

Concordia Theological Quarterly



Volume 80:1-2

January/April 2016

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Errata

There is an error on page 285 in the article by Charles A. Gieschen, “The Relevance of the *Homologoumena* and *Antilegomena* Distinction for the New Testament Canon Today: Revelation as a Test Case,” *CTQ* 79 (2015). The sentence in the first paragraph that reads, “It is ironic that the two primary proof-texts . . . are both from the *antilegomena*” should read: “It is ironic that one of the two primary proof-texts for the divine nature of the Scriptures, 2 Timothy 3:15 and 2 Peter 1:21, is from the *antilegomena*.”

The Editors

The Dichotomy of Judaism and Hellenism Revisited: Roots and Reception of the Gospel

Daniel Johansson

I encountered the problem of Judaism and Hellenism for the first time about twenty years ago when I studied for the lower degree in church music in Sweden. The program included an introduction to the Christian faith and the New Testament. Given the fact that this school was run by the Church of Sweden, this introduction took a surprisingly traditional, conservative approach on every important issue. Our ordinary teacher was the school pastor. Sometimes, however, an older layman who held a Bachelor of Theology substituted. Whether he liked to shock us or simply wished to demonstrate his knowledge, in one of these classes we were told that the death and resurrection of Jesus were not as unique as we might have believed. He claimed that the idea of the death and resurrection of a god after three days was attested in the cultures surrounding Judea. I do not remember his argument but I remember my classmates being surprised and confused. I was not equipped at the time to counter his arguments, nor did I ask the proper questions. With my limited theological background, however, I simply felt that something must be wrong with his reasoning.¹

I encountered the problem again in a different setting when several years later I wrote a paper on the Lord's Supper as student at the Lutheran School of Theology in Gothenburg. I was analyzing the arguments for and against a literal interpretation of the *verba institutionis*. To my surprise, I realized that those exegetes who traced the Lord's Supper back to Jesus himself almost all rejected the real presence of the body and blood of Christ. Those, however, who denied that Jesus had instituted the Supper and rather traced its roots to a non-Jewish, Hellenistic background concluded that the early gentile Christians did indeed believe in the real presence. I would lie if I say that I approached the problem of the inter-

¹ For an introduction to the phenomenon to which my teacher probably was referring, see e.g., Tryggve Mettinger, *The Riddle of Resurrection: "Dying and Rising Gods" in the Ancient Near East* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2001).

pretation of the *verba* from a completely neutral standpoint, so admittedly I felt somewhat attracted by the conclusions of those scholars who found non-Jewish elements in the early Christian faith.

The latter example illustrates a very influential idea in the study of earliest Christianity and New Testament exegesis, namely, the assumption of sharp dividing lines between Palestinian Judaism and Hellenism. In this article, I will first present this idea and the school of thought associated with it, the so-called *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (History of Religion School). Then, I will turn to Martin Hengel's critique of this idea, one that has convinced many and laid the foundation for the new *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*. However, I will also attempt to offer a correction of Hengel, or, perhaps better expressed, a correction of the reception of Hengel's work. I will argue further that many of the insights of the old school are valuable as long as they are used properly. Neither Greco-Roman Gentile converts nor their philosophies or traditions hardly directly influenced Christian doctrines and beliefs as such—these go back to the earliest Jewish background. Nevertheless, these converts were the recipients of the Gospel and therefore brought their various backgrounds with them in their interpretation of it. Without completely rejecting the insights of the first History of Religion School, we ought to distinguish between the root and the reception when discussing it. This in turn has important implications for other theological disciplines, which I will discuss in my conclusion.

I. The History of Religion School and the Sharp Line between Judaism and Hellenism

All modern exegetes, irrespective of theological conviction, take it for granted that the New Testament should be interpreted in the light of our knowledge of the first century AD (or even second century), or at least our knowledge of the Jewish world. Even conservative Lutheran exegetes have, consciously or unconsciously, recognized that the rule that Scripture is its own interpreter does not mean that other sources should not be consulted in the process of interpretation.² This has not always been the case, however. In fact, it took a while before practitioners of historical criticism turned to extra-biblical sources; it was only toward the last quarter of the nineteenth century that an extensive use of non-biblical material came

² Thus, to cast light on a New Testament passage, the exegete typically begins by looking at parallels in the Old Testament, contemporary Judaism, and Greco-Roman sources. Only in a second phase may one refer to other New Testament writings, but then only to confirm that the idea present in the passage under consideration is found in other early Christian authors as well.

about, beginning with the use of non-canonical Jewish literature. Since this affirmed the continuity between the Old and New Testament and could serve well to cast light upon the work and words of Jesus, this was an uncontroversial endeavor. Once this happened, however, it did not take long before scholars began to look at the Greco-Roman world, or indeed the Far East, searching for the roots of Christian ideas. The first main practitioner of this method and the real father of the History of Religion School, Otto Pfliegerer (1839–1908), studied the New Testament and early Christianity in the light of both Judaism and other religions. He could, for example, claim that the title Son of God was interpreted in three different ways among early Christians: 1) as the adopted Son of God, like the king in Israel, 2) as a pre-existent divine being, like Philo's *logos*, and 3) as the virgin-born child similar to Buddha and the Greek heroes.³

Why would the early Christians use pagan material? According to Pfliegerer, it was necessary to use contemporary expressions in order to make the Christian faith understandable and attractive among Gentiles; besides, "the historical Jesus had intrinsic limitations."⁴ He was a child of his time and subject to its own limitations. It was therefore necessary that Jesus' person was given proper clothing so that it expressed his universal and eternal significance. For Pfliegerer, Christianity was a syncretistic religion that borrowed the best from its competitors, adopted it without losing its own distinctiveness, and overcame all other religions. With regard to the discipline of exegesis, Pfliegerer wrote that "the sphere of comparative religion . . . offers to the theology of the twentieth century a rich field of labour, whose culture will result in the clearing up of many problems to which Biblical exegesis and criticism have so far found no satisfactory solution."⁵ It is doubtful that many problems were cleared up; it probably created more problems than it solved, but Pfliegerer was right about the future of New Testament research. The comparative approach has dominated for at least a century and the lasting effects of some of its false conclusions are still making their impact.

The History of Religion School consisted of scholars who were in one way or another associated with the University of Göttingen in the early twentieth century.⁶ Among its more prominent members were Hermann

³ William Baird, *History of New Testament Research: Vol. 2: From Jonathan Edwards to Rudolf Bultmann* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 215.

⁴ Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, 215.

⁵ Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, 215.

⁶ For a brief introduction to the school, see Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, 238–252.

Gunkel, Wilhelm Heitmüller, and Wilhelm Bousset. Two characteristics in particular of this school were, first, the concern with finding parallels to the Christian faith in other religions, usually arguing that the influence came from outside of Christianity rather than the other way around, and second, the focus on cult and worship (i.e., the Christian liturgy). Thus, Wilhelm Heitmüller (1869–1926) studied the sacraments in Paul. In his discussion of 1 Corinthians 10, for example, he concluded that “Christians do not eat the body and blood of a sacrificed animal in order to come into communion with Christ, but, since Christ himself is the sacrifice, they eat the body and blood of Christ, and . . . come into the closest imaginable, completely secret communion with him.”⁷ This understanding, however, could not have originated in Judaism but in the syncretistic oriental religion of the Hellenistic world, according to Heitmüller.

Wilhelm Bousset’s (1865–1920) main contribution to the History of Religion School is his majestic *Kyrios Christos*, in which he traces the development of the doctrine of Christ, or, more precisely, the development of the Christ cult.⁸ Bousset is primarily interested in the rite and cult of early Christians. Following the reasoning of Heitmüller, developed a few years earlier, Bousset draws a sharp distinction between early Jewish Christianity and the somewhat later Gentile Christianity. Bousset argues that the earliest Jewish Christians believed that Jesus was the Son of Man, exalted to the right hand of God. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus *became* the Messiah. Here he follows William Wrede.⁹ However, worship of Jesus did not follow from this conviction. This was not possible in the Jewish context since Jewish monotheism and monolatry would not allow it. In Gentile Christianity, however, the earlier titles Son of Man and Christ were superseded by the title *Kyrios*, which was used in an absolute and religious sense. It was around this Lord, Bousset argued, that the fellowship of Christians gathered to worship. They confessed his name, invoked his name at baptisms, and celebrated the Lord’s Supper around his table.

⁷ Wilhelm Heitmüller, *Taufe und Abendmahl bei Paulus: Darstellung und religionsgeschichtliche Beleuchtung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, 1903), 32. English translation in Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, 242.

⁸ Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: Geschichte des Christusglaubens von den Anfängen des Christentums bis Irenaeus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913; rev. ed. 1921); English translation: *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus*, trans. J. E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), from the 1964 German edition.

⁹ In a very influential study, published in 1901, Wrede concluded that Jesus himself did not claim to be the Messiah, but that this idea was ascribed to Jesus by the early Church. See William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, trans. J. C. G. Greig (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1971).

Indeed, the Lord himself was present as the head of the community and as a recipient of its worship. All this, however, could not have Jewish roots, but was a Hellenistic influence on early Christians made possible by the influx of Gentiles in the Christian communities. Bousset pointed out that the title *Kyrios* was used in the East to acclaim the king as divine and to venerate the gods in Egypt and Syria. Bousset claimed that it was this faith of the Gentile churches that Paul encountered after his conversion. Accordingly, we find the primary evidence for this branch of early Christianity in Paul's letters. The deification of Jesus then developed gradually. Further steps were taken by the Johannine communities, where Jesus is called God, and then in Ignatius' epistles, where Christ is called God on a more regular basis. Tracing this development all the way down to Ireneus, Bousset finds a gradual Hellenization and Paganization of the Christians' faith. Much of this theory—both its presuppositions and conclusions—has been contested. What is important to note is that the sharp dividing line between Judaism and Hellenism, between Palestinian and Gentile Christianity, is the foundation upon which Bousset grounds his thesis.

The same distinction is also at play when, for example, Rudolph Bultmann characterizes the Christology of the Gospel of Mark. In his view, the second evangelist united "the Hellenistic *kerygma* about Christ, whose essential content consists of the Christ-myth [e.g., Phil 2:6-11; Rom 3:24] . . . with the tradition of the story of Jesus."¹⁰ The ability to distinguish between different social groups and their beliefs is taken to an even more sophisticated level by Ferdinand Hahn in his 1963 study of Christological titles from 1963.¹¹ Hahn distinguishes between Palestinian Jewish Christianity, Hellenistic Jewish Christianity, and Gentile Christianity. The new category, Hellenistic Judaism, was thought to function as a bridge between Judaism in Palestine, untouched by Hellenism, and the pagan culture. With these distinctions, Hahn finds evidence of no less than three different Son of God concepts in early Christianity: an early Jewish Christian concept of Son of God as a royal Messiah, a Hellenistic Jewish Christian concept of Son of God as a divine man, and a more elevated (Hellenistic), ontological sonship. All of these could be found in the same document. Mark, according to Hahn, included all three of them in his Gospel and let them stand side by side. Not all scholars, however, have been convinced that it is possible to make these kinds of distinctions.

¹⁰ Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of Synoptic Tradition*, trans. J. Marsh (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), 347.

¹¹ Ferdinand Hahn, *Christologische Hoheitstitel: Ihre Geschichte im fruhen Christentum* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), 287-319.

II. Martin Hengel and the Influence of Hellenism in Palestine

We are largely indebted to one scholar, Martin Hengel (1926-2009), a giant among New Testament scholars of the twentieth century, for the questioning and undermining of the axiom laid down by the History of Religion School. He was largely driven by one goal, namely, to understand and present the early Christology of the church. Sound historical work and faithfulness to the sources were his guiding principles. Hengel wrote his dissertation on the Zealots. Even before Reza Aslan was born, Hengel had undermined Aslan's thesis that Jesus was a zealot, and Hengel probably said all that needed to be said about the Zealot movement.¹² In order to qualify for a position as professor in Germany, the candidate must write a second dissertation, a *Habilitationsschrift*. For this project, Hengel decided to challenge the consensus of a sharp distinction between Judaism and Hellenism in Palestine. The result is his study *Judentum und Hellenismus*.¹³ This and subsequent studies made clear that Palestine was far from an isolated Hebrew entity in the pluralistic world of Hellenism. Strong influences of Hellenism are notable from the conquest of Alexander to the destruction of the temple. I refer to Hengel's work in what follows. He has pointed to four areas where there is a clear Hellenistic influence in Palestine.¹⁴

Greek Language in Palestine

At the time of Jesus, Palestine was to a great extent a bilingual area. The Maccabean revolt against the impact of Hellenism did not change anything in this regard. Alexander Janneus (103-76 BC) issued bilingual coins, whereas Herod about forty years later went over to purely Greek inscriptions on Jewish coins. The number of Greek inscriptions on ossuaries in Jerusalem and its surroundings amounts to approximately forty percent. At least ten to twenty percent of the inhabitants in Jerusalem in this period are estimated to have had Greek as their mother tongue. The return of prominent Diaspora Jews to Jerusalem led to the founding of

¹² Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Random House, 2014); Martin Hengel, *The Zealots: Investigations into the Jewish Freedom Movement in the Period from Herod I until 70 A.D.* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989). The German original was published in 1961.

¹³ Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period*, 2 vols., trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1974). See also Martin Hengel, *Jews, Greeks and Barbarians: Aspects of the Hellenization of Judaism in the Pre-Christian Period*, trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1980); Martin Hengel, *The "Hellenization" of Judaea in the First Century after Christ* (London: SCM, 1989).

¹⁴ Primarily *The "Hellenization" of Judaea in the First Century after Christ*.

several Greek-speaking synagogues (Acts 6:9). Given the evidence from inscriptions, we can assume that many in the leading aristocracy spoke Greek. This evidence is not limited to Jerusalem but is found throughout the region. We can also note that two of the disciples of Jesus, Andrew and Philip, bore Greek names. On the basis of the level of bilinguality, Hengel concludes that it is likely that already during the lifetime of Jesus his message reached Diaspora Jews, who almost exclusively spoke Greek.¹⁵ It was this group that made up the core of the Hellenist movement in Jerusalem mentioned in Acts 6. Jesus' teaching was presumably translated into Greek well before he was crucified. In fact, Jesus himself may have taught in Greek, at least in part.

Greek Education and Literature

Greek education flourished in the Hellenistic cities surrounding Jewish Palestine and apparently in Jewish Palestine as well. The author of the *Letter of Aristeas* assumes that the seventy-two translators of the Septuagint who came from Palestine had a "solid Greek education." The first Jewish writer in Greek who is known to us, although we do not know the name, from about the time of Ben Sira, explicitly identified Enoch with Atlas.¹⁶ At the beginning of the second century BC, a secondary school was built in Jerusalem and presumably also an elementary school, which was a precondition for a secondary school. This did not change with the Maccabean revolt. The grandson of Ben Sira, who immigrated to Egypt in 132 BC and who translated his grandfather's work into Greek, must have acquired his basic Greek education in Jerusalem. Likewise Josephus, the Jewish historian, must have received the foundation of his amazingly broad Greek education in the holy city. The rabbis were influenced by Hellenism (as is evidenced by the large number of Greek loanwords in the rabbinic literature), and the Pharisees before them were more open to the Hellenistic environment than the Essenes. Matthew's note about the Pharisees travelling abroad to make disciples suggests that they were well-travelled (Matt 23:15).

¹⁵ Note the incident in John 12:20-21 where "some Greeks" expressed the desire to see Jesus.

¹⁶ Martin Hengel, *The "Hellenization" of Judaea in the First Century after Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1989). Hengel refers to Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9.17 and 18.2.

Political and Social Aspects of Hellenization

Although the Maccabeans/Hasmoneans had revolted against the policies forced upon them by a Hellenistic ruler, the Hasmonean high priests and kings could not dispense with Greek technology, economics, law, warfare, and language. It is evident that the leaders of the nation needed to be well-educated in the Greek sense. Later, Herod made "Jerusalem a pearl among the cities of the Roman empire" and built palaces in places such as Jericho, Masada, and Herodium. He founded Caesarea Maritima and even contributed to buildings elsewhere in the Roman empire. Herod's Jerusalem was a Hellenistic city with theatre and hippodrome. The level of these buildings, both with regard to technique and artistry, was on par with other capitals of that day, and only surpassed in Rome two generations later by Nero. King Herod himself had a broad Greek education that he received from the high priest Hyrcanus II, who was interested in Greek studies. In order to secure his sons' education, Herod brought one of the most significant scholars of his time to Jerusalem. The presence and influence of Greek wisdom traditions may, according to Hengel, explain why there are affinities between the synoptic tradition and Greek gnomic wisdom and philosophical anecdotes. These should not be regarded as the result of a later Hellenistic influence on Christianity; rather, they go back to Jesus himself.

Hellenistic Traditions in Jewish Palestine

Given that Greek education was present in Palestine beginning in the centuries before Christ, it is conceivable that traces of its literature also are present there. Here we should perhaps remember that contacts between Greek myths and those of the ancient Near East can be demonstrated already in Homer. Hengel points out that the mythological geography of 1 Enoch has numerous points of contact with Greek ideas; for example, the kingdom of the dead in the distant West is reminiscent of the Elysian fields (1 Enoch 22:1-14). Similarly, the rebellion and fall of the watchmen in 1 Enoch 6-11 show similarities with the Greek Prometheus myth. The War scroll of the Essene movement seems to be based on Hellenistic handbooks of war techniques. Astrology and magic played just as great a role in Judaism as it did in the pagan environment. In Ben Sira, there are unique points of contact with Stoicism, such as the doctrine of the two ways. In Judaism, as depicted by Josephus, there was a discussion of free will among the religious groups that seems to reflect the different Greek schools of thought. Ben Sira's defence of the free will may very well reflect his reaction against certain Greek influences in this regard. The rabbinic rules of interpretation probably go back to the methods of Alexandrian philologists and jurists. Furthermore, the Jewish Passover Seder reflects

Greek customs at table, where the leading class would recline on comfortable couches to discuss and sing in their symposia. This festal custom has been transferred to the religious celebration of the whole Jewish people.

One final example, not mentioned by Hengel, is from the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek. In the Hebrew version of Job 9:8, God is described as one who tramples the high places of the sea. This evokes the idea of God subduing the sea as an enemy. The LXX translation, however, says that God is walking on the water as on dry land, which could reflect a number of stories in which the Greek gods or demi-gods, such as Hercules, walk on water.

Hengel's Conclusion

Given this widespread influence of Hellenism on Palestinian Judaism from the third century BC down to the rabbis, it is inconceivable that anyone would make a distinction between Palestinian Judaism untouched by Greek ideas and Hellenistic Judaism. Palestinian Judaism is Hellenistic Judaism. For this reason we should not use such a distinction in describing early Christianity either, according to Hengel. We cannot make these distinctions on the basis of geography. It is likely that there are larger differences between a well-educated scribe and a poor peasant in Palestine than between the scribe and his colleague in Alexandria. Thus, what seem to be pagan Hellenistic influences on early Christianity had become part and parcel of Judaism before they were taken up by early Christians. As far as the roots of early Christian ideas go, they can all be accounted for on Jewish soil.

Hengel's studies have convinced a large number of scholars. Thus, the so-called New History of Religion School has looked for parallels in early Judaism when it has sought to explain the expression of the earliest Christian doctrine.¹⁷ One consequence is that the idea of a primitive Christianity, pure and untouched by Greek ideas, is gone. Furthermore, much of what was regarded as Hellenistic elements in the Gospels and what was ascribed to as developments in the Christian communities may, in fact, go back to Jesus himself.

¹⁷ J. E. Fossum, "The New *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*: The Quest for Jewish Christology," *Society of Biblical Languages Seminar Paper* 30 (1991): 638-646.

III. But What about the Reception of the Gospel?

In my view, the pendulum has swung back a little too far. As a consequence of Hengel's work, the study of parallels in *religionsgeschichtliche* has been restricted to Jewish sources, at least by those who fully embrace Hengel's view. This was probably not what Hengel intended. In fact, he notes parallels between Jesus' preaching and Stoicism, which leads him to suggest a direct contact between Jesus and philosophers of that school.

In my own work on the early Christology in the Gospel of Mark, I have approached the subject with the intention of reading and interpreting the evidence against a solely Jewish background.¹⁸ However, whereas earlier scholarship was looking for the roots of various ideas, following the general trend of scholarship, I have focused on the text itself, aiming to determine what the author intended to communicate and how the earliest hearers and readers of Mark may have interpreted it. I considered the other side of the coin, the reception of the message. Given the common view that the cultural background of most of Mark's earliest readers was Greco-Roman, I was forced to cast my net a little wider and include the Greco-Roman evidence.

One may think that bringing two different cultures to bear on the Gospels would yield diverging results, but this is not necessarily the case. Surprisingly often, the Greco-Roman interpretation simply confirms and reinforces the Old Testament/Jewish interpretation. Thus, when the Jewish cultural background, for example, implies that a certain act by Jesus is a uniquely divine act, it turns out that this act would communicate the same idea in a Greco-Roman setting. The crucial difference is not the activities ascribed to a divine being, but the number of deities. To offer only one example, already touched upon briefly, when Jesus walks on water he is clearly acting in the capacity of the God of Israel. The only one who is depicted as walking on water in the Old Testament is God. The Job passage mentioned earlier associates this with God's creative activities (Job 9:8). A passage from 2 Macc 5:21 (2 Macc 9:8, 12, 28) makes clear that at least some Jews understood that a claim on the part of a human to be able to walk on water was a claim to divinity and, consequently, blasphemous. A look at the Greco-Roman evidence, however, yields similar results. The gods of the sea either drive their carts on the surface of the water or walk on water. Some rulers who claimed divinity also claimed the ability to travel supernaturally on water. Given the Papias tradition—that Mark wrote down what Peter proclaimed in Rome—it is striking that Emperor

¹⁸ See Daniel Johansson, "Jesus and God in the Gospel of Mark: Unity and Distinction" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2011).

Caligula, twenty years or so before Peter preached there, tried to “demonstrate” his divinity by making a bridge between Baiae and Puteoli, south of Rome.¹⁹ He brought together a large number of merchant ships, anchored them in a double line and then let mounds of earth be heaped upon them. Over this “bridge,” he then rode back and forth, claiming that even Neptune was afraid of him. It is noteworthy that this endeavor of the Emperor caused a minor famine in Rome, since he had acquired the merchant ships that brought wheat to Rome from Alexandria. According to Roman historians, some people starved to death in Rome and some also died at Puteoli, for the emperor himself threw into the water several of his friends who could not swim. The Romans had hardly forgotten this when Peter told them about a certain Jewish Messiah who came walking on the water to save him and his fellow disciples during a particularly severe storm.

IV. Conclusion

I conclude this article by offering five points for further reflection. First, when interpreting the New Testament texts, it is highly important to read them in light of both the Jewish and the wider Greco-Roman culture. This will help us to understand how the earliest recipients read and received the message of Jesus and his apostles, but of course also what the authors intended to communicate. It was into this thoroughly Hellenized world, made up of Jews, Greeks, Romans, and other people, that the Gospel was first proclaimed. Reading Greco-Roman literature did indeed help the Lutheran fathers to clarify the meaning of key Greek terminology.²⁰

Second, surprisingly often, the Jewish and Hellenistic cultural backgrounds overlap. It may be the case that this is due to a mutual influence of Judaism and Hellenism, but it may equally well be evidence of the general revelation of God. In the first History of Religion School, it was common to deem Christianity a syncretistic religion that nicely adapted to the circumstances and therefore was so successfully spread. I think we should turn the tables around. The universal message of Christianity is, rather, evidence for the common background of all human beings and for humans being created by the one creator God in his image.

¹⁹ See e.g., Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 59.17.1–11.

²⁰ Cf. Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent: Part 1*, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: CPH, 1971), 470–471 on *δικαίωω*, and Phillip Melancthon, *Loci Communes 1543*, trans. J.A.O. Preus (St Louis: CPH, 1992), 87 on *πιστεύω*.

Third, given the aforementioned observation, missiologists and pastoral theologians must be sensitive to these matters. There is perhaps more of a shared cultural understanding than we usually think. Many missionaries over the years have had experiences that confirm this.

Fourth, church historians should in a similar way be sensitive to History of Religion parallels. For example, there are noteworthy parallels between the roles of local saints and patrons in the Middle Ages, the roles of local deities in Antiquity, and the roles of angels in early Judaism. It has often been claimed that celebration of Christmas in Scandinavia, Sweden in particular, was a happy inculturation of *Midvinterblot*, the midwinter's sacrifice. While that may be the case, it may equally well be God's preparation of the peoples of the north for the celebration of his Son's birth.²¹

Fifth, returning to the question posed at the beginning of this study, should we actually engage in bringing the cultures of Antiquity to bear on our interpretation of the text, given the Lutheran axioms in biblical interpretation that the Holy Scripture is its own interpreter, *claritas Scripturae*, etc.? This is, in fact, one of the questions modern Lutheran theologians have not fully solved. We keep repeating *Scriptura Sacra sui ipsius interpres*, yet this is often the last principle to which modern exegetes turn. The sixteenth century reformers as well as the theologians of Lutheran orthodoxy made use of extra-biblical sources in their interpretation of the Scriptures.²² But how did they use them? The question remains: Is the modern exegetical procedure compatible with traditional Lutheran hermeneutics? Who is up for the challenge to address this question in a comprehensive way?

²¹ Some recent scholars have, however, suggested that the apostles of the north took Christianity there before the Vikings begun to celebrate *Midvinterblot*, if they indeed did at all. Evidence of a pre-Christian sacrificial feast is lacking. This may instead have been an attempt by the local leaders to gather the people around the old religion. See <http://www.nordiskamuseet.se/aretsdagar/vintersolstandet>. (This article on Swedish traditions, found on the webpage of the Nordic Museum, is only available in Swedish). A similar discussion is in vogue regarding the Christmas celebration in Rome. Recent scholarship argues that Christians had begun to celebrate Christmas at Dec 25 *before* Julian the apostate moved the *Sol invictus* feast to this date. Cf. S. Jijmans, "Sol Invictus, the Winter Solstice, and the Origins of Christmas" *Museion* 47 (2003): 277-298; K. B. Westerfield Tucker, "Christmas" in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, ed. A. Hastings, A. Mason, H. Pyper (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 124.

²² Cf. J. A. Steiger, "Die Rezeption der rabbinischen Tradition im Luthertum (Johann Gerhard, Salomo Glassius u.a.) und im Theologiestudium des 17. Jahrhunderts: Mit einer Edition des universitären Studienplanes von Glassius und einer Bibliographie der von ihm konzipierten Studentenbibliothek," *Das Berliner Modell der Mittleren Deutschen Literatur*, ed. Christiane Caemmerer, Walter Delabar, Jörg Jungmayr, and Knut Kiesant (Amsterdam: Rodopi Bv Editions, 2000): 191-252.

The Contribution of Johann Salomo Semler to the Historical Criticism of the New Testament¹

Boris Paschke

The German Lutheran theologian Johann Salomo Semler (1725–1791) was quite popular in his lifetime, as becomes obvious in Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. In this 1774 novel, a pastor's wife is ordered to cut down the two beautiful hazels growing in her garden, not only because they block off the sun, but also because the boys of the neighborhood throw stones at their delicious nuts. This disturbs and annoys the intellectual lady when she ponders over the biblical canon by comparing Kennikot, Semler, and Michaelis with each other.² In light of Goethe's reference to Semler, Michael Rumpf aptly comments that Semler was a "well-known critic of the Bible" (*bekanntere Bibelkritiker*).³

In New Testament scholarship, Semler is still popular today—about two hundred and fifty years after the appearance of Goethe's *Werther*. According to the majority of modern scholars, Semler played a significant role in the development of historical criticism of the New Testament. Many even consider Semler the father or founder of New Testament historical criticism. Werner Georg Kümmel, for instance, states, "Semler is the founder of the historical study of the New Testament."⁴

¹ I dedicate this article to my doctoral promoter and dear colleague Prof. Dr. Martin I. Webber (Evangelische Theologische Faculteit Leuven/Belgium) who, during my doctoral studies, first prompted my interest in researching the history of historical criticism of the New Testament.

² Cf. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774; reprint, Osnabrück: Editio Simile, 1971), 148–151.

³ Michael Rumpf, *Die Leiden des jungen Werther, Johann Wolfgang Goethe: Inhalt, Hintergrund, Interpretation* (München: Mentor, 2005), 39.

⁴ Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems*, trans. McLean Gilmor and Howard C. Kee (London: SCM Press, 1973), 68; similarly David S. Dockery, "New Testament Interpretation: A Historical Survey," in *New Testament Criticism & Interpretation*, ed. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery

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The goal of this article is to investigate what exactly Semler contributed to New Testament historical criticism, a discipline that David S. Dockery defines as follows: "Historical criticism is used as a comprehensive term designating several techniques to discover the historical situation, the sources behind the writings, the literary style and relationships, the date, authorship, approach to composition, destination, and recipients."⁵

Besides the components mentioned in Dockery's definition, however, historical criticism usually also involves the presupposition that supernatural intervention into human affairs is unlikely or even impossible. According to Klaus Scholder, this presupposition has been a substantial and decisive feature of historical criticism of the Bible since the discipline's beginnings in the seventeenth century.⁶ According to Dockery's definition, the goal of historical criticism is "to discover the historical situation." Accordingly, in their definitions, both Howard I. Marshall and Edgar Krentz use the words "what actually happened,"⁷ which are reminiscent of Leopold von Ranke's famous German phrase "*wie es eigentlich gewesen*."⁸

A study of Semler's contribution to historical criticism of the New Testament is worthwhile because—even though it can be debated if he is to be called its father or founder—he was certainly one of the first and leading figures in New Testament historical criticism.⁹ Thus, studying his critical thought is a good introduction to the whole discipline.

(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 50; Gottfried Hornig, *Die Anfänge der historisch-kritischen Theologie: Johann Salomo Semlers Schriftverständnis und seine Stellung zu Luther*, *Forschungen zur Systematischen Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 8 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961), 11; Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1984), 110.

⁵ Dockery, "Interpretation," 50–51.

⁶ Klaus Scholder, *Ursprünge und Probleme der Bibelkritik im 17. Jahrhundert: Ein Beitrag zur Entstehung der historisch-kritischen Theologie*, *Forschungen zur Geschichte und Lehre des Protestantismus* 23 (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1966), 8–10; cf. Gerhard Ebeling, "Die Bedeutung der historisch-kritischen Methode für die protestantische Theologie und Kirche," in *Wort und Glaube*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1967), 34.

⁷ I. Howard Marshall, "Historical Criticism," *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1977), 126; Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method*, ed. Gene M. Tucker, *Guides to Biblical Scholarship* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 37.

⁸ Leopold von Ranke, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1885), vii.

⁹ Cf. Bengt Hägglund, *History of Theology*, trans. Gene J. Lund (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1968). Hägglund writes, "He [Semler] was also one of the first Bible critics" (348).

The focus of the present article is on Semler's historical criticism of the canon and content of the New Testament. Further, by comparing Semler to other historical critics—both of his day (Hermann Samuel Reimarus) and of later generations (Ferdinand Christian Baur, David Friedrich Strauss, and Rudolf Bultmann)—this study also offers a general overview of historical criticism of the New Testament.

Anders Gerdmar aptly states, "Semler's own literary production is vast."¹⁰ Kümmel speaks of 171, Wolfgang Sommer even of 250 publications.¹¹ In studying Semler's contribution to New Testament historical criticism, the present article focuses on what can be considered the most relevant works of Semler's large oeuvre.¹²

I. Semler's Historical Criticism of the Canon of the New Testament

The present study of Semler's contribution to historical criticism of the New Testament is based on the first volume (1771; 2nd ed. 1776) of his four-volume *Treatise of the Free Investigation of the Canon*.¹³

The Canon as Historical Phenomenon

When Semler speaks of "canon," he means the list of Jewish and Christian books that were considered divinely inspired and therefore publicly read in Christian gatherings.¹⁴ According to Semler, the extent of the canon was not always fixed and clearly defined. He points out that the

¹⁰ Anders Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism: German Biblical Interpretation and the Jews, from Herder and Semler to Kittel and Bultmann*, *Studies in Jewish History and Culture* 20 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 39; cf. Gottfried Hornig, *Johann Salomo Semler: Studien zu Leben und Werk des Hallenser Aufklärungstheologen*, ed. Hans-Joachim Kertscher and Fabienne Molin, *Hallesche Beiträge zur Europäischen Aufklärung* 2 (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1996), ix: "Umfangreiches und kaum überschaubares Schriftenkorpus."

¹¹ Cf. Kümmel, *The New Testament*, 62; Wolfgang Sommer, "Ein frommer Aufklärer: Erinnerung an Johann Salomo Semler," *Deutsches Pfarrerblatt* 91, no. 9 (1991): 365.

¹² In the main text of the present study, all statements of Semler are presented in English translation or paraphrase. Because all of Semler's works are unfortunately not yet available in English text editions, all translations or paraphrases are my own. At times, the original German text wording is provided within brackets or in footnotes.

¹³ Johann Salomo Semler, *Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Canon*, ed. Heinz Scheible, *Texte zur Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte* 5 (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1967). Scheible's edition follows the first edition of Semler's work (1771) and inserts additions of the second edition (1776) in pointed brackets (i.e., < . . . >).

¹⁴ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 3, p. 19.

general view of the “constant uniformity and consistency of the canon” is “without reason and historical accuracy” and, thus, a misconception.¹⁵ Semler states that in the various parties and provinces of the early church, unity regarding the extent of the canon did not exist.¹⁶ According to Semler, this unity was not accomplished until the fourth, or even fifth, century when bishops discussed and decided the extent of the canon.¹⁷

Semler refers to two documents of the Western church to prove that his reconstruction of the canon’s historical development is correct. First, he quotes from Canon 24 of the Third Council of Carthage (AD 397)¹⁸ that both decided the canonical status of the twenty-seven New Testament books and expressed the wish for respective negotiations with the bishops of Rome and surrounding areas.¹⁹ Second, Semler cites from a letter that Innocentius (Bishop of Rome) had written to Exsuperius (Bishop of Toulouse) in AD 405 in order to answer the latter’s questions concerning the extent of the canon.²⁰

By tracing the developments of the canon, Semler emphasizes its historical and human aspects. In light of his findings, he rejects the widespread teaching among Protestants that the complete Bible is God’s inspired—and maybe even dictated—word.²¹

In sum, Semler rejects the belief in the plenary inspiration of the Bible because (1) for a long time in church history agreement on the canon’s extent did not exist, (2) unity with regard to the canon was reached only through human negotiations, (3) human decisions on the canon are contradictory and thus not trustworthy,²² (4) statements of church councils concerning the canon will always remain “merely a historical information

¹⁵ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 4, p. 21.

¹⁶ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 3, p. 21.

¹⁷ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 4, p. 24.

¹⁸ By mistake, Semler refers to Canon 24 with “canon 47.”

¹⁹ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 3, p. 20; cf. Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 314–315.

²⁰ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 3, pp. 20–21: “The short appendix indicates which books should be included in the canon of the Holy Scriptures. These are the [scriptures] that you desired to be designated by requested voice.”

²¹ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 15, p. 60.

²² Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 6, p. 31.

and event"²³ and are thus not conclusive, and (5) even in Semler's lifetime different convictions regarding the canon were prevalent.

By demonstrating that the New Testament canon is a historical phenomenon, Semler made a significant contribution to the early development of New Testament historical criticism: he emphasized the historical and human nature of the New Testament and thus initiated and enabled its further historical-critical investigation.

Free Investigation of the Canon

Semler was a Lutheran who intentionally challenged the dogma of fellow German Protestant churches.²⁴ In agreement with his rejection of the church's dogma concerning the canon and plenary inspiration of the Bible, Semler severely criticized his church's theologians by referring to "the orthodox scholars of these days (who want to reign alone)."²⁵ With regard to the question whether a certain biblical book/passage is inspired or not, Semler trusted neither the judgment of the church nor that of his parents and first teachers, but only his own reasoned judgment.²⁶

Throughout his work, Semler uses several designations for those independently thinking individuals²⁷ who, by "making use of reflection and common sense,"²⁸ are in a position to carry out the "free" investigation of the canon promoted in Semler's treatise.²⁹

Semler intends to find out for himself which portions of the Bible are to be considered inspired word of God. He justifies this critical, private³⁰ project by pointing out repeatedly that in the sixteenth century, the

²³ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 2, p. 16.

²⁴ Cf. Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 1, p. 13.

²⁵ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 11, p. 47.

²⁶ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 1, p. 13.

²⁷ E.g., "truth-loving, reasonable person" (*Abhandlung*, § 1, p. 13), "thinking readers" (*Abhandlung*, § 7, p. 32), "researching persons" (*Abhandlung* § 8, p. 35), and "thinking Christians" (*Abhandlung*, § 23, p. 90).

²⁸ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 1, p. 14.

²⁹ Cf. Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 1, p. 14: "an individual, because of his/her strengths of mind [*Seelenkräfte*], is in a position to think independently." Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 14, p. 56: "This own opinion cannot be determined and prescribed by others."

³⁰ Cf. Martin Laube, "Die Unterscheidung von öffentlicher und privater Religion bei Johann Salomo Semler: Zur neuzeittheoretischen Relevanz einer christentums-theoretischen Reflexionsfigur," *Zeitschrift für neuere Theologiegeschichte* 11, no. 1 (2004): 1-23.

Protestant church questioned and investigated the canon of the Roman Catholic Church in a quite similar fashion.³¹ Christian Gottfried Schütz, Semler's student who published his teacher's *Last Credo* posthumously in 1792, states that Semler was "undoubtedly the first Lutheran theologian of our century who dared to refrain from the long dependence on a fixed dogmatic system and who paved the way for the free investigation of the theory."³²

Semler's independence from and rejection of the church's dogma became a major foundation of the historical criticism of the New Testament. An attitude similar to Semler's is found in the critical works of Strauss (1808–1874)³³ and Bultmann (1884–1976), who had "the desire to be free from the shackles, real or supposed, of church doctrine."³⁴

II. Semler's Historical Criticism of the Content of the New Testament

Quest for Timeless Moral Truth

Even though Semler rejected the dogma of the plenary divine inspiration of the Bible, he held that the Bible *contains* the inspired word of God, which, in turn, is to be equated with those portions of scripture presenting timeless moral truth. The adjective "moral" (*moralisch*), which is frequently used in the *Treatise of the Free Investigation of the Canon*, relates to the realms of the spiritual and ethical and thus designates truth that helps all humanity (i.e., humans of all generations and locations) to make personal progress in these realms.

Semler clearly states that word of God (i.e., timeless moral truth) is not to be found in the whole Bible: "Holy scripture and word of God need to be clearly distinguished from each other. . . . Books like Ruth, Esther, <Ezra>, and the Song of Solomon belong to Holy Scripture. These so-called holy books, however, do not all belong to the word of God that makes all people of all times wise unto salvation."³⁵ Because Semler is searching for

³¹ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 1, p. 13; § 2, p. 17.

³² Christian Gottfried Schütz, ed., *Johann Salomo Semlers letztes Glaubensbekenntnis über natürliche und christliche Religion* (Königsberg: Friedrich Nicolovius, 1792), iv; my translation.

³³ Cf. David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet*, vol. 1 (1835; Tübingen: Osiandersche Buchhandlung, 1984), vi.

³⁴ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizon: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 207; cf. Thomas Söding, *Wege der Schriftauslegung: Methodenbuch zum Neuen Testament* (Freiburg: Herder, 1998), 59.

³⁵ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 15, p. 60.

timeless moral truth, he disregards the *time-bound* information that is found in the historical books and passages of the Bible: "All writings of the so-called canon certainly contain passages and parts of speech and composition that pass away together with their times because they refer to circumstances that have passed away with the immediate listeners or readers."³⁶ As an example of such time-bound passages, Semler refers to Galatians 1–2. According to Semler, Paul narrates both his conversion experience and his visits to Arabia, Syria, and Jerusalem, not to transmit moral truths for all people and all times; rather, Paul provides these accounts only to save his own reputation.³⁷ With regard to the value of historical information contained in New Testament texts, Semler formulates the following general rule:

Many portions concern the first Christians' individual persons and circumstances that can never have a general reference [*welche nie ein allgemeines Verhältnis bekommen können*]. The local circumstances remain local and are obsolete for us whose surroundings are totally different in terms of both places and circumstances, so different that they do not match these texts.³⁸

For Semler, the inspired word of God is not to be found in historical accounts³⁹ but rather in the poetic and doctrinal portions of the Bible, such as the Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes⁴⁰ as well as the dogmatic sections of Galatians and Romans, respectively.⁴¹ Semler even looks for timeless divine truth in the works of writers like Cicero.⁴² Henning Graf Reventlow aptly summarizes Semler's position: "Semler is exclusively

³⁶ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 9, p. 40.

³⁷ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 22, p. 86.

³⁸ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 23, pp. 90–91.

³⁹ Cf. Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 21, pp. 83–84. Since historical facts can be eyewitnessed, the four evangelists did not need inspiration for their accounts of tax collecting, casting of nets, crucifying, etc. Far from being inspired, Mark, for example, simply copied the historical information contained in the Gospel of Matthew (thus, Semler supported a *Benutzungshypothese* with Matthaean priority). The evangelists did need inspiration, however, in order to write down moral truth.

⁴⁰ Cf. Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 10, p. 42; § 12, p. 51.

⁴¹ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 22, p. 86; § 23, p. 90.

⁴² Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 11, pp. 47–48; however, in spite of his openness for pagan writers in general and Cicero in particular, Semler did not actually turn to and investigate non-Biblical writers to detect timeless moral truth. Unlike, for example, William Wrede (1859–1906), Semler thus stayed within the boundaries of the Protestant canon. With regard to Wrede, cf. Heikki Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2000), 21.

interested in moral truths that, according to him, are contained in the Bible in general and the New Testament in particular. He devalorizes historical events. As such, they are profane and do not have any religious significance."⁴³

With his distinction between time-bound and timeless information, Semler was a child of his time. Similar ideas are already found in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670) of the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677)⁴⁴ and are expressed by Semler's contemporary Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781), who in 1777 formulated the famous dictum "Accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason."⁴⁵ Edgar Krentz states, "The historical thought of the Enlightenment was more philosophical than historical."⁴⁶

Semler both studied (1743–1750) and taught (1753–1791) at the University of Halle. Through the ministry of August Hermann Francke (1663–1727), the city of Halle became a stronghold of Pietism. It is thus reasonable to ask to what extent Pietism motivated Semler to search for the timeless moral truth contained in the Bible. It is possible that the subjective character of Pietism⁴⁷ influenced Semler's free and independent investigation of the canon. However, it is unlikely that Pietism also led Semler to divide the biblical texts into time-bound information and timeless truth, since Pietists considered the *whole* Bible to be the inspired word of God.⁴⁸

Semler's quest for timeless truth seems to have been a very subjective enterprise. Depending on their respective levels of moral insight, different readers can quite possibly come to different judgments concerning wheth-

⁴³ Henning Graf Reventlow, *Epochen der Bibelauslegung*, vol. 4, *Von der Aufklärung bis zum 20. Jahrhundert* (München: C.H. Beck, 2001), 188; my translation.

⁴⁴ Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 145 (caput VII): "Again, to avoid confusing teachings of eternal significance with those which are of only temporary significance or directed only to the benefit of a few, it is also important to know on what occasion, at what period, and for what nation or age all these teachings were written down."

⁴⁵ Gotthold Lessing, "On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power," in *Lessing's Theological Writings*, trans. Henry Chadwick, *A Library of Modern Religious Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 53.

⁴⁶ Krentz, *Method*, 22.

⁴⁷ Cf. Martin Greschat, *Christentumsgeschichte II: Von der Reformation bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Georg Strecker, *Grundkurs Theologie*, no. 4 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1997), 92.

⁴⁸ Cf. Kazuya Yamashita, *Kant und der Pietismus: Ein Vergleich der Philosophie Kants mit der Theologie Spencers*, *Akademische Abhandlungen zur Philosophie* (Berlin: Verlag für Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2000), 242.

er a given biblical text is to be considered word of God or not. Semler even admits that for readers of the Bible who find themselves on a very low level of moral learning the *entire* Bible could be the source of new insight.⁴⁹

Theory of Accommodation

One of Semler's exegetical aids to detect the timeless truth contained in the New Testament was his so-called theory of accommodation (*Akkommodationstheorie*),⁵⁰ namely, that Jesus and the apostles accommodated or adapted their teaching to the primitive mythological ideas prevalent in their times. According to Semler, most of these primitive mythological ideas were Jewish. It is the merit of Gerdmar to have pointed out this anti-Jewish component and, thus, dangerous potential of Semler's theological work: "The first Protestant writer to call for a dejudaising of Christian theology for theological reasons was Johann Salomo Semler."⁵¹

Semler equates mythos with a "low and uncultivated mentality"⁵² and states that such a mentality existed among the Jews and other peoples before their cultures developed.⁵³ In his *Last Credo*, Semler mentions the Jewish conceptions of angels, demons, and the bosom of Abraham⁵⁴ as well as the idea of an earthly millennial reign of the Messiah⁵⁵ as examples for the primitive and immature mythological views of the Jews. In the times of Jesus and the apostles, such primitive Jewish conceptions were still prevalent among Jews and Christians. In order to convey their message, Semler suggests that Jesus and the apostles accommodated their teaching to these (wrong) contemporary ideas. They sought to lead their Jewish audiences gradually to the "better religion" (*bessere Religion*)—Christianity—so that they eventually would abandon their former conceptions.⁵⁶

Semler stresses that mature, reasonable, and educated Christians are beyond all mythological thinking. They do not need mythology in order to

⁴⁹ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 7, p. 33.

⁵⁰ Cf. Hornig, *Anfänge*, 211–236.

⁵¹ Gerdmar, *Roots*, 39.

⁵² Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 10, p. 41.

⁵³ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 10, p. 42.

⁵⁴ Schütz, *Glaubensbekenntnis*, § 8, p. 46.

⁵⁵ Schütz, *Glaubensbekenntnis*, § 5, p. 36.

⁵⁶ Schütz, *Glaubensbekenntnis*, § 6, p. 38.

understand the timeless truth of Christianity. Semler therefore considers these primitive conceptions unnecessary and dispensable.⁵⁷

As soon as accommodation is detected through historical-critical study, the respective mythological ideas can be abandoned. Semler scholar Hornig labels such a procedure “demythologization” (*Entmythologisierung*).⁵⁸ A good example of how Semler’s theory of accommodation (including demythologization) functions is found in his *Treatise of the Free Investigation of the Canon*. According to Semler, the idea of Christ’s Second Coming was held by Jewish Christians who

⟨still were in a very low position and who were not yet capable of lofty, pure, and general ideas⟩. . . . Paul therefore complies with such people. It is for their sake that he writes some of such parts or pieces in his letters so that these opinions would be gradually weakened and eventually would ⟨even⟩ be abandoned by lovers who had been led, step-by-step, to a more mature judgment. These parts of Paul’s letters have ⟨thus certainly⟩ no general relation to the true Christian teaching that is immediately relevant for our own current spiritual perfection.⁵⁹

In the same vein, Semler considers the trumpet that the apostle Paul mentions in both 1 Corinthians 15:52 and 1 Thessalonians 4:16 a Jewish conception that is not a general truth necessary for all Christians.⁶⁰ Semler regards the fact that Jesus did not return as an obvious proof that his accommodation theory is correct. He states that “the former idea that ⟨this event and the future of Christ⟩ would take place before long has been, as is now obvious, a human and incorrect idea.”⁶¹

In view of these statements, Semler had a very critical, arrogant—and, unfortunately, also anti-Jewish—position regarding many Jewish New Testament conceptions, because he considered them to be part and parcel of a primitive mythological worldview. In his excellent analysis of Semler’s enlightenment thought,⁶² Gerdmar states, “Semler is often preoccupied with the Jews, writing them off as uncultivated and incapable of understanding true religion.”⁶³ According to Gerdmar, this confident attitude of superiority expressed by Semler with regard to the Jewish religion is

⁵⁷ Schütz, *Glaubensbekenntnis*, § 8 p. 46.

⁵⁸ Hornig, *Anfänge*, 225.

⁵⁹ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 22, p. 87.

⁶⁰ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 22, p. 87.

⁶¹ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 22, pp. 87–88.

⁶² Cf. Gerdmar, *Roots*, 39–49.

⁶³ Gerdmar, *Roots*, 46.

“common in Enlightenment theology.”⁶⁴ However, it is, unfortunately, already found much earlier in Christian theological discourse.⁶⁵

When comparing Semler’s accommodation theory to the so-called “mythical method of interpretation,”⁶⁶ espoused later by Bultmann, the following difference becomes obvious: Semler states that Jesus and the apostles “consciously”⁶⁷ and deliberately and accommodated their teachings to primitive conceptions of their times. For the spokesmen of the mythical method, however, the biblical authors *themselves* hold an erroneous position and thus shared in the general low mentality of their times.⁶⁸ Further, a significant difference between Semler and Bultmann becomes obvious. Whereas Semler simply *eliminated*⁶⁹ mythological ideas in order to find timeless truth, Bultmann *interpreted* them.⁷⁰ Bultmann did so because *in* those mythological conceptions he expected to find truth and

⁶⁴ Gerdmar, *Roots*, 43; cf. Heinrich Rothe, “Die Stellung der evangelischen Theologie zum Judentum am Ausgang der Aufklärung” (PhD diss., Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen, 1953). Christoph Bultmann, “What Do We Mean When We Talk about ‘(Late) Enlightenment Biblical Criticism’?”, in *The Bible and the Enlightenment*, ed. William Johnstone, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 377 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 119–134.

⁶⁵ Cf. Wolfgang Stegemann, *Jesus und seine Zeit*, Biblische Enzyklopädie 10 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2010), 179: Stegemann speaks of “the centuries-long disdain of Judaism and the vilification of Jewish beliefs and practices through the Christian world, especially in theological discourses” (my translation). Angelika Strotmann, *Der historische Jesus: Eine Einführung*, Grundwissen Theologie, 2nd ed. (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2015), 67: With regard to Judaism, Strotmann refers to “a religion that, from the Christian perspective, was regarded as a religion inferior to Christianity from early on (since the second century)” (my translation).

⁶⁶ This mythical method was developed by the historian Christian Gottlob Heyne (1729–1812). His student Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752–1827) then introduced it to Biblical studies. Via J.P. Gabler it eventually came to D.F. Strauss.

⁶⁷ Hägglund, *History*, 348.

⁶⁸ Cf. Christian Hartlich and Walter Sachs, *Der Ursprung des Mythosbegriffes in der modernen Bibelwissenschaft*, ed. Hans Frhr. von Campenhausen, Constantin von Dietze, et al., Schriften der Studiengemeinschaft der evangelischen Akademien 2 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1952), 3; cf. William Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, vol. 1, *From Deism to Tübingen* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 149–150.

⁶⁹ See, e.g., Semler’s conviction that the mythological conceptions can or must be “wiped out” (Schütz, *Glaubensbekenntnis*, § 6: *auslöschten*) and “abandoned” (*Abhandlung* § 22: *verlassen*) because they are “not needed” (*Abhandlung* § 22: *nicht . . . nötig*).

⁷⁰ Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie: Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung*, ed. Eberhard Jüngel and Rudolf Smend, Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie: Theologische Abhandlungen, no. 96 (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1985), 24–26.

meaning that might still be relevant and helpful for the existential issues and problems of the modern reader of the New Testament.⁷¹

Miracles as Components of the "Primitive" Jewish Religion

According to Semler, not just the ideas of angels, demons, paradise, and the like, but also the appreciation of miracles belonged to the primitive mentality prevalent in the Jewish religion of the first century. Surprisingly, this is not mentioned in the works of the leading Semler scholar Gottfried Hornig, neither in his books nor in his respective article in the standard reference work, *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*.⁷² In Hornig's overview of Jewish conceptions that Semler considered mythological, miracles are not listed.⁷³ And in his study of Semler's theory of accommodation, Hornig writes: "In spite of his tendency toward demythologization, Semler does not advocate a purely empirical concept of reality in the sense of considering only sensory perceptions to be real. As a historical-critical exegete, Semler expects God's intervention in earthly events."⁷⁴

Hornig here gives the impression that Semler had no problems whatsoever with the belief in miracles. This, however, was not the case. In his *Last Credo*, Semler devoted a whole paragraph (§ 29) to the issue of New Testament miracles. In this paragraph, miracles are clearly placed into the realm of primitive Jewish thinking. Semler points out that the Jews were the ones "who always required to see signs and wonders in order to believe."⁷⁵ Semler then uses several expressions to make clear that the Jewish expectation of and demand for miracles is to be considered primitive thinking. According to him, the Jewish appreciation of miracles is a "mentality" (*Denkungsart*) that is "small" and "very immoral."⁷⁶ Semler

⁷¹ Rudolf Bultmann, "Die christliche Hoffnung und das Problem der Entmythologisierung (1954)," in *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, vol. 3, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1965), 85; cf. Rudolf Bultmann, "Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung," in *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, vol. 4 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1965), 128.

⁷² Cf. Gottfried Hornig, "Semler, Johann Salomo (1725-1791)," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 31 (2000), 142-148.

⁷³ Hornig, *Anfänge*, 226: Hornig here mentions the following ingredients of Jewish mythology: angels carrying the soul to Abraham's bosom; many sitting in the kingdom of heaven together with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; heaven, paradise, and eternal bliss; hell, hades, and eternal punishment; and devil and demons that are able to possess humans.

⁷⁴ Hornig, *Anfänge*, 232; my translation.

⁷⁵ Schütz, *Glaubensbekenntnis*, § 29, pp. 239-240.

⁷⁶ Schütz, *Glaubensbekenntnis*, § 29, pp. 240-241.

even goes so far as to speak of “the old mind and mistake of the most common Judaism.”⁷⁷ In agreement with all of the above, Semler states that miracles are “for the immoral children, for those who are mentally incompetent.”⁷⁸

Semler does not refrain from applying his theory of accommodation to the narratives of Jesus’s miracles. Because the Jews expected their Messiah to perform miracles, the evangelists accommodated their reports to that expectation in order to show that Jesus was equal to⁷⁹ and even greater than⁸⁰ Moses who, according to Jewish tradition, performed miracles.

Semler holds that miracles are not necessary ingredients of the mature Christian believer’s faith: “The Christian worship of God can also take place without these ideas.”⁸¹ Semler allows enlightened Christians for whom miracles are obscure (*dunkel*) to ignore the respective Biblical narratives altogether.⁸² Semler uses two different lines of argumentation to prove that the mature Christian does not need the New Testament accounts of miracles. First, he makes the exegetical point that (1) Jesus blessed those who believe in him even though they do not see (cf. John 20:29);⁸³ (2) mature Christians do not need the belief in miracles, since they have the Spirit, the truth, and strong food (cf. Heb 5:12);⁸⁴ and (3) miracles do not occur in the epistles of the apostles⁸⁵ (cf., however, 1 Cor 12:10, 28; Gal 3:5).

The second line of argumentation is philosophical/logical and is based on the assumption that the (Jewish-) Christian worldview of the first century differed from that of later Christianity with regard to both demons and miracles. Within the framework of the Jewish worldview, miracles fulfilled the function of being divine antidotes to evil demons that supposedly existed and were thought to take possession of humans. Semler

⁷⁷ Schütz, *Glaubensbekenntnis*, § 29, p. 244.

⁷⁸ Schütz, *Glaubensbekenntnis*, § 29, p. 244.

⁷⁹ Schütz, *Glaubensbekenntnis*, § 29, p. 245.

⁸⁰ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 21, p. 82.

⁸¹ Schütz, *Glaubensbekenntnis*, § 29, p. 247.

⁸² Schütz, *Glaubensbekenntnis*, § 29, p. 239.

⁸³ Schütz, *Glaubensbekenntnis*, § 29, p. 240.

⁸⁴ Schütz, *Glaubensbekenntnis*, § 29, p. 244.

⁸⁵ Schütz, *Glaubensbekenntnis*, § 29, p. 246.

suggests that once the mythological belief in demons ceased, miracles were no longer needed.⁸⁶

Belief in Miracles and Supernatural Intervention

Even though Hornig might be too positive with regard to Semler's appreciation of miracles, he certainly is correct in pointing out that Semler did not hold to a purely empirical worldview but rather reckoned with the possibility of miracles and supernatural intervention into human affairs. This becomes obvious in the so-called "Fragment Controversy" (*Fragmentenstreit*). Three years after the first volume of Semler's *Treatise of the Free Investigation of the Canon* (1771) appeared, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing began to publish anonymous fragments of the so-called "Unknown of Wolfenbüttel" (*Wolfenbüttelschen Ungenannten*). The most controversial of these was a 1778 fragment entitled *On the Intentions of Jesus and His Disciples* (*Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger*). Even though the public eagerly speculated about the fragments' author, his name was not revealed until 1814: Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768). The fragments had been portions of the *Apology for or Defense of the Rational Worshippers of God*,⁸⁷ which Reimarus had written secretly and then kept hidden in his desk.

Like Semler, Reimarus is considered to be an influential figure in the development of historical criticism of the New Testament. According to Earle E. Cairns, "the beginning of higher criticism of the New Testament is usually associated with the name of Hermann Reimarus (1694–1768)."⁸⁸ More specifically, Reimarus is considered the first scholar to have engaged in the historical-critical study of the life of Jesus.⁸⁹

When comparing Semler to Reimarus, the Dutch scholars W. J. J. Glashouwer and W. J. Ouweneel come to the conclusion that the former was "as radical" as the latter.⁹⁰ This assessment, however, is not correct. In fact, because Semler considered miracles possible supernatural interventions,

⁸⁶ Schütz, *Glaubensbekenntnis*, § 29, p. 245.

⁸⁷ Hermann Samuel Reimarus, *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes*, 2 vols., Im Auftrag der Joachim-Jungius-Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften Hamburg herausgegeben von Gerhard Alexander (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1972).

⁸⁸ Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church*, 3rd. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 448; cf. Hans Jochen Genthe, *Kleine Geschichte der neutestamentlichen Wissenschaft* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 52.

⁸⁹ Cf. Angelika Strotmann, *Der historische Jesus: eine Einführung*, 2nd rev. ed., Grundwissen Theologie (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2015), 22.

⁹⁰ W. J. J. Glashouwer and W. J. Ouweneel, *Het ontstaan van de Bijbel* (Hilversum: Evangelische Omroep, 1998), 151.

he was *less* radical than Reimarus. Sommer states with regard to Semler, “The founder of historical-critical theology in Germany was a man characterized by a profound piety.”⁹¹

Reimarus did not believe in miracles and supernatural interventions because he was strongly inclined towards the philosophy of deism.⁹² In accordance with deistic ideas, Reimarus denied that the resurrection of Jesus actually happened. According to the fragment *On the Intentions of Jesus and His Disciples*, the belief in Jesus’ resurrection is not based on fact, but on fraud. Reimarus states that the disciples stole the body of Jesus from the grave at night (cf. Matt 27:64)⁹³ and then preached his resurrection and ascension.⁹⁴

For Semler, however, the unknown author, Reimarus, was going too far in his criticism of the New Testament. In 1779, Semler thus wrote his *Answer to the Fragments of an Unnamed Author, Especially “On the Intentions of Jesus and His Disciples,”*⁹⁵ in which he defended the historical reliability of the New Testament accounts on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁹⁶ According to the preface to his work, Semler intended to offer a “study that is indeed useful for both the defense of Christianity and the real refutation of the accusations of the unknown author.” Thus, Semler did not consider himself to be as radical as the anonymous author whom he labels “Deist” throughout his response.⁹⁷

Semler refutes the criticism of the unknown author on two different levels. First, in the preface, he points out the “historical mistakes” of the unknown author. Semler demonstrates that it is both “totally impossible” and “very improbable” that the disciples stole Jesus’s dead body from the grave.⁹⁸ Further, Semler—somewhat superficially—denies that there exist

⁹¹ Sommer, “Aufklärer,” 368; my translation.

⁹² Thomas K. Kuhn, “Reimarus, Hermann Samuel,” in *Theologen: 185 Porträts von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Markus Vinzent (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2004), 203; Genthe, *Geschichte*, 50.

⁹³ Reimarus follows Byzantine witnesses of Matt 27:64 that add *nuktos* to indicate the supposed nocturnal time of the theft (see, e.g., codices C and L).

⁹⁴ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, ed., *Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger: Noch ein Fragment des Wolfenbüttelschen Ungenannten* (Braunschweig, 1778), 242–245 (§ 56).

⁹⁵ Johann Salomo Semler, *Beantwortung der Fragmente eines Ungenannten insbesondere vom Zweck Jesu und seiner Jünger* (Halle: Verlag des Erziehungsinstituts, 1779).

⁹⁶ Cf. Hornig, *Anfänge*, 12.

⁹⁷ Cf., e.g., Semler, *Beantwortung*, 279, 358, and 368.

⁹⁸ Semler, *Beantwortung*, 413.

serious contradictions between the different accounts of Jesus' resurrection.⁹⁹ Second, he criticizes the anonymous writer's conviction that miracles cannot happen. For Semler, this presupposition is the heart of the unknown writer's historical criticism.¹⁰⁰

Semler repeatedly makes clear that he does not share the unknown author's Deistic presuppositions. According to Semler, miracles and divine interventions are possible. He considers the resurrection of Jesus "a supernatural event"¹⁰¹ and elaborates,

Since the times of Plato, and even before him, the resurrection of the dead has been admitted as something possible. Historical proof has even been put forward: such-and-such has come back from death to life. If Deists want to doubt this possibility, we Christians should not hinder them from so doing. But their doubt and their claim do not necessarily enter into our soul This is the distinction between Deists and another class of people who, in spite of all their insight, do not dare to give God orders and laws from down on earth. That which Deists are not willing to accept as possible is thus still possible: Jesus was able to come back to life.¹⁰²

In light of these statements by Semler, Horton Harris aptly writes that Semler "worked within a broadly theistic view of the Bible."¹⁰³ However, in light of the statements presented above, Semler had an ambivalent position concerning miracles. With regard to Semler's theology in general, Bengt Hägglund speaks of "the lack of clarity which characterized Semler's position."¹⁰⁴ This general assessment can certainly be applied to Semler's view on miracles in particular.

Reconstruction of Early Christianity

Even though Semler did not apply historical criticism to the New Testament to find out "what actually happened," it would be wrong to think that Semler did not have any interest in the historical situation of the New Testament. In fact, Semler did attempt to reconstruct the history of

⁹⁹ Semler, *Beantwortung*, 371.

¹⁰⁰ Semler, *Beantwortung*, 358.

¹⁰¹ Semler, *Beantwortung*, 274.

¹⁰² Semler, *Beantwortung*, 417.

¹⁰³ Horton Harris, *The Tübingen School: A Historical and Theological Investigation of the School of F. C. Baur*, 2nd ed (Leicester: Apollos, 1990), 249.

¹⁰⁴ Hägglund, *History*, 349.

early Christianity.¹⁰⁵ According to Semler, early Christianity was made up of two different parties, the Petrine/Jewish/Hebrew party and the Pauline/Hellenistic party.¹⁰⁶ According to Semler, these two parties had enmity for each other: “Another party, who were called Jewish-minded Christians, were public enemies of all of Paul’s writings.”¹⁰⁷ Paul, in turn, wrote his letter to the Galatians to react against “crafty undertakings of some adversaries from the Jewish party.”¹⁰⁸

Semler mentions two main differences in the teaching of these two parties: First, Paul and his party reacted against the legalism of the Jewish party.¹⁰⁹ Second, the Jewish party held views that were more primitive than those of the other party.¹¹⁰ Semler contributed immensely to New Testament historical criticism in dividing early Christianity into two parties and in assigning the New Testament writings to one of these parties: “In so doing he [Semler] not only recognizes a difference of categories within the New Testament, but for the first time as a conscious act, sets the New Testament books into the historical context of primitive Christianity and makes the individual biblical authors the object of investigation.”¹¹¹

Scholars agree that Semler’s reconstruction of early Christianity anticipated the research of Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860). Albert Schweitzer, for instance, calls Semler “the precursor of Baur in the reconstruction of primitive Christianity.”¹¹² Glashouwer and Ouweneel even go so far as to see a direct dependence of Baur’s Tübingen School on Semler’s work.¹¹³ While it is certain that Baur knew and acknowledged Semler as a

¹⁰⁵ However, in contrast to Reimarus, who pioneered in the quest for the historical Jesus, Semler never attempted a historical reconstruction of Jesus’ life.

¹⁰⁶ Schütz, *Glaubensbekenntnis*, § 6, pp. 38–39.

¹⁰⁷ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 4, p. 22.

¹⁰⁸ Semler, *Abhandlung*, § 22, p. 86.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Semler, *Abhandlung* § 20, p. 76.

¹¹⁰ Johann Salomo Semler, *Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Canon*, Vierter Theil (Halle: Carl Hermann Hemmerde, 1775), Vorrede.

¹¹¹ Kümmel, *Testament*, 67.

¹¹² Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, ed. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 2000), 25; cf. Baird, *History*, vol. 1, 126: “Anticipating the work of F.C. Baur, he [Semler] believed the early church to have been made up of two parties.”

¹¹³ Glashouwer and Ouweneel, *Ontstaan*, 151.

church historian,¹¹⁴ it is uncertain whether he took Semler's reconstruction of early Christianity as a starting point for that of his own, which was built on 1 Corinthians 1:12. In his programmatic article "The Christ Party in the Corinthian Church" (1831),¹¹⁵ Baur refers to several succeeding scholars like Storr and Grotius. Semler, however, is not mentioned.

While it is true that Semler engaged in historical study when reconstructing early Christianity, for him this reconstruction was not an end in itself. The underlying motivation was to understand the texts against the background of their historical situations. Semler's ultimate motivation in this regard, however, was to detect—and remove—the time-bound content of the New Testament.¹¹⁶

III. Conclusion

The present article has examined the contribution of the Lutheran theologian Johann Salomo Semler to historical criticism of the New Testament. Semler was a historical critic of both the canon and the content of the New Testament. His contribution certainly was greater in the first of these two areas. Here, Semler, as "the pioneer of the historical view of the canon,"¹¹⁷ argued that the canon of the New Testament is a historical phenomenon and therefore open for free, independent, and critical investigation. William Baird states: "Above all, Semler's major contribution to higher criticism is found in his thesis about the canon. If one accepts his challenge of a free investigation of the canon, this means that the authenticity of every book in the NT is open to question."¹¹⁸

When it comes to Semler's historical criticism of the *content* (i.e., of the individual books and paragraphs) of the New Testament, however, the significance of his contribution must not be overestimated. It is obvious that Semler was not interested in the historical situation of the New Testament. Instead of attempting to discover "what actually happened," he

¹¹⁴ Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Die Epochen der kirchlichen Geschichtsschreibung* (Tübingen: Ludwig Friedrich Fues, 1852), 143: "Was Semler noch ganz besonders auszeichnet, ist der unermüdlische Fleiß in der Erforschung der Quellen, worin er wohl von wenigen Kirchenhistorikern übertroffen worden ist."

¹¹⁵ Ferdinand Christian Baur, "Die Christuspartei in der korinthischen Gemeinde," in *Ausgewählte Werke in Einzelausgaben*, ed. Klaus Scholder, vol. 1, *Historisch-kritische Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament*, (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1963), 1–76.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Hornig, *Studien*, 279.

¹¹⁷ Schweitzer, *Quest*, 25.

¹¹⁸ Baird, *History*, vol. 1, 126.

even disregarded the historical information contained in the New Testament. Semler rather directed his attention to the *timeless* moral truth that he thought to find above all in the dogmatic sections of the New Testament. In light of this it would be wrong to over-emphasize Semler's historical interest (as does Kümmel¹¹⁹) and to call him the father or founder of historical criticism.¹²⁰

Even though Semler was neither a historical critic *par excellence* nor the father or founder of historical criticism,¹²¹ he did make use of historical-critical techniques. An interesting comment on the limited extent of Semler's historical criticism comes from the pen of Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752–1827): “Semler sensed the necessity of the historical interpretation without being able to carry it out to the full extent.”¹²² The historical critics of the nineteenth century who built on the canonical criticism of Semler, and who were “influenced by secular historical research”¹²³ carried out the historical-critical interpretation of the New Testament in a more stringent manner.

In accordance with the modern worldview of the eighteenth century, Semler—in an anti-Jewish manner—considered the Biblical conceptions of angels, demons, paradise, and the like to be elements of primitive mythological thinking. Jesus and the apostles accommodated to these Jewish beliefs in order to bring their new and better moral teachings across. The modern reasonable Christian, according to Semler, does not need to take into consideration these mythological elements of their teaching.

¹¹⁹ Kümmel, *Testament*, 62: “The historical interest which Semler had taken over from Baumgarten led him to interrogate from a rigorously historical point of view all religious tradition, including the New Testament.”

¹²⁰ Cf. Reventlow, *Epochen*, vol. 4, 189.

¹²¹ It is impossible to name an individual person as *the* founder of New Testament historical criticism. According to both Klaus Scholder and Eckhard Schnabel, it is more correct to consider the modern *Zeitgeist* responsible for the rise of historical criticism; cf. Scholder, *Ursprünge*, 7–10; Eckhard Schnabel, *Inspiration und Offenbarung: Die Lehre vom Ursprung und Wesen der Bibel*, 2nd ed. (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1997), 47.

¹²² Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, *Litterärsgeschichte*, Zweyte Hälfte, *Litterärsgeschichte der drey letzten Jahrhunderte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1814), 1071; my translation.

¹²³ Krentz, *Method*, 24; cf. 22–23: Krentz especially has the following works in mind: Barthold Georg Niebuhr's *Römische Geschichte* (1811–1812); Leopold von Ranke's *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Völker*, vol. 1 (1824); and Johann Gustav Droysen's *Alexander the Great* (1833).

Even though in his attitude towards miracles he was more sceptical than Hornig thinks he was, Semler was not as critical as most other historical critics of both his time (Reimarus) and later times (Strauss and Bultmann). The main reason for that was that he considered miracles possible supernatural intervention into human affairs. Semler was thus not totally inclined to the anti-supernaturalistic presuppositions that, according to Scholder, were characteristic and fundamental for historical criticism of Semler's time.

With his reconstruction of early Christianity, Semler initiated later developments of New Testament historical criticism. He demonstrated that the early Christian church was basically made up of two conflicting parties, namely, a Hebrew and a Hellenistic one. Ideas of that kind are later found in the works of both Ferdinand Christian Baur and his near namesake, Walter Bauer.

With regard to the limited scholarly attention that Semler's works have so far received, Ulrich L. Lehner recently stated, "Semler (1725–1791) was one of the most productive German theologians of the Enlightenment period, and yet he remains one of the last read due to his often-dark conceptual language and his infamous verbosity."¹²⁴ To date, scholarship on Johann Salomo Semler is, by and large, limited to German publications.

The present article might help to change this unfortunate situation. Hopefully, international theological scholarship will follow the example of the pastor's wife in Goethe's *Werther* in devoting adequate attention to the critical investigation of Semler's seminal writings.

¹²⁴ Ulrich L. Lehner, review of Marianne Schröter, *Aufklärung durch Historisierung: Johann Salomo Semlers Hermeneutik des Christentums* (Berlin, 2012), in *Theological Studies* 73, no. 4 (2012): 977.