to clarify the contribution of New Testament science to the overall theological discourse.

New Testament Science
beyond Historicism

Recent Developments in the Theory of History and Their
Significance for the Exegesis of Early Christian Writings²

One of the central tasks of New Testament science is to mediate to the respective present a picture of the beginnings of Christianity that is based on the early Christian witnesses. In this way it makes a fundamental contribution to Christian theology as a historically grounded science. The intellectual-historical presuppositions upon which it is based have taken form—at least for the European and North American cultural sphere—since the late eighteenth century, thus in a period that was decisively shaped by enlightenment, idealism, and historicism. The historical-critical consciousness, which emerged as part of these developments, was then—at the latest since Max Weber—itself subjected to critical reflection.³ Above all there was a calling into question of the assumption that historical events—and accordingly also “history” itself—carry their meaning in themselves, which was therefore to be drawn out from them by historians, as well as the assumption that the historian has direct access to the objects investigated by him. The meaning of past events does not lie hidden in the witnesses of the past themselves but opens itself to the view of the interpreter, who places these in a broader [10] context.⁴ From this follows the epistemological question of the relationship between past happening and historical imagination in the writing of history.

² The wording of the title follows Mommsen 1972. Mommsen’s remarks are based on his inaugural lecture at the University of Düsseldorf on February 3, 1970, which had the goal of “determining more precisely the present-day position of the historical sciences both looking back to its great traditions and also with a view to its tasks in today’s society” (5–6). The determination of the position of the historical sciences undertaken by Mommsen still points the way ahead for today’s reflections on the foundations and relevance of historical work.

³ Cf. Mommsen 1972, 18–24.

⁴ This was already classically formulated—admittedly from an idealistic perspective—by von Humboldt 1969, 585: “But what has happened is only partly visible in the world of senses; the rest must be felt, inferred, guessed.”

In light of these fundamental objections, which have led to a fundamental rethinking of the premises of historical work,⁵ the question also arises of how we can arrive at a history based on the witnesses of early Christianity that can be brought in as a contribution to the theological conversation.⁶ If New Testament science wants to perform its task in a methodologically considered manner, then it is referred thereby to the conversation with the science of history.⁷ In light of this, the following presuppositions can be stated: the early Christian texts do not convey direct access to the reality to which they refer but relate to that reality in a selective and interpretive manner. They do this, as all other texts also do, in the medium of language, which structures our access to reality and mediates between present and past.⁸ Through interpretation of these texts—thus as it were in a double refraction—a picture of the beginnings of Christianity is set forth. In what follows I will take up several aspects from the most recent theory-of-history discussion against this background, which then will be made fruitful for New Testament science. [11]

1. Methodological foundations of the modern concept of history

Recent theory-of-history discussion in the European sphere started in the 1970s⁹ and has led since then to a wide-ranging discourse on the epistemological foundations of the access to the past under the conditions of the historical-critical consciousness.¹⁰ Parallel to this development the works of

⁵ See further chap. 2 in this volume.

⁶ The theory-of-history considerations given in what follows would therefore have to be combined with theological-hermeneutical consequences. On this cf. recently Reinmuth 2002, 11–38.

⁷ That the science of history, if it wants to do justice to its object, requires a consideration of the character of historical knowing was already recognized early and led to the formation of *historics* (*Historik*), which deals with the methodological, epistemological, and hermeneutical foundations of the science of history. The discipline was founded by J. G. Droysen, who shaped the concept and in whose tradition the most recent theory-of-history approaches also stand. Cf. Droysen 1977 (on the term “Historik,” see 43–44). For more recent discussion, reference may be made to Rösen 1983–1989; Lorenz 1997; Goertz 1995.

⁸ A concise presentation of epistemological aspects bound up with the reference of texts to reality is found in Lategan/Vorster 1985, 67–93. Fried 1996, 295–300, has succinctly presented the consequences for the science of history. Fried 1996, 295, programmatically states that “no historian is able to view historical truth purely, not even the smallest part of it . . . everything can only be grasped as language pictures.”

⁹ Cf. the programmatic lecture of Koselleck 1971, which was given in 1970 at the German convocation of historians in Cologne.

¹⁰ The following may be mentioned as examples: the six volume “Beiträge zur Historik” [“Contributions to Historics”] (Munich 1977–1990) published by the work group

Hayden White emerged in the USA, which considered nineteenth-century European historical thinking in light of the *linguistic turn*.¹¹ This takes into account the necessity of a discourse on the theoretical foundations of the science of history, which scarcely took place in Germany until about the middle of the twentieth century due to the lasting influence of historicism. It is true that in his lectures on historicism Johann Gustav Droysen already submitted the foundations of historical knowing to a careful analysis in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹² The German science of history, however, did not at first make much effort to develop further this methodological foundation, but instead oriented itself on the working out of the nature of past epochs based on critical source study (an approach that was decisively inaugurated by Leopold von Ranke) without specifically thematizing the epistemological problems bound up with this.¹³ The approaches for overcoming the problems of historicism developed by Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber did not initially fundamentally change this situation either.

The discourse, which has now been underway for three decades, on the methodological foundations of the science of history must be placed in this broader horizon. It first became clear that historicism—notwithstanding its achievements, which have often [12] been underscored in differentiated statements¹⁴—must be charged with a “weakness in theory.”¹⁵ This consists in an individualizing hermeneutic oriented to a one-sided concept of understanding, to which corresponds a dismissal of social-scientific lines of questioning,¹⁶ and in an inadequate differentiation between the history set forth by the historian and the past itself, which manifested itself in a positivistic model of explanation.¹⁷

By contrast, Droysen had already maintained that the past is not perceived in an act of direct empathy, but historical knowing is based instead

“Theory of History”; Rösen 1976; 2003; Müller/Rösen 1997; Goertz 2001; and more recently Ricoeur 2004a; 2004b.

¹¹ White 1973; 1978.

¹² Droysen gave this lecture a total of seventeen times in Jena and Berlin between 1857 and 1882/1883. Cf. the preface by P. Leyh in Droysen 1977, ix.

¹³ An extension of the science-of-history discussion in the Federal Republic of Germany followed, however, through the reception of social-scientific lines of questioning from about the middle of the twentieth century. This, however, did not yet lead to a fundamental consideration of the methodological foundations of the historical process of knowing.

¹⁴ By way of overview cf. Hertfelder 1998; Murrmann-Kahl 2001.

¹⁵ Cf. Goertz 1995, 53–56.

¹⁶ This first became visible in the Lamprecht controversy. On this cf. Murrmann-Kahl 1992, 123–26 n. 155, as well as the in-depth discussion of Lamprecht by his student Schönebaum 1955

¹⁷ Cf. Mommsen 1972. For a presentation and criticism of the positivistic model, cf. Lorenz 1997, 65–87.

on an “understanding gained through criticism and interpretation.”¹⁸ Droysen thus criticized the view that the nature of history lies in the criticism of the sources that leads to “pure fact” and maintained against this that the interpretive activity in the engagement with the past restricts the notion of a historical objectivity from the start.¹⁹ Consequently he specified the “nature of the historical method” not as the determination of pure fact but as an act of investigative understanding.²⁰ If the historical work was determined in this way from the perspective of the interpretation, which takes up the results of the criticism and takes them further,²¹ then this represented the insight into the constructive character of the historical process of knowing through which the respective conception of history was already distinguished from past reality in the methodological approach.²²

Even if Weber was critical of Droysen, he nevertheless expanded existing approaches epistemologically. Through his analysis of social-scientific and cultural-scientific knowledge²³ the notion of a direct relationship to the object of knowledge was further relativized through the distinction [13] between scientific lines of inquiry and personal value judgments as well as through the introduction of the heuristic category of the “ideal type.” A fundamental deficiency of historicism was addressed with Weber’s clear separation between reality as a chaotic, amorphous stream of events and the category of the ideal type, which first makes knowledge possible.²⁴

The present-day theory of history stands in the tradition of these insights. As important as a critical penetration of the historical material is in dealing with the past, there is no way around Droysen’s insight that even criticism does not seek the “actual historical fact.”²⁵ Likewise, we must not fall behind Weber’s epistemological insight that cultural-scientific knowledge is not able to ground value judgments and the past is always questioned from the interests and with the heuristic methods of the present. It is indisputable that the historical material first becomes a “source” about the past through the lines of inquiry and instruments of knowledge with which it is processed and through the presentation of investigated facts by the

¹⁸ Droysen 1977, 57.

¹⁹ Cf. Barth 1991, 194–203.

²⁰ Barth 1991, 423: “The nature of the historical method is to understand by investigating.”

²¹ Droysen 1977, 431: “The conscientiousness that will not go beyond the results of criticism errs in handing over all further work with them to fantasy instead of also finding rules for the further work that will secure their correctness.” Cf. Droysen 1897, 25–26.

²² Droysen 1977, 417; cf. also 239. In both places Droysen criticizes Ranke, whose presentations come too close to the historical novel.

²³ Thus especially in Weber 1988.

²⁴ On this cf. Kocka 1986.

²⁵ Droysen 1977, 428.

interpreter. Past facts and events are always only accessible in the form of various kinds of witnesses about them and are never, by contrast, directly accessible. The transfer of these witnesses into history therefore represents a complex process of analysis, evaluation, and ordering of the historical material into a coherent course of events. For this, the interpretive activity of the interpreter—the “historical imagination”—is indispensable, for it is only in this way that a “source” for history comes into being from the historical material. Thus, the sources alone do not lead to conceptions of history, but they guide the interpretations and simultaneously limit the possibilities for appropriating the past.²⁶

It is this characteristic intertwining of construction and reconstruction that has characterized the modern science of history from its beginnings and has led more recently to a renewal of the conversation between historians and literary scientists on the relationship between [14] the science of history and literature.²⁷ With this a dimension has been rediscovered that was of central importance for the formation of modern historical thinking and that must now be reflected on with reference to historical criticism.²⁸

These developments led to the dissolution—beginning already in the eighteenth century—of the Aristotelian opposition between history writing, which transmits what happened, and literature (or poetry), which fabricates what could have been.²⁹ Under the conditions of the modern historical consciousness this opposition is recognized as epistemologically inadequate and replaced through a concept of history that underlines the commonality—which culminates in the category of *narrated time*—with the literary narrative.³⁰ If the critical evaluation of the historical material first reaches

²⁶ Cf. Koselleck 1979, 206: “Strictly speaking a source can never tell us what we should say. It does, however, hinder us from making statements that we may not make. The sources have a power of veto. They prohibit us from venturing or allowing interpretations that can be plainly seen through as false or as not permissible . . . Sources protect us from errors but they do not tell us what we should say.”

²⁷ The results of two important symposiums at which this relationship played a role are documented in Lämmert 1982 as well as Henrich/Iser 1983.

²⁸ At the beginning of the modern historical consciousness stood the new form of history *presentation* established by F. Schiller, not yet the *critical investigation* of the past—though that also certainly claimed to report on actual happenings! Building on Schiller’s ideas, the latter, by contrast, was first called for by von Humboldt, and then systematically worked out by Droysen. For the aesthetic dimension, which is fundamental for modern history writing, see Süßmann 2000, 75–112.

²⁹ Aristotle, *Poet.*, 1415b. For discussion of this topos, cf. chap. 3 in this volume as well as Koselleck 1979, 278–84.

³⁰ The great work of Ricoeur 1988–1991; 1984–1988; is first and foremost to be mentioned. Ricoeur develops a model that views literary and historical narrative from the Aristotelian concept of the fable (or plot) and conceptualizes the access to past reality as *narrated time* (*erzählte Zeit*), which has to be distinguished from the *time of narration* (*Erzählzeit*).

its goal in the construction of history, which represents the past time in the present,³¹ then the integration of the process of interpretation into the methodology of historical knowing is indispensable—the writing of history becomes the “theory problem of the science of history.”³²

In view of this, fictionality can no longer be restricted to free invention, which would have to be assigned to literature but kept out of history writing.³³ Rather, for the latter, precisely the reality-disclosing power that fictions possess as heuristic hypotheses [15] about reality is of interest because this first makes possible an access to the past that is oriented to the sources.³⁴ The *distinction* between history writing and literature does not thereby become invalid. Nevertheless, for the methodological foundation of the concept of history the insight into the not-to-be-separated processes of critical source study and historical imagination is indispensable, because only in this way can history come into being from sources in a methodologically considered manner.³⁵

2. Theory of history and New Testament science

Protestant theologians were involved to a large extent in the formation of the modern concept of history.³⁶ The emergence of critical Bible science as an independent discipline over against dogmatics was therefore a fundamental consequence of this process. The development from the enlightenment history of the eighteenth century to the historicism of the nineteenth century found expression in the theological discussion just as the emergence of the philosophy of history did. This already points to the close relationship between the emergence of the modern historical consciousness and a theology reflected on from a historical-critical point of view. Therefore, New Testament science must also take into consideration the recent developments in the theory of history sketched above.

The breakthrough to historical thinking makes its presence felt at various points. An example is the discussion concerning an access to Jesus as the foundation of the Christian faith that is not obstructed by dogmatic

³¹ Cf. Jauss 1982.

³² Cf. Rüsen 1982b; Rüsen 1982a.

³³ In addition to Koselleck 1979 and Ricoeur 1988–1991; 1984–1988, cf. also the important article by Mommsen 1984.

³⁴ Cf. Baumgartner/Rüsen 1982, 691.

³⁵ Jauss 1982, 427–34, has pointed out the use of fictional methods in Ranke’s “French History.” It becomes clear through this that the notion of an “objective view” of history is combined with a manner of presentation that does not take into consideration its epistemological presuppositions.

³⁶ Important epistemological presuppositions of the historical point of view were already formulated by Herder 1774. Cf. Herder 1968; 1993, 38–48.

interventions. While Hermann Samuel Reimarus initially separated the teaching of Jesus from that of the apostles,³⁷ the nineteenth century was characterized by the search for an image of Jesus gained by the standards of historical criticism as the starting point for the history of Christianity. [16]

A second sphere in which the turn to a theology founded on historical criticism can be seen is the distinction, programmatically put forward by Johann Philipp Gabler, between biblical and dogmatic theology, which was followed by the distinction between Old Testament and New Testament theology as a next step, before William Wrede fundamentally called into question the legitimacy of the discipline “theology of the New Testament” and demanded that it be replaced by a history of early Christian religion or theology.³⁸ Both developments, which are situated in immediate proximity to each other in time,³⁹ complement one another to the extent that they champion the autonomous right of historical-critical theology over against dogmatic theology. For this reason they are of fundamental importance for the differentiation of the theological disciplines.

From a methodology-of-history perspective, the discussion was shaped by the controversy with the Tübingen School, in particular with David Friedrich Strauss and Ferdinand Christian Baur. Shortly after its publication, Christian Hermann Weisse critically engaged Strauss’ “Life of Jesus,” which appeared in 1835/1836. Against Strauss’ thesis of the mythical shaping of the Jesus tradition, Weisse wanted to set a Jesus secured by historical research as the foundation for the Christian faith. The theory that he developed for this of two sources based on direct or indirect eyewitness testimony (the recollections of Peter recorded by Mark and the sayings source of the apostle Matthew), which was to gain great acceptance in Synoptic research as the “two-source theory,” was originally intended to undermine the thesis of a freely circulating oral Jesus tradition by referring to the two oldest, historically reliable sources on Jesus. Notwithstanding the acceptance, which rightly followed, of the two-source theory as the most plausible Synoptic explanatory model, Weisse’s approach hindered a reception of insights informed by a hermeneutics of history for a long time in Jesus research. By contrast, a further development of the approach of Strauss occurs when the Gospels as well as the traditions reworked in them are understood as interpretations of the activity of Jesus in the forms of expression of their time.⁴⁰

³⁷ Cf. Reimarus 1984, 13.

³⁸ For further discussion of this topic, see chap. 16 in this volume.

³⁹ The edition of the aforementioned text of Reimarus by Lessing followed in 1778; Gabler’s lecture on an independent biblical theology was given in 1787 and published two years later.

⁴⁰ Theissen 2000, 47 (cf. 1999, 21), fittingly speaks in this connection of a “peculiar combination of myth and history” at the beginning of Christianity.

From the side of theology Baur also experienced decisive rejection.⁴¹ His historical criticism, in part overdrawn and untenable, also brought the productive [17] aspects of his approach into disrepute. Against his establishment of the priority of Matthew many arguments can be advanced that undermine his position. His disputing of the authenticity of many of Paul's letters also proved to be too radical. The impression arose—whether rightly or wrongly—that here decisions were made about the historical source findings on the basis of a certain philosophy of history. With such a general rejection of his approach, however, the impulses from Baur that were of lasting importance—in spite of undoubtedly necessary corrections—were pushed to the side.

For an approach to Jesus and the history of early Christianity that is informed by a hermeneutics of history the insights of Strauss and Baur that continue to be valid must therefore be taken up. However right it is that Strauss' myth criticism underestimates the historical value of the Gospels, his view that in the Gospels certain "myths" were drawn upon to explain a historical phenomenon continues to be valid for research on the Gospels and Jesus. Moreover, his model of Synoptic exegesis, which is close to Herder's tradition hypothesis, has been impressively confirmed by scholarship on the oral transmission of the early Jesus tradition. It has been clear for a long time that a purely literary model would be inadequate for explaining the tradition processes, and instead we must reckon with a coexistence of oral and written paths of tradition, even after the emergence of the first gospels.⁴²

With regard to Baur, the teacher of Strauss, an analogous finding can be observed. Even if his notion of an opposition between a Jewish Christian and a Gentile Christian direction in early Christianity, which were then conciliated with each other in "early Catholicism," cannot be maintained in this schematic manner, he nevertheless accomplished pioneering work with the consistent application of historiographic principles to the history of early Christianity.⁴³ He saw clearly that the historian stands before the task of forming a history from the mass of individual data rather than remaining stuck in the details in a positivistic manner. With his inquiry into the tendency of the traditions, which the historian must take into account in the construction of a historical connection, he combined historical criticism of the sources and interpretation in a manner that corresponds to the aforementioned principles of historical research worked out by Droysen.

⁴¹ Cf. Köpf 1992, 447–50.

⁴² This is consistently taken into account in the Jesus presentation of Dunn 2003b. Cf. the relevant section "The Tradition" on pages 173–254.

⁴³ On this cf. Scholder 1961; Köpf 1992, 451–61.

His [18] methodology-of-history insights must therefore be taken up and developed further with regard to a history of early Christianity.

New Testament science has only received with reservation the approaches of Droysen, Baur and Weber, as well as the impulses of Herder and Strauss. When it became clear, at the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, that the oldest Jesus presentation in the Gospel of Mark also may not be understood positivistically in a historical-biographical manner, but is an interpretation of history from the perspective of faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God, it instead developed other answers: Albert Schweitzer accused the life-of-Jesus research of not taking seriously the strangeness of the person of Jesus and demanded instead a turn to the “true, unshakable, historical foundation” of Christianity. At the same time, in his now famous lecture on “the essence of Christianity,” Adolf von Harnack derived this in an analogous manner from the “proclamation of Jesus according to its main features.”⁴⁴ Both models—which came to extremely different results despite the stated intention of a “purely historical” approach—sought a direct assurance about the historical foundation of Christianity, without reflecting on the character of historical knowledge. When Harnack in his subsequent investigation⁴⁵ set aside the Gospel of Mark, which had in the meantime become questionable as a historical source, and relied instead on the sayings source Q, one can already discern here the tendency to seek what is essential in the appearance of Jesus in his sayings, thus in his “proclamation”—a line that has consequences via Rudolf Bultmann’s Jesus book into current Q and Jesus research, and one that wants to gain direct access, removed from historical provisionalities, to the origin of Christianity by establishing the authentic sayings of Jesus.⁴⁶

Bultmann’s engagement with the epistemological and hermeneutical problems pertaining to a relationship to early Christian history undoubtedly represents an important step forward within New Testament science.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, in his existential-philosophical approach, characterized [19]

⁴⁴ Von Harnack 1999, 41, wants to pose the question of what Christianity is as a “purely historical” question and in this way to make known, lift out, and make comprehensible “what is essential and lasting.”

⁴⁵ Von Harnack 1907; 1908.

⁴⁶ Such tendencies can especially be observed in certain circles of North American Q and Jesus research. It is no accident that the *Gospel of Thomas*—which corresponds to the described approach in its concept of Jesus sayings without context—also plays an important role here.

⁴⁷ Reference should be made especially to his article “Das Problem der Hermeneutik” (1950), as well as “Ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich?” (1957). For the German original of these essays, see Bultmann 2002, 223–47, 258–66. For English translations, see Bultmann 1955 (“The Problem of Hermeneutics”) and 1966 (“Is Presuppositionless Exegesis Possible?”).

by concepts such as “de-historization,” “highly personal encounter with history,” and “being delivered over to history,” the tendency to theologically exaggerate the perspectival and provisional nature of historical conceptions with reference to “authenticity” (*Eigentlichkeit*) is unmistakable.⁴⁸ The combination of form-critical methodology with an existential hermeneutic directed toward the concept of “decision” would therefore have to be specifically reflected upon from a theory-of-history perspective.

By contrast, an often-overlooked reception of insights informed by a hermeneutics of history is found in Emanuel Hirsch.⁴⁹ Hirsch explicitly follows on from Ranke, Droysen, and Baur and makes their insights fruitful for the engagement with the history of Christianity. More recently, reflections on a relationship to the beginnings of Christianity informed by a methodology of history have been formulated, e.g., by Bernhard Lategan,⁵⁰ Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza,⁵¹ and specifically in relation to Jesus research by Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter.⁵² Recently, Udo Schnelle and Eckart Reinmuth have also taken up the recent discussion in the theory of history.⁵³ In these approaches the perspectival nature of historical knowledge is taken into account as well as the indispensability of fictional elements in the meaning-creating historical narrative. With this the first steps have been taken along a path that is of fundamental importance for the future discourse on the methodological foundations of the investigation of early Christianity.⁵⁴ In conclusion, I will make this concrete with a few pointers.

The texts of the New Testament relate to the reality of Jesus in that they—to take up an expression of Gerd Theissen—surround it with [20] an “aura of fictionality.”⁵⁵ In this way they construct past reality in such a way that it obtains meaning for the respective present. The Gospels are witnesses that narratively rework and theologically interpret the events of

⁴⁸ This approach also underlies Bultmann’s Jesus book, in which “Jesus proclamation” is placed in advance in a “temporal-historical framework” and is then understood evidently largely independently from this framework as what Jesus “actually wanted” (Bultmann 1926, 11). On this cf. Schröter 2007, 103–46 (chap. 6 in this volume).

⁴⁹ Cf. Barth 1991, 212–303, as well as Lüdemann 1991.

⁵⁰ Cf. e.g., Lategan 1985.

⁵¹ Schüssler-Fiorenza 1991.

⁵² Theissen/Winter 1997; 2001.

⁵³ Schnelle 2003, 2–8; 2005, 26–32.

⁵⁴ It should be explicitly noted that only works from the immediate circle of New Testament scholars have been mentioned here. The situation in the other theological disciplines would have to be judged separately. The references to the works from Murrmann-Kahl 1992 and Barth 1991 (see n. 16 and n. 19) already point to another state of discussion in systematic theology.

⁵⁵ Theissen/Merz 2001, 31 (cf. 1998, 13): “With its hypotheses the historical imagination creates an ‘aura of fictionality’ around the figure of Jesus just like the religious imagination of early Christianity [did].”

Jesus' activity and fate. As representations of the history of Jesus they are at the same time historical sources that provide information about their own time as well as the narrated time.⁵⁶ The letters of Paul can be understood analogously as creations of meaning that construct the present and past reality anew in light of the Christ event.⁵⁷ Finally, Acts—or the Lukan Doppelwerk as a whole—represents the first work in which Jesus, the apostles in Jerusalem, the Hellenists, and finally Paul are united with one another within a conception of history.

In what follows our concern will be with these early Christian witnesses' relation to reality. The reality construction of early Christianity thereby represents the starting point for a present-day relation to the beginnings of Christianity. These interpretations should not simply be repeated, but critically questioned in relation to the difference between reality and its representation. The goal of such a consideration of the early Christian texts is a theology of the New Testament that does not simply set the early Christian conceptions alongside one another but understands them in their collection into a "canon" of binding faith confessions as an expression of a specific understanding of reality and God. Thus the result of such an approach cannot be the reconstruction of a past reality behind the texts. Rather, what is to be strived for is a conception of an early Christian history and theology that allows the meaning of the New Testament witnesses for Christian theology and Christian faith in the present to become clear. [21]

3. Conclusions

When New Testament science draws pictures of the beginnings of Christianity, then we are dealing with conceptualizations of the historical imagination that are accountable to the sources and that interpret the historical material from the perspective of the respective present. The sources are thereby the building stones and the historical imagination is the architect who fits them together into a picture of history. The sources themselves do not yield history; they have, however, a "power of veto" with respect to interpretations that are not possible.⁵⁸

New Testament science has the task of submitting the historical material to a careful philological-historical analysis and evaluating it accordingly. In

⁵⁶ Cf. Schröter 2001b, 6–61; Schröter 2007, 103–46 (chap. 6 in this volume).

⁵⁷ Concerning the question of the changeability of the image of the past through historical thinking, cf. in the first instance Rösen 2003, 17–44. In Paul this becomes clear, for example, in the new construction of the history of Israel and the Gentiles in light of the Christ event. As the recourse to Abraham in Galatians 3 and Romans 4, and also to Adam in Romans 5, shows, for him the commonalities (sinfulness, addressees of the promise) predominate, which now make possible a community in Christ.

⁵⁸ Cf. the quotation from Kosselleck 1979, 206, cited in n. 26 above.

this area, designated “criticism” by Droysen, it has developed a heightened consciousness and a sophisticated methodology, which must also play a leading role in the future. By contrast, the epistemological reference—found in the theory formation of the modern science of history since Humboldt and Droysen and independently reflected upon once more by Weber—to the processes of meaning formation that are necessary for the emergence of history, which confront the historical material with heuristic, correctable, and falsifiable models, has had less of an impact. The shared sphere of historiography and literature, perceived in the modern theory of history from its beginnings, points to this as does the historical narrative’s power of explanation, which has recently been emphasized again.

The areas in which these reflections have primarily found expression in New Testament science are New Testament theology, Jesus research, and the history of early Christianity. In all these areas the sources have to be linked to narratives that make the emergence of Christianity from the activity of Jesus comprehensible. Such conceptions should not be equated with the past itself, but represent hypotheses—obtained with the aid of the historical material—concerning the events underlying the sources, their causes and effects, and also their meaning for the respective present.

A consideration of the epistemological presuppositions of the modern science of history and their hermeneutical implications thus leads to a conception of New Testament science beyond historicism. In view of the task of displaying the beginnings of Christianity to the respective present in the form of a heuristic model, presentations on the initial period of Christianity [22] must be set forth as narratives that possess a claim to historical plausibility and are written at the same time with the awareness that we are dealing with models through which past reality is represented in the present.⁵⁹ In this way the past *as history* becomes accessible to the respective present. The orientation of Christian theology to its origins, which remains necessary, can thus take place in a form that corresponds to present-day conditions of knowledge.

⁵⁹ Cf. Ricoeur 1988–1991, III, 222–93; 1984–1988, III, 142–79. In earlier generations—e.g., with A. v. Harnack, H. Lietzmann, or A. Deissmann—this form of presentation was still a matter of course. At present it has largely been lost in favor of a showing of the material.