Beyond New Testament Theology

A story and a programme

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Introduction

New Testament study is not an end in itself. It is pursued for the sake of some more comprehensive enterprise, although different opinions are possible as to what that enterprise should be. For some, presumably the majority of those interested in such matters, New Testament scholarship should serve the ends of Christian theology and education. For others, its ultimate goal might be the elucidation of the role of religion in our culture. Whatever the particular motivation, there is a pressing need for synthesizing accounts of the religious or theological contents of the New Testament and related literature in the light of modern scholarship. Traditionally such accounts have mostly been called ‘New Testament theologies’.

Synthesizing accounts are particularly needed to provide orientation to those who are not experts in the field. There are many potential users of New Testament scholarship. The systematic and the practical theologian, the historian or phenomenologist of religion, the minister and the priest, the lay person (religious or non-religious) reflecting on questions of world-view and values – each of these groups of people (and others could be added) needs a solid synthesis of what exegetes have discovered as material for their own reflections and constructions.

There is often a gap in content between monographs and syntheses in that many of the more recent exegetical findings have not found their way into the latter. But there is another, more serious gap as well. There is an almost incomprehensible mental distance between the bulk of special studies and New Testament theologies. The latter seem to inhabit a different world.
Special studies on the New Testament and early Christianity are quite often conducted in a detached, descriptive, history-of-religions or literary-critical atmosphere.\(^1\) Value-laden theological categories such as ‘revelation’ or ‘inspiration’ are seldom used at this level. Considerable theological diversity within the New Testament is taken for granted, and no attempt is made at harmonizing the differences. Biblical ideas are discussed without any sense of obligation to show how they may or may not be relevant to modern men and women in their situation.

All this changes abruptly when one turns from monographs to New Testament theologies or, for that matter, when general statements are made on the purpose of New Testament study. The landscape is no longer historical, but overtly theological. We hear a good deal of God revealing himself definitively in Christ and speaking to us through the New Testament texts. Some diversity in the texts is admitted (often reluctantly), but the authors are at pains to show that behind the diversity there nevertheless lies a theological unity. They also make an effort to make the texts speak to modern men and women in their present situation (unless they content themselves with the simple affirmation that such a contemporary appeal is what the texts are all about).

Now it might be argued that it is the *raison d’être* of synthesizing accounts to deal with such issues; that is why they are different from monographs. Nor am I in principle opposed to all attempts at reading ancient texts with modern questions also in mind. The trouble is that many New Testament theologies bear witness to a mental distance from everyday exegesis, to a gap that they never even attempt to bridge. It seems as if the author of such a theology would have to deny at the outset the existence of a number of problems which confront any exegete in his or her daily work. The existence of an underlying theological unity in the New Testament is postulated rather than argued. The applicability of at least what are regarded as the central texts to modern situations is taken for granted. Divine revelation is spoken of as if its existence were self-evident. The recourse to theistic God-talk (not just on a descriptive level) is a matter of course.

This is admittedly a somewhat one-sided picture, but I will be concerned to show later on in this book that it is not spun out of thin air. A gap does exist (although some laudable exceptions from recent years will be presented in Part Three). Occasionally it seems to exist in the minds of scholars themselves. An acute analyst turns into a pious preacher when faced with the task of synthesis. (This situation is even more obvious in the field of ‘Old Testament theology’.)\(^2\)

Any potential author of a synthesis is faced with a host of problems of principle and method. What exactly should be treated in a synthesis, and from what point of view? To whom should it be addressed? What should be the relation of the author to his or her subject? What kind of attitude should he adopt to theological and ecclesial tradition? What is a meaningful way to organize and emphasize the material?

Not enough energy has been devoted to the resolution of such issues. There have been some laudable recent efforts here, in particular by Robert Morgan and Hendrikus Boers (see the bibliography), but these have not received the amount of discussion they deserve among the guild. It is my aim to call attention to these problems once more.

A reasonable way to tackle the issues is to analyse the history of New Testament theology as a discipline from a methodological perspective.\(^3\) This venture includes a survey of both the actual business of constructing a synthesis and the methodological discussions of how one should go about the job. The first part of this book attempts to sort out the most important features of that story. It goes without saying that I have inevitably concentrated on questions of principle, method and structure. The actual contents of the various works are presented very briefly, and others making a similar survey would surely have chosen the aspects worth mentioning somewhat differently. Many issues which are in themselves very important (for instance, the extent of pagan Hellenistic influences on early Christianity) are not discussed at all.

All history is a matter of perspective, and my account of the development of the discipline may be taken as a case in point. I have been deliberately selective, highlighting such points as seem important from my own present standpoint (though that is hardly
Beyond New Testament Theology

idiosyncratic. So I have paid special attention to the existence (or non-existence) of the following features in the works discussed:

1. Awareness of the problems involved in relating historical study to theology.
3. Awareness of the cultural gap between modernity and antiquity and, consequently, of the peril of modernization.
4. As a particularly important aspect of the former, recognition of the centrality of futurist eschatology in large parts of the New Testament, not least in the message of the historical Jesus.
5. Recognition of the necessity to study the New Testament in a broad context of political, social and religious history.
7. Willingness also to admit the existence of problematic claims, arguments and standpoints in New Testament texts.
8. Some concern for a fair presentation of competing traditions, notably Judaism.

A presentation from, say, a more ecclesial standpoint would have taken a different shape (as the numerous recent discussions of a ‘biblical theology’ designed to cover both Testaments amply testify). For instance, I have given relatively little space to Adolf Schlatter or even to Karl Barth. From my perspective, the exegetical merits of these spiritual masters do not justify the amount of attention often paid to them in connection with ‘New Testament theology’. By contrast, I have wished to call attention to the merits of some more neglected figures in the field.

I shall devote a fair amount of space to discussing synthesizing works (and programmatic articles) from the turn of the century. The liberal classic of H. J. Holtzmann and the history-of-religions attempts of Wrede, Weiss, Weinel, Bousset, Wernle and Kaftan will receive a good deal of attention – more so than many of their latter-day competitors. This is by no means for the sake of antiquarian completeness. I have not sought to build up a museum of exegesis. In fact I have virtually ignored some contemporaries of those I have just mentioned (such as B. Weiss and W. Beyschlag)

who might have had a claim to more attention had I wished to give a rounded picture of the currents of the age as a whole. On the contrary, it is my contention that the works of the said scholars contain insights which have been either ignored or unjustly rejected in subsequent New Testament interpretation. My personal experience is that, for all their shortcomings, the theological syntheses of Weinel or Wernle make more refreshing reading than most modern instances of the genre since Bultmann.

I would argue that New Testament scholarship made a fatal mistake when, in the aftermath of the First World War, it turned its back on the liberals and the history-of-religions school and succumbed to the rhetorical-theological appeal of dialectical theology. There is, of course, no point in repristinating the ideas of a century-old school of thought as such. Nevertheless, there is much of value in those old works which has been ignored, or ridiculed, to the detriment of present scholarship. One such feature is the unbending critical candour of those older scholars, manifest for instance in their discussions of Pauline theology (an area sacrosanct even to many modern perpetuators of the liberal legacy); another is their willingness to assess religious and theological ideas as secondary theories devised to interpret underlying experiences (although they conceived of the nature of these experiences in a one-sided way).

The story I shall try to unfold runs something like this. Two centuries ago, Gabler made a helpful theoretical distinction between historical and theological interpretation of the Bible, assigning the two tasks to two different stages of work. Praise has been lavished on Gabler ever since, but his advice has not been followed. Strauss made a heroic attempt, basically in Gablerian vein, to divorce theology from history. It may have been the radical nature of Strauss’s enterprise, too shocking to be palatable at the time, that led New Testament scholars away from Gabler’s proposal. Baur and the liberals (the greatest of whom in our field was Holtzmann) fused history and theology together. Baur tried to interpret the total process of history as the revelation of the Spirit; the liberals singled out the (critically established) kernel of Jesus’ message as the permanently valid religious and theological norm.
Wrede made a lucid distinction between history and theology, assigning only the former to the domain of the exegete. Unfortunately, he died early, and his proposal was not followed up even among the members of the history-of-religions ‘school’, whose spokesman he was. Although most of early Christianity was described historically by the history-of-religions scholars, the message of Jesus (interpreted in terms of liberal theology) was still conceived of as a theological norm by which everything else was gauged.

Wrede’s proposal was not followed, since the urge of exegetes to act as theologians as well was too deep-seated. In the wake of dialectical theology, New Testament exegesis gave in to the neo-orthodox appeal of Barth. Bultmann made a gigantic attempt to bind the history of religions and theology together. He achieved his goal by a tour-de-force: in effect, he limited New Testament theology to the theology of Paul and John (both interpreted in existentialist terms). This move, however, freed him to examine the rest of the material in more objective history-of-religions terms. Until the 1980s, all that happened in the field of New Testament theology remained in the shadow of Bultmann. His pupils tried to mediate the legacy of the master to new generations. Others tried unrealistically to resist Bultmann’s influence by describing New Testament thought as in itself normative, as if no problem of application existed. Yet others have tried to single out the normative elements of the New Testament in the course of an allegedly historical presentation. All in all, it is hard to evaluate the development of the discipline until quite recently except as an anti-climax to Bultmann’s work.

Before the 1990s, nobody had realized Wrede’s vision. Even more startling is the fact that, except for some theoretical statements, Gabler’s idea of distinguishing between historical and theological stages of work has been abandoned as well. However, some attention had again come to be paid to certain central concerns of the liberal exegetes and the history-of-religions school. This had happened in related areas of study rather than in ‘New Testament theology’ proper, but it was clear that the new concerns would be pertinent to the future of the latter.

Thus, the existence of theological diversity in the New Testament documents was taken more seriously than it often was (Dunn). The demand that the New Testament canon should be dismissed altogether in historical study was revived in the area of ‘New Testament introduction’, given great dramatic effect by the discoveries in Nag Hammadi (Koester). The claim was also raised that exegesis should become a public critical science which serves instruction and information in society rather than the proclamation of the church (Petzke). Finally, after so many decades of contempt on the part of the neo-orthodox, attention is again being paid to the religious experiences reflected in the texts (Johnson).

All these concerns have been developed during the 1990s. The last decade even saw the first programmatic attempts to carry out Wrede’s vision (an account of early Christian religion instead of New Testament theology). In the final part of this book I shall try to buttress and refine this programme. I join those exegetes who have recently drawn on the sociology of knowledge as developed and applied to the study of religion by Peter Berger in particular. Berger’s (and Thomas Luckmann’s) concept of the ‘symbolic universe’ seems extremely helpful, along with Berger’s emphasis on the dialectic between experience and interpretation. However, I shall maintain that ‘experience’ is to be understood in a much wider sense than it is by Berger, who restricts himself to mystical ‘core’ experiences.

The bulk of Part Four deals with the principles and approaches of a historical interpretation of early Christian thought. A final chapter hints at the possibility, indeed necessity, that exegetes should also engage in a theological (or philosophical, or some other type of critically contemporizing) interpretation of their historical work. The chapter is brief, for the chances of an exegete contributing qua exegete to the philosophical-theological quest are, in my view, far more limited than one would guess from reading New Testament theologies. It is quite impossible to build a theology on the Bible alone. Apart from the other theological disciplines, there are immense other areas that responsible theology must take into account, including history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology and comparative religion. What role the Bible ought to play in a
creative theological construction, and how, is not for the biblical scholar to stipulate. What he can do is above all to analyse the ways in which the Bible has been treated in religion, theology and society and relate his findings to what can be said about the original meaning of the relevant passages. This may seem much less than most of us have been accustomed to. And yet precisely this latter task would seem to open up quite new vistas of fruitful research and dialogue.

To summarize the thesis. ‘New Testament theology’ may be a legitimate part of self-consciously ecclesial theology. By contrast, those of us who work in a broader academic context might want to abandon such an enterprise (and, a fortiori, any dreams of a ‘pan-biblical theology’ which would cover both Testaments). More precisely, ‘New Testament theology’ could be replaced, in this context, with two different projects: first, the ‘history of early Christian thought’ (or theology, if you like), evolving in the context of early Judaism; second, critical philosophical, ethical and/or theological ‘reflection on the New Testament’, as well as on its influence on our history and its significance for contemporary life.

My contention is not that these two tasks ought to be carried out separately, the one first and the other afterwards; that does not seem to be the way the human mind works. Nonetheless, the two tasks ought to be kept distinct. The peril of modernizing the past should be resisted even in an era that likes to think of itself as ‘postmodern’.
In recent years much has happened. ‘New Testament Theology’ is experiencing a time of revival. The concern to ‘pursue scriptural interpretation as theology’ is alive and well among contemporary exegetes. Now as before, the gap between ‘everyday exegesis’ and programmatic statements is often obvious. Thus, Martin Hengel writes: ‘Our discipline would destroy itself, if it . . . gave up the quest for the truth of the revealed word of God and turned into a mere descriptive history of religion, in which this question must no longer be asked. Here is the salt that gives our work its value and right of existence.’ Ironically, this religious concern is not palpable in Hengel’s own great works, which can without problems be counted as history of religion (‘mere’ history of religion, if you like). A certain historical conservatism, even if spiced with exaggerated criticisms of other scholars, is hardly sufficient to turn Hengel’s books on Judaism and Hellenism, Paul, or the Johannine question into treatises of God’s truth.

A. K. M. Adam recommends a turn away from history altogether. ‘New Testament theology need not be founded on warrants derived from historical-critical reasoning.’ ‘The perceived necessity of historical foundations’ only grows, he claims, ‘from the cultural situation of modernity’ (1995, 1) and the social constraints on the scholar; ignoring historical criticism would go against ‘the scholarly etiquette’ and prevent one from gaining a hearing in the guild (204). However, modernity is caricatured by Adam. The assertion that ‘the modern scholar will strive always to acknowledge the most recent works’ (12) does not exactly fit a
programme like mine which takes its cue from a work which appeared in 1897, or from a school of thought which flourished before 1914. 3

Adam does not mention the fact that Christians have (long before the time of 'modernity') stressed that precisely their faith rests firmly on the foundation of historical events. That is why even modern scholars have kept an interest in religious history, and why it is difficult to regard historical questions as entirely irrelevant to New Testament theology. 4 Adam complains that historical scholarship is 'elitist', witness the fact that his 'Aunt Isabel's interpretations are simply excluded' (146). Awful, isn't it?

Adam conceives New Testament theology entirely from a church perspective as the perpetuation of the New Testament traditions. We may think of it as a variety of family trades, handed down from generation to generation of the disciples of Jesus' (5). In the last analysis, he seems to understand by New Testament theology roughly what I would refer to a second stage of work: theological reflection on the New Testament. It is another matter that his reflection will differ vastly from mine.

A more vehement attack against the guild of biblical scholars is mounted by Francis Watson. He starts out, without further ado, from the assertion that Christianity possesses the truth in the incarnate Word, mediated through texts (1997, 1). The impact of the historical-critical method is 'notoriously destructive' (4), and this is true of the more recent narrative paradigm as well (9). This is an intriguing accusation, as it comes from a scholar whose 1986 dissertation was an excellent piece of historical-critical research, from a sociological perspective, on Paul's relation to Judaism; 5 this book still takes an eminent place in the debates on Paul and the law. It is unfortunate that Watson in his polemic omits to comment on his own youthful sin. For me, this conversion to dogmatism of a brilliant scholar is one of the greatest disappointments (and mysteries) in the recent history of the field.

Watson claims that the whole Bible is to be treated as a christocentric book; Justin Martyr was on the right track in his hermeneutics. Both testaments are best interpreted from the point of view of classic systematic theology. A specialized 'biblical theology' that is not 'coextensive with Christian theology as a whole' is needed only for pragmatic reasons (2). Watson's conception resembles that of the Greek Orthodox church, though the central position of the book reminds one of its Protestant background. 6

For all their strangeness, Watson’s recent publications serve to clarify a basic methodological issue. If you refuse to take a history-of-religion approach and want instead to construct a self-consciously Christian biblical theology, this is the logical outcome: the whole Bible is to be read from a patristic perspective, for it was in a patristic atmosphere that the canon was created. This is as Christian (in a traditional sense) as it can get. Yet those who plead for a Christian biblical theology have in general refrained from so strict a logic.

A diametrically opposed position is taken by Gerd Lüdemann. He castigates the 'clericalization' of biblical research, the assumption that theology is a 'discipline of the church', and the concentration of scholars on the 'theological meaning' of the texts (1996, 4f.). Following Franz Overbeck (and in agreement with Wrede's programme) he pleads for a 'profane church history' (8). Lüdemann's concern is 'to humanize the history of earliest Christianity so that present-day contemporaries can recognize themselves in the mighty' process of the earliest history of Christianity - in the conflicts, anxieties, longings and dreams of the people of the time' (6). Such a programme cannot be rejected (or praised, for that matter) as 'merely descriptive'. It is a question of an overall view which always demands a great deal of constructive imagination. The crucial question is: from what perspective is the picture drawn?

However, I do not quite understand why this 'mighty process' which, of course, includes enormous reinterpretations, should be branded as 'deception', as Lüdemann (1998) has recently done. Here he seems himself to have glided from history of religions into 'theology', albeit a theology with reversed premises. But of course even a negative evaluation of the tradition must be allowed on the second stage of work, if it does not distort the historical interpretation.
A middle course is adopted by the Hungarian scholar Peter Balla, who has devoted a dissertation to the ‘challenge’ of Wrede and myself. He pleads for a distinction between history and theology, and for a historical approach in New Testament theology. He defines ‘theology’ in this context as the theology found in the New Testament in a wide sense, which includes experiences and religious ‘actions’ (21). But unlike Wrede, Balla tries to justify, even in the framework of an historical approach, a procedure which limits itself to the canon. He regards this as legitimate, but only because he thinks that the New Testament writings contain a unitary theology. In making this assumption, Balla puts himself in a very difficult position. Reversing a dictum by Wrede, he claims that the New Testament authors wrote with ‘canonical awareness’ (101). To uphold this claim, Balla has to resort to deductive arguments and awkward harmonization. He even asserts (quoting his teacher, J. C. O’Neill) that the evangelists could hardly have fundamentally changed or thoroughly modified one another’s works (180). ‘Curses and warnings against changing any of the words of sacred books’ (cf. Rev 22.18f.) ‘may have been also the rules the evangelists and their predecessors were most likely to have followed’ (O’Neill). This, however, flies in the face of all evidence.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza passionately advocates a ‘rhetorical-emancipatory’ approach as opposed to what she conceives as the positivistic scientific paradigm. Biblical theology ought to be ‘reconceptualized in rhetorical terms’ (1999, 177). The task would not only be ‘descriptive-analytic’ but also ‘hermeneutic, ideology-critical, evaluative and theological’ (191). Both biblical texts and the interpretative practices are to be subjected to critical analysis, the final goal being social justice and the well-being of all. One must agree that all these tasks are important, even if one may hesitate to include all of them among the basic tasks of a biblical scholar. It is hardly feasible to try to obligate a whole discipline to the ethical-political task of bringing about justice, though I would like to see as many individual scholars as possible committed to it.

What I dislike about Schüssler Fiorenza’s programme is her way of characterizing the other side: I can only deem her picture of the reigning ‘positivistic’ paradigm a caricature. How many historical-critical scholars really claim ‘certainty’ for their interpretations (35), strive to establish ‘a single true meaning’ of a text (41) or think that they can ‘tell the simple truth’ (42)? To use texts as ‘windows to the world’ or ‘as mirrors of the past’ by no means implies that one must read them as ‘objective data’ (52). According to Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘in the scientific positivistic paradigm research methods are understood as rules and regulations’, whereas in the ethical-rhetorical paradigm they are seen ‘as modes of inquiry, as questions to be asked, and as perspectives to be clarified’ (68). I had always thought that the historical method consisted precisely of questions and perspectives. And if scholars identify with Paul’s arguments in order to claim Paul’s authority for themselves (185) – which too many undeniably do – this is not a fault of the historical method, but of people who are not critical enough in their historical criticism. Liberal and history-of-religion exegetes of the nineteenth and early twentieth century did better on this score. Schüssler Fiorenza is also justified in criticizing ‘the majority of scholars’ for understanding canonical voices as right and true but vilifying ‘their submerged alternative arguments as false and heretical’ (182). But again the fault lies not with the paradigm but with the inadequate use made of it by many scholars. On the other hand, Schüssler Fiorenza herself seems to fall into the same pit in her emancipatory reading of Revelation (see below, 169).
Historical Interpretation: Principles

(a) The addressees

Some of the most important choices facing anyone who plans a synthesis of the religious contents of the New Testament are the questions: Whom is the synthesis supposed to serve? Who are its hoped-for ‘consumers’? Am I speaking primarily to fellow scholars (the ‘academy’), to the church (‘the church’ here refers to any Christian denominations which have accepted critical exegesis to some degree) or to a wider audience? Ultimately, the options are reduced to two, for although in practice fellow scholars are often the first audience, addressing them can hardly be taken as the final goal. Behind them, either a church or a secular community is discernible as the audience to which the message, directed in a more technical dress to colleagues, can be communicated in simpler terms.

Most often New Testament theology has been understood to be ultimately a function of the church. This function is still taken for granted e.g. in a recent introduction to exegetical methods in which the statement is made: ‘The application of historical-critical methods to the New Testament . . . has as its ultimate goal the believing appropriation and actualization (of the text) in the proclamation of the church.’ Even relatively radical exegetes who have encountered much opposition from their churches have wanted to work in a church context (J. Weiss, Bultmann, Conzelmann, Käsemann). Wrede’s idea that historical exegesis should not look beyond itself, that ‘New Testament theology has its goal simply in itself’ (69), has not had much response lately. While specialists increasingly work without necessarily paying any
attention at all to theological questions in the strict sense, most
syntheses and most of the reflection on principles connected with
them – or even short general statements on what the discipline is
all about – have been governed by the conviction that New
Testament study has an ecclesial-theological task. Here a remark-
able hiatus between special studies and the syntheses makes itself
felt. Synthesizing seems to possess a philosophy of its own, dis-

tinct from that which governs monograph production.

Ernst Käsemann, in his programmatic essay, wrote that

there can be no separation between learning and life. No one can
work in a vacuum . . . each discipline is continually being asked
whether it enriches our own experience and is of use to others
. . . Scientific thought will always have some connection with
practice, albeit in varying degrees . . . (236)

So far, so good. But then, with astonishing ease, ‘life’ is simply
narrowed down to ‘Christian life’ or ‘life in the church’:

So too the history and exegesis of the New Testament, whether
we like it or not, exercise a function in the life of the Church and
relate to the community within which Christians live . . . were
my work of no possible help to (Dom Helder Camara) in his
troubles, I would not want to remain a New Testament scholar.
No real service is rendered to the Spirit by one who is unable to
assist men under trial. New Testament theology gives an over-
all direction to all specialist skill and puts this discipline of ours,
whatever the tensions, in relation to the Church. Without this
relation the discipline loses its distinctive character, its concrete
roots, and it ceases to be indispensable and binding.

Is there then no life extra ecclesiam in Western ‘post-Christian’
societies? One may well agree with Käsemann in his contention
that learning must not be separated from life. But ‘life’ can – and
should – be understood in much wider terms even when one is
talking about the Bible. It is true that the roots of the exegetical
discipline are in the church (but so are those of almost any Western

branch of scholarship). Certainly, if one wants to do ‘binding’
research, as Käsemann puts it, one should address the church –
although one may find that that particular addressee is very reluc-
tant to let herself be ‘bound’ by critical exegesis.6 But concern for
life does not in itself necessarily lead a scholar to an ecclesial path.

It seems natural to take a broader view if one is free to choose
one’s course, that is, if one is not financially dependent on accep-
tance by church authorities or, more subtly, tied to an academic
programme exclusively committed to the education of clergy.
Regarding the latter point compare Morgan’s comment: ‘Until
recently most biblical scholars have taught in contexts which
required them to relate their rational work to the faith of their reli-
gious communities. This remains the case in German and Swiss
university theological faculties geared to ministerial training, but
elsewhere is now less common.’7 It is one of Morgan’s main points
that this change of working milieu, due for instance to the estab-
ishment of Departments of Religion in the USA in secular uni-
versities which have no institutional relationship to the churches,8
has profoundly affected the nature of biblical studies, bringing
about their far-reaching secularization. That next to nothing of
this is to be seen in the context of ‘New Testament theology’ is no
doubt related to the fact that the latter is very much a German (and
Swiss) affair. But it must not be forgotten that the foundation for
an alternative vision was also laid in Germany (Wrede and the
history-of-religions school).

Exegesis, as well as social sciences or medical science, can be
pursued with the aim of providing people with means of coping
with life – in this case, with their cultural and religious heritage.
Their commitment to serving a church is – to exaggerate only slightly – comparable to a social scientist’s or a historian’s con-
fining himself to serve a certain political party (or a certain nation)
with his research. It is hard to see much difference in principle
between a historian committed to a party and an exegete com-
mitted to a church. In both cases a broader perspective seems
desirable. A synthesis directed to the wider society, to people
interested in the findings of New Testament study independently
of their relationship to a church, seems preferable to a church-
orientated way of conceiving the task. In the context of a state university such a solution is especially natural. This decision has, of course, nothing to do with a desire to legitimize the existing social order of the society. Self-evidently, ‘serving’ means critical services. Of course, abandonment of a church orientation in itself by no means guarantees that one’s research is not affected by pressure from the outside. It is perfectly possible that it will be vitiates by political or commercial or even by ideologically anti-religious influences and that these influences will be even more harmful than church ones would have been. Whatever his frame of reference, the scholar must be on his guard to preserve his independence.9

The point that in a post-Christian society exegesis should be orientated on the concerns of society rather than those of the church has been made forcefully by Gerd Petzke (above, p. 103).10 But this starting-point also resembles that of Wrede, with a slight modification. Wrede pointed out that it is not possible for an exegete to serve the church in particular even if he would like to do so. For obviously he cannot change any of his results in accordance with some wishes of the church. On the other hand, contrary to Wrede, it is possible to take even church interests into account without jeopardizing strictly scholarly methodology, when asking questions and choosing tasks (consider Luke Johnson’s enterprise: above, p. 107). While I am personally quite happy to engage now and then in applied studies in a church context11 (which in principle I deem comparable to research projects ordered and paid for by non-academic bodies such as governments or industrial enterprises), I would not adopt such a stance permanently, nor when outlining a synthesis of my field.

It is, of course, perfectly possible to opt for a different strategy and pursue exegesis and New Testament theology in a church context. In that case many other methodological choices will – indeed must – be different, if the path chosen is followed consistently. It is not my intention to try to do away with church-theological study of the Bible. My point is simply that we may not have always realized how very different such a task is from a historical interpretation of the material. The question is whether such compromising attempts to combine both tasks as currently govern the synthesizing market are methodologically defensible.

However, an orientation towards (one’s own) society is no more than a first step. The truly appropriate horizon today for biblical study (or any other discipline, for that matter) is humankind as a whole. Theology and exegesis need a global perspective, an ‘ecumenical’ horizon, in the original sense of the word.12 The future of humankind depends on the capacity of different nations and cultures – which to a considerable degree means different religions – to get along with one another. “These days, nobody would seriously dispute the fact that peace in the world very much depends on peace among the various religions ...”13 Therefore it is an important task even with regard to world peace to study the rise of Christianity and also to make it understandable to representations of other traditions. Even more important may be the task of enhancing the understanding of Christianity in its relation to other traditions among its adherents and its cultural heirs (see below, 158ff.). Of course, this does not mean that the results of such study should or could be made to correspond to any global needs, as if the old church framework were simply replaced with a wider but no less dogmatic framework. I am only speaking of the scope and the ethos of the enterprise.

The previous paragraph was misunderstood even by some very perceptive readers of the first edition. Thus Halvor Moxnes attributes to me the view that New Testament study should ‘contribute to the formation of and the upholding of a global community’ (1993, 153). This is not what I meant. The fact, rightly stressed by Moxnes (154), that studies informed by social anthropology ‘may make the New Testament more “foreign” and particular and less universal or global’ in no way militates against my intentions. The results of the analyses are not to be adapted even to global needs (see further below, 168ff.).

Now Christian churches and their members are part of humankind; they thus very much belong to the potential users of the kind of research I have in mind. In fact many members of the churches welcome a broad perspective or are engaged in pursuing it themselves. In many churches there are both ministers and lay
people who are willing to take a broad-minded view of the cognitive side of their religion; there is no hard-and-fast boundary between a church and the rest of society, nor is it fair to speak of a unified church point of view. My point is simply that the traditional interests of the churches, which are still often assumed in an authoritarian and aprioristic way, cannot provide the orientation for a synthesis. A non-ecclesial synthesis has to be comprehensible and to give clues to understanding to anybody, independently of faith and world-view. If traditional systematic theology and church leaders (or laymen) are reluctant to cope with such scholarship, recipients are to be sought elsewhere. In any case, close cooperation with comparative religion is necessary.

(b) Proclamation or information?

The answer to this next question is implied in the previous decision. Exegesis orientated on a world society cannot aim at a kerygmatic goal. Saying this amounts to a break with the tradition, cherished by neo-orthodoxy, in which New Testament theology and Christian proclamation are closely intertwined (Bultmann, Conzelmann, etc.). As far as syntheses (as distinct from special studies) are concerned, this decision amounts to a new step in the history of New Testament research.

In fact, this decision is a great deal more crucial than the previous one. The boundary between exegesis orientated on society and exegesis orientated on the church is not a hard-and-fast one, and it is undoubtedly possible to pursue candid research in a church context as well if one is not afraid of some pain and pressure. It all depends on one’s working ethos. Is the historical work ultimately designed to appeal to people in the interests of a given community (an outsider would speak of propagandistic aims), or does its goal consist in the clarification of the issues at hand?

Put in other words: the decision to work in a church context still leaves the scholar plenty of room to move in. But if he also works with the firm conviction that his task is, ultimately, to promote preaching, the scope of his work is hopelessly narrowed down.

This is seen sufficiently in the desperate struggle of church-orientated exegetes (notably Stuhlmann), kicking against the goads of historical criticism and trying to avoid presenting ‘negative’ (or merely negative) results. If we stop artificially maintaining the bond between exegesis and preaching, there is no reason why there should be a problem in presenting ‘negative’ results. In fact, the history of biblical study is full of examples from Galileo through Strauss to Albert Schweitzer which demonstrate that it is the ‘negative’ results which have most forcefully driven research forwards. Who today is seriously interested (except for historical reasons) in Galileo’s ‘positive’ attempt to show that the heliocentric world-view does not contradict the Bible?

Obviously, we are on our way into ‘a culturally (even if not statistically)’ post-Christian period. Christianity today is only one ‘system of orientation’ among others in any Western society. The normative documents of Christians cannot then be binding for a society, as was thought to be the case some centuries ago. Exegesis cannot impose a normative interpretation of the Bible on a society (nor, for that matter, will attempts to impose such an orientation on a church be successful either). What exegesis can do instead is to provide realistic perspectives on the background, rise and early history of Christianity (Petzke, above, p. 105).

A consequence of this aim is the recognition that detailed exegesis of each biblical verse (criticised as ‘micrology’ by Wrede, above, p. 23) is not of much interest to society. What is relevant is the elucidation of the main lines. The present flood of commentaries is only comprehensible in a church context, as a survival from the good old days when exegesis could still be seen as normative. It is revealing that there is a shortage of commentaries as soon as we leave the canonical writings and move into the realm of the Apostolic Fathers, and that there are hardly any commentaries at all on the host of pseudepigraphical writings.

One might venture to say that there is in fact far too much exposition of the Bible in present-day scholarship. True innovations apart, it is not very meaningful from the point of view of society for scholars to go through the same terrain over and over again. Nor is this state of matters necessarily meaningful from a church point of
view either; for the churches notoriously accept and appropriate much less of the flood of exegesis than is available.22

Thus the discipline might profit from a redirection of its resources. Much more attention could be paid to non-canonical literature, the history of the influence of the Bible, and perhaps - moving from historical to theological issues - problems of confronting the Bible with present-day questions.

A historical perspective on Christianity is by no means dead knowledge in a modern society. It is a question of the roots of our religion, of how it all began, and at the same time largely of the roots of our whole culture. Such research as elucidates the early history of Christianity serves almost automatically to clarify the identity of a modern person as well.23 The Bible is 'a major element in our own imaginative tradition, whatever we may think or believe about it'.24

The global perspective, too, demands that the task be conceived in terms of critical information (though not, of course, in a 'scientistic' sense, see below, 168) rather than proclamation. In our situation it would be irresponsible for experts on the study of religion to concentrate on propagating their respective traditions. A globally meaningful aim is to make a tradition (be it one's own, be it an alien one) comprehensible and to relate it to other traditions.25 In this process, both one's own tradition and those of others have to be understood with empathy.26 Fair play, or the application of the philosophical Golden Rule if you like, is a necessary requirement in the study of religions today. Even if a comparative approach in such a spirit may not overly impress representatives of alien traditions, as is probably the case today e.g. with regard to most Muslim communities, it can be of great heuristic value for a Westerner in search of understanding his or her own tradition.

The history of the discipline of New Testament theology tells us that most often a kerygmatic way of conceiving the task has been accompanied by a caricature of rival systems. Thus the Judaism of New Testament times has been blackened, so that the light of the gospel may shine forth all the more brightly. On a smaller scale this is surely true of the treatment of Stoicism and Gnosticism as well.27 The recognition of this error of perspective alone demands a new way of framing the task. Any rival systems (Judaism, Stoicism, mystery religions, Gnosticism), as well as any Christian interpretations that compete with each other, must be understood on their own terms.28 They are to be compared, and the comparison must be fair. If (relative) value judgments are made, the strengths and weaknesses of each tradition have to be assessed in a balanced way. In practice this may mean that one should pay particularly careful attention to the weaknesses of one's own tradition and to the strengths of those of others - not because one's own tradition is necessarily 'worse', but for the sake of balance: it has been done the other way round down the ages anyway.

It is surely of great significance for the present encounter of religions and traditions to study corresponding encounters in history. A special case for the historian of early Christianity is, of course, the contest connected with the emergence and separation of Christianity from Judaism. It is extremely important, both from the viewpoint of science and of global understanding, to study such conflicts as impartially as possible. Instead of putting oneself at the outset, say, on Paul's side, one has to weigh the case of those opposed to him just as seriously. The strengths and weaknesses of each position have to be considered in their own right rather than from the scholar's confessional point of view. Weak arguments or inconsistent reasoning in the ideological struggle are to be noted, on whichever side they may occur.29

In this regard a societally and globally orientated exegesis will be notably different from a church-orientated one. The latter may, and perhaps should, continue to regard it as its ultimate task to assist modern man to make a decision of faith similar to that made by people in the early church.30 To what extent a fair treatment of rival systems is at all possible on this basis is still an open question.
(c) The New Testament or early Christianity?

Wrede made a clear distinction between a history of early Christian religion and New Testament theology. An important dividing line is the question of the canon. A scholar who confines his task essentially to the interpretation of the canonical New Testament writings (even if he uses extra-canonical documents for purposes of comparison and elucidation) bases his work on a decision of the church which has arisen in the course of history. In the framework of an ecclesial interpretation of the Bible for kerygmatic and catechetical purposes such a limitation is quite meaningful. In historical work it is, by contrast, arbitrary.

Of those scholars who have reflected on the issue, most endorse Wrede's distinction. Schlier's comments are of particular interest (above, p. 66). This convert to Catholicism admits that limiting oneself to the canon is arbitrary from a historical point of view. In nevertheless opting for New Testament theology rather than for a history of early Christian religion, he knowingly makes a faith decision which cannot, and need not, be argued historically. Consistently, Schlier also utters the wish that a New Testament theology may lead to a biblical theology which covers all canonical literature. The canon divorces things that have belonged together historically, and it also joins together things that have had no historical connection.

Faced with the issue of canon, then, a scholar must decide whether he wants to produce, within canonical limits, a 'New Testament theology' (and, if he remains consistent, also a theology of the whole Bible) or else a history of early Christian religion independent of the canon. At the turn of the century it was not yet realized what far-reaching consequences this decision would have. Even Wrede thought that in practice it would affect only the treatment of the second Christian generation, which was in a secondary position anyway. Jesus, Paul and John would in any case preserve their position as the high-points of the presentation, and for the reconstruction of their thought, for all practical purposes only canonical sources were available (above, 22).

Since that time we have become aware in quite a new way of the diversity of the early church during and even before Paul's time. A canon-centred study of Paul can concentrate on clarifying and interpreting Paul's thought. A historical study must integrate Paul into a field to which belong also those Christians who were independent of him, as well as his opponents, and even the latter possess an equal right to the sympathetic attention of the scholar. In an ecclesial New Testament theology Paul may be taken as a norm. For the history of religion Paul is, instead, one figure among others. The scholar must try to understand him with empathy, out of his own intentions - but he must also try to understand Paul's opponents with empathy, out of their own intentions. On this score, K. Berger has done pioneering work in his history of early Christian theology.

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts has brought to light plenty of material which probably includes relatively early layers. What it means to take these texts seriously in a history of early Christian literature can be studied in Koester's work (above, 103). Their yield to an account of early Christian religion is probably no less. For the first time it is possible to study Gnosticism (both in Christian and non-Christian versions, it seems) with the aid of sources which are not tainted by polemics at the outset.

In an ecclesial New Testament theology the texts of Nag Hammadi probably have no intrinsic significance. In a history-of-religions work the same attention has to be paid to them as to any other contemporary sources (cf. Vouga). 'Orthodoxy' and 'heresy' are, from the point of view of early Christian history, misleading categories which are to be dismissed. They can have a historical significance only: they tell us what was regarded as orthodox or as heretical by some groups at some period of time. Such concepts as 'revelation' or 'inspiration' also remain outside history-of-religions works (except when one analyses what early Christians may have understood by 'revelation' or how they conceived 'inspiration').

In practice, much history-of-religions work has also been carried out in church-orientated New Testament theologies. Bultmann, above all, moves beyond the boundaries of the canon in a sovereign way, and his work offers a good basis for an even more
consistent history of religion. By contrast, attempts to sketch historical lines of development on the basis of canonical texts alone (such as Kümmel's) are methodologically hybrid. From canonical texts one can paint individual pictures of the theologies of various writers, and these pictures can be compared with one another. Yet the narrowness of the perspective renders truly historical work impossible at the outset.

One question that looms large in most New Testament theologies and is sometimes even considered the most important of all will be notably absent, or play a minor role, in a history-of-religions account of early Christianity: the question of unity behind diversity. We will recall that Kümmel, for one, recognized that this question only arises for a Christian reader anxious to learn about the accountability of his faith (above, p.84). To be sure, there is nothing inherently impossible in such a question to be asked from a historical perspective. Yet to be meaningful, such a question presupposes a body of literature close enough in space and time and in any case clearly limited over against other writings. It might be a meaningful question to ask whether there is unity behind diversity between the Synoptic Gospels, or between the writings combined to constitute the Pauline corpus. But the totality of early Christian literature (including non-canonical literature) is obviously of such diversity that the question could be asked only on a very high level of abstraction. The question of the unity or diversity in the New Testament belongs basically to contemporizing theology, to the (possible) second stage of critical work, at which one ponders problems of present-day Christianity. In present-day Christianity the canon is, of course, a given fact and an influential factor.39

(d) The relevance of the 'history of influence'

Some scholars have defended their limitation to the canon with an argument from the history of the influence of the Bible. It is precisely the canonical writings that have had an influence on the history of Western culture; therefore, even humanistic research has a special reason for focussing on the study of them.40

The influence of the biblical canon on Western history is indeed an important, and so far much neglected, scholarly task. This influence should be carefully studied in its own right. A careful distinction should be made here between history of influence and history of interpretation. Surely the latter must partly be seen as a history of suppression. It also testifies to the influence of other forces than the text in question. Moreover, the history of influence should by no means be limited to the function of the Bible in theology and religion. On the contrary, special attention should be paid to influences in the realms of politics and culture at large.

The influence of the canon has been whatever it has been, independently of how the writings that eventually became canonical came into being. Thus, the letter to the Romans has not exerted its historic influence primarily as Paul's statement on certain problems in certain places in the 50s CE. Instead, it has had an impact as part of what was conceived to be God's revelation (comprising the Old Testament and the New), interpreted in the light of a host of other writings (of which the most important, the Christian creeds and confessions, are later than the New Testament - in some cases a millennium and a half later). For the greater part of church history this letter was more influential in a Latin translation than in the original Greek version. It is quite possible that the greatest influence of all has been exerted by those sections of Romans which are regarded neither as very central nor as very characteristic of the author by modern exegesis. It was the opinion of Leopold von Ranke, at any rate, that Romans 13.1 - 7 - the passage on the state authorities - is the most important text that Paul ever wrote.44 It is a plausible view that 'most historical relationships are ironical in character' and that 'the course of history has little to do with the intrinsic logic of ideas that served as causal factors in it'.45

Moreover, it is not just 'the texts' that have had an impact on those who have used them. It may well be that some quite mundane affairs, notably the sack of Jerusalem which relegated the intrinsically Jewish understanding of the Christian message to insignificance, or the politics of Constantine the Great, have had a much greater influence on subsequent developments than any
biblical text(s). Still, some texts have had a great deal of influence, sometimes beneficial, sometimes disastrous (anti-Jewish texts), but others have not; surely there is a whole spectrum of degrees of importance in this regard. And one ought to make careful distinctions between, say, the texts as such and the texts as interpreted in some later framework. What has really been influential in Western history is the total process that led to the formation of the Christian church into the body it became. This process, of which the canonical texts are a part, no more and no less, cannot be outlined without recourse to a great number of non-canonical sources and non-textual factors. The history of influence is very important, but that fact should not be used as an argument for limiting an exegetical synthesis to the canonical writings.

If exegetical study takes the importance of the history of influence very seriously, a result will be a new allocation of space between the discussion of various writings, with some surprises from the viewpoint of conventional New Testament theology. Surely Acts and Pastorals would rise high up on the scale as writings that were really formative of subsequent developments.\(^47\)

\((e)\) Religion or religious thought?

The next decision, or prior choice, is more of an optional nature. 'Early Christian religion' is a vast area of study. Of the several components that make up a religion, the intellectual or theological one is only one. It is this side of the Christian religion – religious thought or the intellectual content of faith – that has been the focus of 'New Testament theology'. Wrede protested against this feature, too, in the traditional way of conceiving the task: the history of early Christian religion was to study the life of the believers rather than theology. Liberal and history-of-religions scholars were well aware that religious thought is only one, relatively small, part of a religion. They emphasized the religious experiences reflected in the texts; 'theology' was nothing but a set of conceptual interpretations of pre-theological experiences. Most often a rather negative attitude was taken toward such interpretations. The history-of-religions school broadened the perspective in a communal direction, underlining the significance of common cultic experiences as well. Recently, Theissen has taken Wrede's insight seriously and includes ritual and ethics, along with 'myth', in his account of primitive Christian religion (not just theology).

I am in full agreement with these insights. Yet I am personally still inclined to maintain more continuity with traditional 'New Testament theology' in focussing on a discussion of religious thought in Early Christianity. This is not because thought is the most important aspect in a religion (or, specifically, in Christianity); that is disputable. It is rather a personal decision, partly made for pragmatic reasons: one must begin somewhere, and a comprehensive history of early Christian religion (cult, rite, myth, communality) would seem an immense task. Yet Theissen's example shows that it is possible for an exceptionally capable individual to attempt it. An account of early Christian thought is a task worth undertaking, no matter what its relative importance as compared with other tasks may be. The study of religious thought is one branch in the study of religion. Ideas and mental conceptions loom large enough among the influences on Western culture that have emanated from Christianity to keep some interest in them alive. The analysis of how these influential conceptions arose and developed within the total process can consequently aid a Westener to come to terms with his or her history and identity.\(^48\)

One all-important qualification is immediately needed. I would not study Christian thought alone, as if it were a world of its own, independently of historical, psychological and social realities – of the 'total process' (cf. already Wrede, above, p. 24). I have, after all, criticized many 'New Testament theologies' for doing just that. A history of early Christian thought as I see it ought to make abundantly clear the connections of the thoughts and ideas with the experiences of individuals and groups. The development of thought is to be analysed precisely in the light of the interaction between experiences and interpretations.\(^49\) Thus even those dimensions of religion which are not the primary object of the study would be part of the picture, some even having a crucial position.
The relation between thought and experience is of such vital importance for the whole enterprise that a special section must be devoted to a discussion of it (see below, 189ff.).

(f) Purely historical?

In distinguishing between history of religion and theology, Wrede wished to leave theology completely to the dogmaticians. Historical research had no aims beyond history itself. Yet it should be clear after the discussions in hermeneutics and the philosophy of science this century that the person of the scholar cannot be wholly bracketed out in historical work. The scholar’s perception is influenced by his or her own situation and interests. A contemporizing concern always exists, consciously or unconsciously. But the concerns of the reader can be kept under control within certain limits. ‘It is true that complete objectivity is not attainable, but a high degree of objectivity is attainable, and a high degree of it is very much better than a low degree.’ Historians have interests; what matters is that they do not pervert historical judgment.

The understanding of a text takes place between two foci, the pastness of the text and the presentness of the reader. In penetrating deeper into understanding, the reader learns to relate what he or she understands in an increasingly organized way between these foci (rather than simply letting the ‘two horizons’ fuse together). He or she learns to discern similarities and dissimilarities, points of contact and lack of them, possibilities and limits of interpretation. It is probably misleading to speak of two chronologically successive separate stages in the process of research. The scholar presumably thinks both of the past and of the present all (or most of) the time. But it is still possible to keep the horizons distinct. And it would be helpful to keep them apart when presenting the results to readers.

The statement that historical study is about ‘what the text meant’ (Stendahl) is surely somewhat oversimplified. Nonetheless this slogan points in the right direction. It remains possible to inquire ‘what kind of readings can do justice to the text in its historical context’. Despite the plurality of possible interpretat-
to anyone wishing to back up an assessment of the modern situation with historical knowledge. Only when the biblical scholar gives up theological pretensions will sufficient space be left for considerations arising from other perspectives.

What I have just written is not at all to be understood in the sense of nineteenth-century historicism. The person of the biblical scholar, his problems and those of the modern world are always part of the picture. Nevertheless, the ability to distinguish between the past and the present is essential. But history can be presented in such a way that the manner of presentation also facilitates the use of the material in conjunction with modern problems (see below, 184f.). I would argue for a historical interpretation which is so constructed that those who want to can also attempt a theological interpretation on its basis. This (Gablerian!) concern will affect the structure of the synthesis in that it favours the choice of a thematic presentation.

It is customary to speak of the problem of (historical) ‘reconstruction’ and (theological) ‘interpretation’ as the key question in New Testament theology. This pair of terms is somewhat misleading. After all, there can be no reconstruction without interpretation. Therefore it is more appropriate to talk of the relation between two sorts of interpretation: historical and contemporizing. A historical interpretation is not independent of the situation of the interpreter. Modern problems affect the choice of perspective and the way various phenomena are emphasized.

For example, in view of the present global situation, tolerance and ability to engage in a dialogue appear as virtues that cannot be forgotten in biblical interpretation. If the New Testament is read on its own terms alone, tolerance will hardly emerge as a central value. By putting some weight on it – one may recall here the indictment of fanatical features in the New Testament by liberal scholars – the interpreter introduces (relative) value-judgments coloured by knowledge and evaluation of post-New Testament developments and his or her own situation. The historical interpretation thus receives a colouring which it would otherwise lack. As a special case of the issue of tolerance and intolerance, our awareness of the subsequent effects of the anti-Judaism present in parts of the New Testament will necessarily affect the questions put to the ancient authors. But it is very important that the modern situation is not allowed to dictate the results, as often happens when scholars sensitive to the issue of anti-Judaism attempt to interpret Paul and other New Testament writers artificially in such a way that all anti-Jewish tendencies are eliminated. That elimination must take place in the application by way of overt criticism of the problematical features, and not in exegesis.

Similarly, it is appropriate to approach the New Testament with feminist questions in mind, but the scholar must not know in advance whether or not Jesus was a ‘feminist’. Should it turn out that such a characterization does not fit, the feminist scholar will have to deal with this on another level of criticism.

Again, it is fitting to read the New Testament with issues raised by liberation theology in mind, but (say) the problem of the social context of Revelation must be answered on the basis of ancient evidence alone, regardless whether the results serve the concern for the oppressed today or not. Here I disagree with Schüssler Fiorenza’s ‘emancipatory’ reading of Revelation which aprioriistically denies such interpretations as seem dangerous in our time, e.g. interpretations which attribute the destruction of the world to God (1993, 122). She assesses different interpretations in terms of the ‘values and visions they engender’ (126) I agree on the danger, but insist that it be handled at a different stage, in the course of a critical evaluation of Revelation from a modern perspective (which is, I understand, the stance that Schüssler Fiorenza herself advocates in principle). I have dealt with ‘liberationist’ approaches to the New Testament (including post-colonial ones) at some length in other connections, trying to make clear that I sympathize with the liberationist interpretations but refuse to idealize the texts for that reason. Moreover, I do not think that we should perceive of the spread of the liberationist approach as a paradigm shift, but rather as a welcome widening of perspective within the classical critical paradigm. Feminist, ideological and post-colonial criticisms, for instance, may well be seen as continuation (in a new framework) of the content criticism that was practised by liberal scholars a century ago.
A historical approach need not exclude critical evaluation as long as the principle of fair play is adhered to: all parties in a conflict (say, over the law, or over the proper attitude to the Roman empire) are to be subjected to similar treatment. What is excluded on the historical level is the use of the ancient material to buttress a modern religious, theological or ideological position. A critique within the boundaries of fair play is allowed on the historical level, even though it cannot be carried through except from a given modern location (socio-political, religious and other). By contrast, a positive use of the texts in addressing modern issues must await the next stage of work.

Defined in this way, the historical task may even adopt features of ‘ideological criticism’. It asks about the interests behind the texts viewed as ideological documents that serve some particular group. It emphasizes ‘the partisanship of every text’ and ‘the demand to press beyond mere description of the ideology of the texts to a critique of it’. Here the borderline between the two stages, historical and contemporizing, becomes rather thin, and one realizes that a hard-and-fast line cannot be drawn and that the distinction, though indispensable, may be of a heuristic nature after all. Perhaps, however, the line could be drawn between what Clines terms the ‘historical’ and the ‘ahistorical’ dimensions of ideological criticism. ‘In the historical dimension, the ideological questions aim at identifying the classes or social groups whose interests brought the text into being and the groups whose interest ensured the preservation of the text. In the ahistorical dimension, the ideological questions aim at detecting the impact the texts have upon groups who are currently using them.’

As yet another example of how modern considerations may affect the choice of topic and approach (but not, in principle, the results) I take the liberty of referring to my own work on *Paul and the Law*. My starting-point was the history of Paul’s influence, i.e. his actual position in much modern theology and the tendency of modern theology to use his statements normatively as models to be followed in inter-religious debates. My discussion of first-century issues is undoubtedly coloured by the effort to determine whether Paul’s theology is usable for such a purpose; yet it seeks to move in a framework which does not distort Paul’s historical situation. In the end some brief (far too brief) theological intimations are added to suggest the direction in which subsequent contemporizing thought might move.

I think, then, that a historian of the religion of the early church can and should deal with his material so that it can be effectively utilized even by a reader who is mostly concerned with the modern situation. But such shaping is possible only as regards the questions asked and the manner and order of presentation. The results, of course, must remain independent of the interests of any group of readers.

All this moves on the level of historical interpretation (Gabler’s ‘true’ biblical theology). It depends on the scholar himself whether he wants to move, following Gabler’s lead, at a second stage of the work, to theological questions proper, i.e. to reflections on what his historical findings can mean for men and women of today. This move will be discussed below, in Chapter 3.

(g) The challenge of new approaches

In exegetical articles and monographs, the history of theological ideas is increasingly being replaced by other approaches, some of them ahistorical, others informed by social sciences. In 1988, Robin Scrogggs called attention to the threat of ‘contextualisms’ for New Testament theology. In recent biblical study, questions that were earlier suppressed in the interest of the history of ideas had become uppermost: social stratification, economic dynamics, political situation, family structures and social mores, psychological dynamics, literary and rhetorical conventions (18). Scrogggs, for one, feared that ‘in all of these approaches, New Testament theology as it has traditionally been conceived is . . . seriously called into question’ (19). For instance, narrative criticism of the Gospels presupposes that parts of the narrative have no meaning independently of the whole; presumed theological statements cannot be lifted out from the narrative context and made into abstract structures (21).

If textual worlds were the only legitimate object of study, no
kind of New Testament theology, much less a history of early Christian thought, could be regarded as an appropriate synthesis of biblical scholarship (if there could be any synthesis at all, rather than an array of diverse text worlds). I do not see, however, why there should be a controversy on this point at all. To be sure, caution is called for, if e.g. sentences from a Gospel are used outside the narrative context. Yet a Gospel is not only a narrative; it is a story composed to propagate a message. It is quite possible to sort out what kind of convictions lie behind the story: to sketch the 'symbolic world' of its author. It is this that is in the focus of 'early Christian religion'. Kari Syreeni convincingly argues that three different 'worlds' should be taken into account by the interpreter of a text: (1) the textual world, (2) the real world in which the author lived, and (3) the ideologically constructed symbolic world of the latter.

The recent concentration on the 'story world' of, say, the Gospel of Mark hardly produces convincing results, if it is pursued without taking account of the two other worlds. Contrary to the claims of e.g. Rhoads and Michie (1982), Mark's story world is hardly a coherent self-contained unity. Rather, it contains tensions (e.g. in its depiction of the disciples) which are explicable only when attention is paid to Mark's real-world concerns. Whether or not these concerns can appropriately be called 'theological', surely some kind of religious or ideological convictions lie behind them. A story, like everything else, can naturally be examined from any number of viewpoints, even against the grain. Scholarship can never be content with mere re-telling; it has the right to squeeze from its sources any information that these can be made to yield, however reluctantly.

Literary and structuralist methods are helpful for certain purposes and the results are interesting in certain regards. It would be meaningless to make them absolute (condemning historical methods), just as it would be meaningless to make the historical approach absolute. It is anybody's choice whether she finds historical or ahistorical issues more interesting. But surely sufficient interest in religio-historical questions still exists for them to be asked by some people. Other people - or the same people on other occasions - should ask other questions. It is still justified to use the texts also as windows into something beyond themselves.

However dangerous, then, the 'contextualisms' may look from the viewpoint of old-style 'doctrinal-concept' theology, they are no threat whatsoever to a history of early Christian thought, for the simple reason that the latter is by definition directed to a different problem than are these other approaches. As history of thought does not consist of a study of the texts as texts, but rather tries to penetrate to what lies behind the texts, it is immune to new methods that may diminish the usefulness of the texts as 'theological' statements. It is not rendered futile by these methods. By contrast, it can - and indeed must - learn from them to reflect ever more carefully how it can or cannot extract information from the texts.

Unlike purely literary methods, the social-scientific approaches do go beyond the texts, searching after the social reality that has produced the texts. Some hope that a new paradigm will emerge to replace the historical-critical one, but others see here just an extension of the historical approach. Again, it is hard to see why there should be a controversy; different questions can be asked depending on one's goals. Form critics were always interested in 'life settings'; sociology or social anthropology may now assist in reconstructing those settings with far greater plausibility.

To be sure, if ever there was a virgin exegetical field untouched by social analysis, it is New Testament theology with its lasting truths and unchanging existential situations. It would have been different, though, had Wrede had his way. He emphasized that the early Christian world of ideas was 'very strongly conditioned by external history', citing as his prime example Paul's 'doctrine' of justification by faith. This 'doctrine had a practical origin and practical purpose' and Paul 'would never have formed' it 'had he not taken in hand the task of converting the Gentiles'. Those who apply social-scientific insights to New Testament studies stand in this trajectory. John Gager, one of the early pioneers, expressly agreed with Wrede's programme. Rowland has brought social history to bear on his account of Christian origins in a fruitful way,
and Theissen has made excellent use of sociological and cultural-anthropological models in constructing his 'semitic cathedral'.

Recently Wayne Meeks has outlined a suggestive picture of the 'origins of early Christian morality'. Despite the huge methodological progress, documented in Meeks' superb use of modern social anthropology, this work is fully compatible with Wrede's vision (and might even be taken as a sophisticated elaboration of it).

The boundaries of the canon play no part: Meeks discusses 'the first two centuries'. Hermas and Valentinus are dealt with in the same spirit as Paul. Even Meeks' programmatic move from 'ethics' to 'morality' or from 'the great ethical principles of the early Christians' to their 'moral intuitions' or 'moral common sense' (1993, 11) or simply from texts to people (4) is roughly analogous to Wrede's substitution of (lived) 'religion' for 'theology'. And clearly Meeks represents a two-stage strategy. The purpose of his 'ethnographic journey into the foreign world of Christian beginnings' is 'resolutely historical and descriptive'; it is a large part of the job of a historian 'to try to protect the integrity of the past, and that often has the effect of emphasizing its strangeness' (211). In the last few pages, however, Meeks ventures 'a more personal word' to 'readers who have some concern for the state of Christian moral discourse today' (211–19).

Social-scientific approaches are excellent aids in the effort to minimize cultural ethnocentrism, the projection of our modern values and perceptions into ancient texts. I join those who see here, not a new paradigm, but a welcome refinement of the historical one. New Testament theology or its equivalents are unapologetically concerned with ideas, notions and thoughts. These ideas cannot be separated from their social contexts. Nevertheless, it is fully justified for some people at least to focus their research on the formation of these ideas. This need not mean that the intellectual dimension is the most important one in religious studies. Ideas simply loom just large enough among the influences that have emanated from early Christianity to keep some interest in them alive.

Helpful social-scientific notions to be integrated into 'New Testament theology' or its equivalents include the insight that early Christian thought has very much to do with the group identity of people and with the legitimation of the emerging symbolic worlds or ideologies, and also with the mastering of cognitive dissonance. The early Christian world of thought has very much to do with legitimation devices in ideological struggles between different groups, and this should be made clear.

Nor is rhetorical criticism a threat. Where it does not degenerate into a new scholasticism, it can illuminate the social communicative situation in which early Christian writings, especially letters, came into being. On a general level it is certainly true that e.g. Paul's letters are to be 'derhetorized' before they can be used in a reconstruction of Paul's thought world. In other words, obvious exaggerations due to particular situations should be recognized as such. It is my impression, however, that rhetorical criticism is often used as an apologetic tool: contradictions and other 'dubious' features are explained away as carefully thought-out rhetorical devices. 'Rhetoric' can be made to serve harmonization. Advocates of rhetorical criticism also — like advocates of any new methodology — often make unrealistic claims, believing that their method can solve problems that have proved too hard for users of 'conventional' methods. However, in practice rhetorical criticism is not a key that can open all locks, and eventually even its practitioners tend to resort surreptitiously to old methods when they attempt to throw light on theological questions. Rhetorical aspects must be taken into consideration in reconstructions of early Christian thought (or in New Testament theology for that matter; cf. Hübner). Their yield would seem to be a yet sharper perception of the social situation to which the theological or ideological statements of the early Christians once belonged.

Indeed, attempts to integrate new approaches with what is indispensable in the old ones are to be warmly welcomed. Such attempts include the three-world-model of Syreeni and Vernon Robbins' program of socio-rhetorical criticism, 'the result of a concerted effort to integrate new practices of interpretation'. It should be emphasized, however, that an account of 'early Christian religion' (or 'New Testament theology' for that matter) does not aim at a 'complete' interpretation of texts. It is a task much more
limited in scope than is the socio-rhetorical programme. I am sure that the two can live alongside each other in fruitful cooperation.\footnote{76}

(h) The attitude of the scholar

Church-orientated New Testament theology demands faith of the scholar, although this faith cannot be controlled or even defined. For some, for all practical purposes the faith of the scholar amounts to his confidence that behind diversity a theological unity is found in the New Testament.\footnote{77} For others, faith implies that one has to distil from the New Testament with the help of content-criticism such emphases as are meaningful for the modern reader. It is part of the picture that one person's faith is heresy or sheer unbelief in the eyes of another. For Richardson, Bultmann, a stern defender of a faith-approach in exegesis, is the arch-heretic (so is Barth, for that matter).

Such faith cannot and must not be demanded of a scholar of the history of early Christian religion. The only attitude that can be presupposed is the will to take the material seriously. (In practice, no other attitude can be required from a theological interpreter either.)\footnote{78} Empathy is all-important, but 'empathy stops short of belief'.\footnote{79} This is often denied by theologians with a hermeneutical orientation, but a moment of reflection on the study of religions other than one's own should make clear that empathetic understanding is fully possible without ultimate commitment to the tradition studied.\footnote{80} As Barr (1980, 26) puts it,

Empathy and personal involvement are not to be identified with the acceptance of the theological or ideological position of the matter studied. If this were strictly so, it would lead to an impossibly solipsistic position . . . It would mean that no one could express a valid opinion about a theology or a philosophy unless they were themselves adherents of that opinion. Theologians themselves of course do not at all conform to this ideal: they feel free to express judgments about (shall we say) gnosticism, without being in the slightest convinced of the validity of that intellectual system.

Personal (Christian, Jewish or any other) faith is not prohibited, but neither is unbelief\footnote{81}. Each different existential attitude to Christian (or Jewish) systems of orientation includes peculiar assets as well as peculiar dangers which have been well characterized by Stendahl (1984, 22): 'The believer has the advantage of automatic empathy with the believers in the text -- but his faith constantly threatens to have him modernize the material.\footnote{82} The agnostic has the advantage of feeling no such temptations, but his power of empathy must be considerable if he is to identify himself sufficiently with the believer of the first century.' Both parts of this last sentence would seem to apply to the work of Teeple.

A further differentiation is called for. A scholar's own faith only helps him to understand certain types of expressions of religious life -- those congenial to himself. What is worse, an unwary interpreter will tend to discover his own image at possible and impossible points in the sources. This is evident in the shortcomings of the liberal exegetes whose historical accounts were distorted precisely because of their faith. They believed in a certain kind of Jesus, and so they cared to take seriously only that kind of Jesus, dismissing such features in the sources as conflicting with their ideal.\footnote{83} The faith of Richardson made him construct an Anglican Jesus (above, p. 65), and so on. A scholar who identifies himself with Paul (often enough, with a Paul interpreted through Reformation lenses) does not necessarily (to put it mildly) understand the Christian faith-world of the apostle's 'Judaizing' opponents. If genuine understanding is to take place, the ability of the scholar to distance himself from his own dearest values is also a quite necessary requirement.\footnote{84}

Bultmann's sophisticated demand for believing preunderstanding breaks down totally in face of this necessary widening of perspective.\footnote{85} The fact is certainly worth pondering that the very scholar who wrote so eruditely about the conditions of understanding was totally incapable of doing justice to the Jewish religion, of which he drew a gloomy caricature.\footnote{86} By contrast, scholars who have written little on the theory of understanding have succeeded far better than the master of hermeneutics in understanding the rival tradition. Bultmann accepted Barth's
starting-point: one can understand a text only if one has an inner relationship to its real message. This statement may be accepted, if ‘inner relationship’ is understood in quite general terms (so that ‘critical sympathy’ or ‘genuine interest’ will qualify); for Bultmann, however, ‘faith’ as a religious and existential commitment was at stake. But the claim that a Christian can never ‘understand’ a Muslim text or vice versa is simply obscurantist.87

With astonishing naïveté, ‘faith’ always seems to mean Christian faith in these hermeneutical discussions. Not even the existence of Jewish faith has been taken seriously (not even in Old Testament theology, until quite recently).88 But Jewish faith will produce a very different picture of the New Testament from that drawn by Christian faith, and so will Muslim faith or a Hindu conviction. The inevitable widening of perspective makes as objective an approach as possible imperative on the level of historical interpretation. That such an approach is possible is sufficiently demonstrated by the work of J. Weiss and A. Schweitzer: they dared to paint a Jesus who held a faith different from their own.

Whatever one’s personal prejudice, it has to be held under control. For ‘the relativity of human objectivity does not give us an excuse to excel in bias, not even when we state our bias in an introductory chapter’.89 An important practical criterion with which the attitude of a scholar can be tested is that of fair play: can he do equal justice to all parties of the process he is studying?

One last point ought to be self-evident, but is almost never made in hermeneutical discussions.90 It is not only the significance of faith for exegesis that ought to be discussed, but also the significance of critical exegesis for faith. Experience shows that ‘in the biography of every other theological student’ the encounter with exegesis brings about a crisis for the faith of the person.91 This crisis should be assessed positively: it opens up the possibility that a person finds her or his way to an independent stance or to personal freedom in relation to a tradition with massive claims on him or her (Klaus Berger).92 The faith of the scholar should not be spoken of as a static ‘given’ (or not ‘given’). It should, rather, be seen as something dynamic and changing. What is really important is the scholar’s willingness to struggle with the texts whole-heartedly.

(i) The prehistory and finishing line of early Christian thought

The distinction between historical and dogmatic study of the Bible (Gabler) soon also led to a dichotomy within the historical task itself. Old Testament theology and New Testament theology parted ways. For pragmatic reasons at least both realms of biblical exegesis must indeed retain their independence, for no individual can any longer master the material of both. But considering a synthesis of early Christian religious thought, one must also ask questions about its relationship to earlier thought and about the bearing of that relationship on the synthesis.

Of those working within a Christian theological framework, an increasing number of scholars now longs for a comprehensive ‘theology of the whole Bible’ that would transcend the barrier between the Testaments. Schleiermacher suggested relatively early that a church-theological view of the New Testament actually implies a vision of the unity of the Old and the New Testament. Recently, many have undertaken to move towards a theology of the whole Bible (e.g. Childs, Stuhlmacher, Hübner, see above, pp. 120f.). But if the New Testament canon is detached from contemporary non-canonical literature and made an objective of study on its own, this is a Christian theological (rather than a historical) decision. Then one can ask: Would not consistency require that all canonical material be treated together? In other words: a ‘theology of the New Testament’ alone is a methodological compromise that can be defended only on pragmatic grounds. In for a penny, in for a pound: let the advocates of a canonical approach try to write theologies of the whole Bible.91

The history of early Christian religion finds itself in a different position. In it, the New Testament writings cannot be detached from other writings either synchronically or diachronically. Synchronically, they must be interpreted in conjunction with other materials from the Hellenistic period, as e.g. Koester has stressed. Diachronically, they are to be interpreted as part of a
process which is rooted in the cultural and religious history of Israel (and of the whole of the Near East) and which continues in the history of the church and of Western culture down to the present day. An appropriate interpretation presupposes that at least that part of the process that lies behind be taken into account.

The symbolic universe that determined the way in which early Christians interpreted their experiences had been formed during the history of Israel. Therefore the student of early Christianity must, to some extent, illuminate the path that had led to the situation with which he is ultimately concerned. Then the Old Testament material is relevant in conjunction with any other available contemporary material, e.g. archaeological material. Even more important is the subsequent development. Early Judaism as the seed-bed of the early church is a focal point of interest. It is appropriate to deal with 'early Christianity' as 'the most important Messianic sect of Judaism' (the subtitle of Rowland 1987). The limits of the canon are of no importance. The development of the tradition from the exile on is important to the scholar of early Christianity (although in practice the presentation must be restricted to a minimum).

It is important to realize that the Deuteronomic view of God's dealings with man which prevails in the Old Testament is originally only the view of one 'party' on the religious history of Israel and has its rivals even within the Old Testament itself, notably the Wisdom tradition. In an 'Old Testament theology' the Deuteronomic view may become the centre of the whole enterprise. In a balanced history of Israelite religion, by contrast, it will be presented as the view of one group among many. A history of Israelite religion will be quite different from an Old Testament theology, if the latter is to stick relatively close to the visions found in the Old Testament itself.

Where should a history of early Christian thought end? One could well suggest the time of Constantine the Great as an appropriate boundary line. In practice it would be difficult to go as far as this. Bousset stretched his description of the christological development down to Irenaeus (above, 30), and as a milestone of incipient Catholicism this theologian who unites so many lines of development in himself undoubtedly constitutes an appropriate limit. It would also be possible to regard the Apologists of the second century as the limit (Wrede). All such limitations are, however, pragmatic decisions arising from the limits of the scholar's capacity. Nor have they too great a significance, if exegesis and church history or history of dogma co-operate closely, one taking up the work where the other has left off, with the same method and within a similar way of setting the task. As for the contemporizing perspective, it might be ideal if the exegetical presentation already included some hints of the development of the themes in question in subsequent church history and the history of ideas. But at this point, at the very latest, the tension between the ideal and what is possible may well become too great.

(j) Finished products and earlier stages

Authors of New Testament theologies have disagreed as to whether or not the proclamation of Jesus as reconstructed with historical methods belongs to their province. Bultmann excluded Jesus as belonging only to the presuppositions of New Testament theology (above, 50). This was indeed an inevitable consequence of Bultmann's definition of 'theology'. If there is Christian theology only after Easter, Jesus' pre-Easter proclamation is, by definition, something else (unless the earthly Jesus already proclaimed the post-Easter Christian message).

Even if one deems there to be much more continuity between Jesus and the church than did Bultmann, limiting oneself to the canonical texts (which Bultmann did not do) should mean that a historically reconstructed Jesus is not a theme of New Testament theology. One scholar to perceive this early on was Theodor Zahn, not exactly a radical theologian (above, 55). If a synthesis intentionally deals with the thoughts expressed in the canonical writings, then it is consistent to focus on the final products and on their canonical point of view, as Schlier insists. Traditio-historical reconstructions (the source Q, the teachings of the Hellenists) may help here to clarify the viewpoint and theology of a canonical author (e.g. Luke, Paul), but should not be given an independent
significance. Such reconstructions as are ultimately dispensable from the canonical point of view also include the message of the historical Jesus. The New Testament authors were not interested in a reconstructed Jesus, but in Jesus as he was remembered—or in Jesus as people wanted to remember him.

For the sake of consistency, church-theological New Testament theology should concentrate on Jesus as remembered, on the ‘faith image’ of Jesus.\textsuperscript{100} By contrast, historical and traditio-historical reconstructions are suited to provide material for non-church study of early Christian religion.\textsuperscript{101} Such a presentation self-evidently includes the historical figures of John the Baptist and Jesus (in so far as they can be reconstructed); likewise the Hellenists around Stephen or the bearers of Q. The Q document is important in helping to delineate the thoughts of Matthew or Luke, but it is equally important in its own right in providing glimpses into the thought-world of a particular segment of early Christianity.\textsuperscript{102}

A consistent concentration on the finished products would also exclude any special interest in such putative reconstructions as early creeds (Conzelmann) and in general in any oral traditions that may have preceded the production of the New Testament writings.\textsuperscript{103} The logical outcome would be to start with the earliest New Testament writings, i.e. with Paul. This solution was indeed suggested by Strecker (although in part for dubious reasons)\textsuperscript{104} and put into practice by him and, independently of him, by Morris.

\textbf{(k) Historical or thematic structure?}

Most New Testament theologies have been organized in chronological or traditio-historical terms according to persons or groups (of persons or of writings): Jesus — the early community — Paul — John, etc. Subdivisions (e.g. the teaching of Jesus or of Paul) have then been treated thematically. An overall thematic structure was put forward by Stauffer, Albertz and Richardson (with poor results, above pp. 56, 64, 65) and, somewhat more successfully, by Schelkle (67).\textsuperscript{105} Bultmann treats parts of his material (the Hellenistic church, post-Pauline developments) thematically, not without success.\textsuperscript{106}

In a presentation of early Christian thought both types of organization of the material are possible in principle. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. A tradition-historical account helps to discern lines of development that are broken in a thematic presentation (cf. K. Berger). The latter, again, can more clearly delineate the ideological and theological problems, and models for their solution (Theissen). Something has to be sacrificed in any case. Some authors have indeed given at least some hints as to what their discussion would look like if organized differently. At the end of a chronological account a systematic survey of some basic questions is added; a thematic account is prefaced with a short outline of the historical development. Such a combination indeed seems wise.

The ideal would be for a reader to have both chronological and thematic syntheses in hand. Both viewpoints cannot receive equal attention in a single work. I personally am inclined slightly to favour a thematic structure. The thematic treatment must, however, be prefixed with a short diachronic survey of the various groups in the early church and of the main lines of their thought.\textsuperscript{107} The following reasons would seem to support a thematic decision.

(a) The available material is very fragmentary.\textsuperscript{108} No continuous lines of development can be drawn. The geographical location of many writings and groups is quite uncertain, too.\textsuperscript{109} Moreover, the documents available for the earliest period are all occasional writings.\textsuperscript{110} The body of texts that has survived inevitably gives a distorted picture. Important though his contribution was, Paul is bound to receive a much more decisive position than is historically plausible, simply because he wrote letters that survived while others did not. If one wishes to write a ‘New Testament theology’ from a church perspective, the preponderance of Paul may be all right. If, however, one chooses a historical perspective, one should keep in mind that Paul was a very controversial person in his time and became accepted in larger Christian circles only when he had been ‘domesticated’ by Acts and the Pastoral Epistles. In a presentation of early Christian religion, therefore, he should be one among many ‘heroes’—no more and no less.

(b) Due to the paucity of the material, traditio-historical recon-
structions need to remain extremely conjectural, as can be seen in the works of Schmithals and K. Berger. For instance, the picture of the ‘Hellenists’ in Jerusalem can be drawn in quite different ways. Yet it is probable that this very group had a great significance in the formation and early expansion of what became Christianity. The reconstruction of the message of Jesus is notoriously disputed. Any account of the thought of the earliest church, if given in the form of chronological development, would be quite hypothetical on crucial points. The reader would have to grope in darkness for a long time; not until reaching Paul could he see more clearly. Hypothetical constructions are more tolerable in a thematic account in which various models in addressing a problem are considered together. Even if a given reconstructed model never existed as such, it could still throw light on the nature of the problem.

(c) Reasons related to the history of influence also favour a thematic structure. I have argued that one aim of a synthesis is to help the reader assess subsequent developments, and ultimately his own situation as a product and a receiver of the Christian tradition. It may be more important to the reader to learn what sort of ideas existed, say, about sin, salvation or the last things in the early church than to know exactly what the total theology of a Paul or a Matthew was like. Also, it is likely that what has really been influential is not so much particular texts as the Christian religion as a whole. Of course both questions are intermingled. In view of subsequent developments it will be relevant to know what options there were, and also what sort of contexts they once belonged to.

(d) In recent study the difference between New Testament introduction and New Testament theology has been diminished, as ‘introductions’ pay increasing attention to the religion and theology manifested in the various writings. To avoid duplication, it might be wise to choose a different perspective when one is focussing on theology.

(e) A thematic structure is often associated with a harmonizing approach which does away with the internal divergences in the New Testament. However, this does not follow from a thematic structure as such. By contrast, a thematic viewpoint provides the possibility to delineate sharply the differences between the various ideas, as is shown by the work of Braun (above, 77f.) and Dunn (above, 100), and even Theissen. Within a thematic overall structure the ideas of different groups and persons have to be clearly distinguished, i.e., the thematic structure must be subdivided in longitudinal terms.

In summary, it may be more suitable to characterize the project described as a phenomenology of early Christian religious thought than as its history.

(1) Where to start?

For a thematic account it is important to find a proper starting-point which is really central in the sources. Obviously, it would not be wise to start an account of early Christian thought with an exposition of the Trinity (though monotheism might be a possibility). It also seems that the decision, favoured by existentialist theology, to choose anthropology as a starting point, leads to undue modernizing.

The two serious alternatives would seem to be christology and eschatology. In a sense, the whole proclamation of the early church is an interpretation of the significance of the Christ. Therefore christology would be a possible starting-point. However, christology can be seen as part of a larger whole, eschatology. In Jesus’ own mission the eschatological reign of God seems to have been a more fundamental theme than his own person. Eschatological expectation connects early Christianity inextricably both with the religion of Israel as documented in the Old Testament (diachronically) and with contemporary Judaism (synchronically). It therefore seems meaningful to start from eschatology, or, considering the roots of Old Testament eschatology, from the idea of God acting in history. In fact it almost seems possible to present the rise and development of early Christian thought as a whole within a eschatological framework (which would of course include the issue of the decline of eschatology as well).

The chapter on eschatology would have to start with a brief consideration on the notion of Yahweh as acting in historical events
(battles) and on the significance of the discrepancy between great memories and actual political and social conditions for the religion of Israel. Eschatology is to be seen as the memories of the ancient victories achieved by Yahweh projected on to the screen of the future.

How could a thematically structured presentation go on? I can imagine something like following outline (in catchwords): eschatology would be followed by chapters on the nature and attainment of salvation (soteriology); the bringer of salvation (christology); the life in the Spirit (ecclesiology, pneumatology, means of revelation, spiritual gifts, baptism and the Lord’s supper; the cult; mission and ministry); the relation of the new community to Israel (mutual antagonism; appropriation of the sacred symbols of Israel – Scripture, Torah, circumcision; the opening toward Gentiles); the human condition (anthropology; sin); the new morality.

[m] Some relevant emphases in recent research

The centrality of eschatology leads to a brief discussion of other major emphases that would have to figure in a new synthesis. It is a sad fact that there has been a growing gap between monographs and syntheses in the field of New Testament and related studies. The syntheses bearing the title ‘New Testament theology’ show little signs of many insights gained in the discussion of recent decades. This is especially true of eschatology, although its centrality was discovered as early as the last century. Bultmann does start his presentation of Jesus with eschatology, but it soon turns out that this belongs to the unimportant husk, not to the existential core of the message. To start here, and to take eschatology seriously, amounts to an attempt to diminish the gap mentioned above. A related issue is the new interest in and evaluation of apocalyptic, which can no longer be seen merely as fanciful and absurd day-dreaming.\footnote{11}

A major point in a new synthesis will be the changed view of the Jewish religion. For Bultmann, the old view of Judaism as an anthropocentric legalistic religion (in the pejorative sense of the word) was fundamental to his whole construction. Recent work has taught us to take a less partisan look at Judaism, trying to see it from an insider’s point of view as well. This is an area in which the vision of an empathetic historical interpretation, which is not committed in advance to the position of any one side in the ongoing struggle, becomes all-important. It makes all the difference whether the author of the synthesis takes, say, Paul’s view of the law as a normative prescription, or whether he perceives it as a problem to be analysed, so that a person engaged in theology proper on the next stage of work can either accept, reject or modify Paul’s view.\footnote{12} In Theissen’s work the discussion of these questions has now been raised to a new level.

The development of new approaches, in themselves alternatives to doing ‘New Testament theology’, has to be taken into account in the study of the early Christian thought-world. Thus the social and sociological analysis which has seen a considerable progress in the last two decades has an obvious bearing on an attempt to portray the interplay between (social) experience and interpretation. The introduction of social anthropology serves as still another control, designed to hold cultural anachronism in check. The contribution of linguistics and structuralism seems less obvious, except that it, too, may serve as a control: various textual features are not to be exploited theologically, if their function in the context is really different.

[n] Conclusion

I have opted for Wrede’s vision in a modified form. According to it, biblical studies are to serve society and mankind within their own limited resources, but not the church in particular. The task is not proclaimatory, but informative and understanding. The material has to be treated impartially, with no distinction between ‘orthodox’ and ‘heterodox’ views.

The canon cannot be the starting point in exegesis orientated on society. Therefore the objective of the synthesis should not literally be ‘New Testament theology’ but early Christian thought. By contrast, scholars of the church can, in a church context, concentrate on the canon and outline theologies of the New Testa-
ment or, more consistently, of the whole Bible, in the light of their respective confessions.

An account of early Christian thought should not prescribe what the reader should think of Christianity or how Christianity ought to be interpreted today. Nevertheless, the contemnorizing point of view is not to be forgotten. The material should be organized and treated in such a way that even a reader asking contemnorizing questions may profit from it as much as possible. A phenomenology of early Christian thought does not answer questions about the present significance of that thought, but it must provide materials and clues to assist the reader who asks such questions.

The personal pre-understanding of the scholar is always present. It is not, however, a static factor, but can develop in the process of research. Neither ‘faith’ nor ‘unbelief’ can be required of the scholar. Yet he ought to be conscious of the advantages and disadvantages of his particular religious (or non-religious) attitude.

An account of early Christian thought will start from the development of tradition in Israel, especially from the exile on, in order to move next to early Judaism. The rise and development of Christianity will be elucidated as part of a process that can, in principle, be followed both backwards and onwards endlessly. Thought must not, however, be isolated as a world of its own. The connections of religious thought with the concrete historical and social experiences of individuals and groups are to be taken very seriously. The rise and development of early Christian thought can be described as an interplay between tradition, experience and interpretation.

In the present state of research a thematic organization of the material seems preferable. Eschatology may provide the most appropriate starting point.