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New Testament Studies, Past and Present

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# New Testament Studies, Past and Present

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The pastor who picks up a recent New Testament introduction or theology, a study of the Synoptic Gospels or Acts, or a history of New Testament times may well feel that for him the study of the New Testament has become an arcane and esoteric discipline. The questions asked about the *Redaktionsgeschichte* of a Gospel, the surprising frequency with which the term *gnosis* or Gnosticism appears in current literature, or the discussion in many circles of "incipient catholicism" may well lead him to suspect that the whole discipline has now changed.

Yet the present methods, concerns, and objectives in New Testament studies have not sprung full-blown from the forehead of Zeus upon the plain of theological studies. The questions currently asked, the positions assumed, the "schools of thought,"

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*This article continues the series of presentations titled "Reading Programs in Theology" offered under the sponsorship of the Department of Continuing Education of Concordia Seminary. The series is designed to provide reading courses in various areas of theology, offering brief introductions to limited fields of theological study together with a recommended bibliography for further study by individuals or groups. Enrollees are entitled to purchase the books discussed in these articles at a discount price through the Seminary Store. For additional information, interested persons may contact Prof. Robert Conrad, Director of Continuing Education. A new course will appear each quarter. The accompanying study guide in the area of New Testament studies was prepared by Edgar Krentz, professor of exegetical theology at Concordia Seminary.*

and the methods used are all the product of a history that goes back at least to the Reformation. Some knowledge of that history is necessary, for example, even to read a modern commentary with intelligence and discernment. The purpose of this short introduction to the history of New Testament criticism is to provide the background for an appreciation of modern Biblical studies.

The history of interpretation since the Reformation is conveniently divided into six periods, each characterized by its own problems and interests.

## I. THE REFORMATION PERIOD

(1517—1550)

The Reformers struggled to free the voice of the Gospel from the tyranny of tradition and the bondage of ecclesiastical interpretation. The *solus Christus*, which was the center of their thought, made necessary an emphasis on *sola scriptura*. Luther's *Commentary on Galatians* (*American Edition*, Vols. 26, 27) sounded a rousing call for the freedom of the Gospel from all encumbrances and exemplified the interpretation of the Scriptures from the vantage point of the Gospel. Luther insisted that the single sense of Scripture, the literal sense, must be supreme. Calvin, too, was concerned with this *sensus literalis*. What Luther proclaimed with the fire of genius, Calvin determined by the methods of careful, diligent, scholarly exegesis.

As one studies this period, one soon recognizes that Luther's concern for and emphasis on the Gospel as central to exegesis

and hermeneutics gave him a certain blithe freedom in his approach to Scripture. "Was Christum treibet" became for him a criterion from which he could express strictures on James, Jude, Hebrews, and the Apocalypse in his prefaces to New Testament Books (*American Edition*, Vol. 35). In his *Theses on Faith* of 1535, Luther still maintained this Christocentric view: "If our adversaries urge Scripture against Christ, then we will urge Christ against the Scriptures." The Lutheran Confessions continue this insistence on the centrality of the Gospel as a key to the understanding of the Scriptures (Ap IV).

For this period one should read the treatment in the general histories of interpretation, Pelikan's introductory volume to the American edition, and the famous essay by Karl Holl (full titles in the appended bibliography). It would be even more helpful to read Luther's Galatians commentary, his prefaces to the New Testament books, and W. G. Kümmel's article on them in the *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*.

## II. FROM THE REFORMATION TO THE RISE OF HISTORICISM

(1550—1820)

The Reformers had not been in sharp controversy with their Catholic opponents on many aspects of the Scriptures. Soon they were to find themselves jointly opposing what appeared to be a series of attacks on the Scriptures and their meaning. Threats arose both from emerging science and the development of philosophy.

On the one hand Copernicus' theory that the sun was the center of celestial motion rather than the earth seemed to call into question certain statements of the Scripture (Luther himself made one direct

refutation of Copernicus in his table conversation of 1539). The Lutheran Andreas Osiander seemed to allow this view to stand as a physical theory. Copernicus was followed by Galileo and Kepler, the latter persecuted by Lutherans as the former was by Catholics.

This scientific revolution was paralleled by an expanding knowledge of geography and ancient history that called the geographic knowledge of the Bible into question for many while the chronological data of the Bible were for the first time in centuries questioned on the basis of secular historical data.

Such isolated historical and scientific questions were generalized into methodological inquiries by Rene Descartes' *Discourse on Method* (1637) and *Principia philosophica* (1644) which introduced the principle of doubt into rational thought. From that point on the names of Spinoza, Newton, Hobbes, Lessing, and Semler mark the sequence that leads more and more to an emphasis on what is rational and timeless. In this period of the Enlightenment, history became less and less a vehicle of objective truth; many held that the timeless, rational, generally valid truths must be abstracted from history, which is *per definitionem* nationalistic, narrow, specific, and biased.

Students of this period in the history of interpretation should pay attention to the general trend of philosophic and scientific thought and the constant feuds among theologians. They should note how theology was almost always on the defensive. Volumes that will be of great aid are Klaus Scholder on the 17th century (there is no adequate English volume) and Richardson for the 18th.

### III. THE RISE OF HISTORICISM

(1820—ca. 1890)

Lessing had argued that accidental truths of history could not establish the necessary truths of reason. This basic thought of the Enlightenment found two radically different answers in the 19th century. On the one hand Schleiermacher, a man who was both rational and romantic, countered rationalism's emphasis on reason by a theology based on experience. His theology was thus an attack on the very presupposition of rationalism. It was, in a sense, the direct forerunner of the existential schools of the present time. In England it was represented by Coleridge.

The other answer was more influential in the course of Biblical studies in the 19th century. It attacked the idea that truth can be known apart from a particular historical form. Such scholars as D. F. Strauss, M. L. De Wette, H. Ewald, and especially Ferdinand Christian Baur in Germany, Benjamin Jowett, Frederick Temple, and (in a restricted sense) the great Cambridge trio of Lightfoot, Westcott, and Hort in England recognized the necessity of the historical dimension in Biblical studies. At the same time the science of history was developing into a critical discipline. Georg Bartold Niebuhr wrote an epoch-making history of Rome, von Ranke formulated the goal of historical research as the determination of "wie es eigentlich gewesen," and the methods were soon used in theological studies.

The result was a critical attitude in the study of the New Testament and its history. The quest of the historical Jesus, the playing off of Paul against Jesus, the critical verdicts on the authenticity of various

New Testament books, are all characteristic of this era. The New Testament itself became a part of church history, and revelation was lost in the historical. The kerygma was overlooked. When this was combined with a strongly optimistic view of man, it led to liberalism, with its emphasis on personalities (history become biography) and ethics. Only the historical is true; since the transcendent is not subject to historical inquiry, Biblical scholars turned into "history of religions" men.

It should, perhaps, be emphasized that there were some positive contributions made by this development. The historians have great respect for sources; it was natural that the foundations of the textual criticism of the New Testament should take place in this era. One of the foundation stones of the study of the Gospels, the two-source theory of Synoptic relationships, comes out of this era. Textual work demands careful philological inquiry. It was this century that laid the foundations of comparative philology; the methods of this discipline were to eventuate in lexica, grammars, concordances and the synopses of the Gospels, which are still today the basis of all Biblical studies in depth.

For this period, one will find the works of Neill, Smart, Braaten, and the source material of Kümmel of great value.

### IV. THE AGE OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION

(ca. 1890—1920)

The dangers in historicism (the emphasis on the verifiable as the only truth, which resulted in the concentration on individuals and ethics) led to a reading of the New Testament as though it were a description of a 19th-century German (or English) idealistic gentleman. Uncon-

sciously, Jesus, Paul, and the company of the apostles were modernized. This interpretation of the New Testament received two hammer blows to the head when Johannes Weiss in *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* (1892) showed that Jesus' preaching was dominated by concepts and terms that must be understood in terms of apocalyptic eschatology, while Albert Schweitzer's *Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906) showed the inadequacies of the 19th-century lives of Jesus.

At the same time the papyri from Egypt were calling attention to the fact that the language of the New Testament was the Koine of the Hellenistic world. G. Adolf Deissmann and R. Reitzenstein were studying the piety of the ancient mystery religions as parallels to Pauline thought. Other scholars were finding Stoic, or Iranian, or Jewish traits in the New Testament. Wilhelm Bousset (*Kyrios Christos*) and R. Reitzenstein called attention to the ancient "gnostic" parallels to Pauline thought. Meanwhile G. Dalman and Adolf Schlatter were mining the riches of Rabbinic Judaism.

But the emphasis that gained the ascendancy, at least in continental studies, was that of mystery-religion piety and gnosis. The New Testament in the hands of the members of the school of comparative religions was turned into a document of general religious history. In reacting against the modernizing of historicism, this school went to the other extreme. The New Testament was in danger of being dissolved into a mere selection of earlier and/or contemporary religious thought. There was no real "New" left in the New Testament. Jesus became for Bousset the cultic god of another Eastern mystery reli-

gion, and theology was turned into the history of the religious streams that influence the New Testament. The unity of the New Testament was lost; the New Testament became purely the object of historical research.

One will find good descriptions in Grant, Neill, and above all in Kümmel.

#### V. THE DEATH OF OPTIMISM AND THE REBIRTH OF THEOLOGY

(1920—1945)

As we move closer to our own time, it becomes a bit more difficult to summarize the many men and movements that have played decisive roles. Suffice it to say that the years immediately after World War I saw two significant developments that could not have been predicted. In the first place, the necessity of a more theological and less historical approach to the Scriptures was made clear by Karl Barth's *Commentary on Romans* (1918), a book that burst like a bomb on the theological world. It was supported by the development of form-criticism, which (as one scholar has put it) looked for the historical Jesus and found early Christian preaching. Quite apart from the validity of form-criticism as a tool in recovering the historical Jesus, it did remind scholars that no interpretation of the New Testament that did not do justice to its character as preaching, as address, as Word of God, was valid and *sachgemäß*.

A second development made this clear. In 1922 Paul Billerbeck published the first of four massive volumes under the title *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*. At one blow this parish pastor had changed the whole question of comparative religion; from that

time on every New Testament scholar has begun with the world of Judaism and interpreted Jesus, Paul, and the rest from there out. (At the same time, many commentaries written before that date were put out of date!)

These two developments came together in a massive work that is still in progress, the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, begun under the editorship of G. Kittel in 1933.

Meanwhile two schools of interpretation were developing that are too involved to be described here. As one reads, he should watch for the existential interpretation of R. Bultmann and the *Heilsgeschichte* of O. Cullmann. Both stand for much broader schools of interpretation.

## VI. BIBLICAL STUDIES TODAY

(1945—)

The 20 years since World War II have seen major developments in New Testament studies, some valuable, some bizarre, all interesting. Major manuscript discoveries at the Dead Sea (Jewish) and in Chenoboskion (Gnostic) have opened eyes to new possibilities in the realm of comparative studies. The death of the old quest of the historical Jesus has been balanced by a New Quest, taken up by the Bultmann School. Form-criticism tended to strip off later elements in the Gospels and regard them as useless. Today redaction-criticism uses these very elements to describe the theological emphases of each of the Synoptic authors.

Rudolf Bultmann's plea for demythologizing has led to a renewed interest in hermeneutics on the one hand and to a new interest in history as a medium of revelation on the other (Pannenberg,

Barr). Where earlier scholars were sure that Gnosis was a well-known and easily identifiable entity, today scholars are less sure than they once were (Colpe, Schenke). A Scot trumpets that computer analysis has shown all but a few letters of the Pauline corpus to be deutero-Pauline; his blast makes newspaper copy and the news magazines, but scarcely ripples the world of New Testament scholarship.

Today scholars are more interested in describing the history of the first century church. "Incipient Catholicism" has become a catchword for this study. Interest has been awakened in a way not characteristic of scholarship before the war in the origin of the New Testament canon. The nature and function of Biblical theology is a burning issue.

In order to understand this and the last section, the reader is directed to the books by Fuller, Richardson, Neill and the present writer.

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*Theologie. Der Stand der Forschung* (München: Kösel Verlag, 1963) is more complete.

NOTE: No attention has been paid to the history of New Testament Studies in the Roman Catholic Church. For those interested in the present state, a short bibliography of authoritative documents is appended.

#### RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN ROMAN CATHOLIC NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES

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