

## Teaching newer insights in Biblical theology

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This lecture will deal with Biblical theology, and let me say from the beginning that, as a professor of New Testament, I will mainly – though not exclusively – pay attention to NT theology. Since the recent developments in this field of research go *beyond* the limits of NT theology in a narrow sense, I will pay attention to these newer insights as well. To illustrate this, I will start with an text that may surprise you, since it is taken from the Gospel of Thomas, logion 28.

Jesus said: “I took my place in the midst of the world, and I appeared to them in the flesh. I found all of them drunk; I found none of them thirsty. And my soul became afflicted for the sons of men, because they are blind in their hearts and do not have sight; for empty they came into the world, and empty too they seek to leave the world. But for the moment they are drunk. When they shake off their wine, then they will repent.”<sup>1</sup>

Although this text is often considered as having a Gnostic ring, that does not alter the fact that it is very evidently a Christian text; it is not even necessary to interpret it as being Gnostic. Some of its separate elements occur in the canonical NT, but as a whole this text does not occur there. Let us assume that it has been attributed to Jesus around 100 CE. This would be one or some decades after the composition of the canonical gospels, which also contain words of Jesus that must have been attributed to him by the early Church or by the evangelist. Of course, such attributions do not preclude that such words may have corresponded to Jesus’ original teaching.

We will not deal with the precise interpretation of this logion, but I want to ask: If this text belongs to early Christianity, is it thinkable to include it in a NT theology? Since this text does not occur in the NT canon, it seems most logic to exclude it from a NT theology. But if a NT scholar intends to give a description of early Christianity in general, there is no reason whatsoever for the exclusion of this logion.

Here we are at the heart of the matter that I want to introduce to you. Since a long time, but most particularly since the last decade, it is customary to make a clear distinction between NT theology on the one hand and the history of early Christianity on the other hand.

### **Biblical theology and History of religion**

In NT theology, scholars intend to give a fair description of the contents and the theology of the NT canon. The same is true, of course, of Old Testament theology, with regard to the OT canon. Biblical theology (to include both testaments) is usually studied on the assumption that the contents and theology of the Bible are precious and witness to the truth or the salvation which God revealed to mankind. So Biblical theology is usually an affair of Church-related theology and intends to serve the Church. Its presupposition is that the Biblical message is

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<sup>1</sup> Translation Th.O. Lambdin, in B. Layton (ed.), *Nag Hammadi Codex II,2-7 I* (NHS 20), Leiden 1989, 65, except for “drunk”, which twice replaces “intoxicated”. The text has been transmitted in Coptic and partially in Greek (p. 118-119, 127).

relevant for our time – although this does not mean that a critical approach of the Bible is eschewed.

On the other hand, one may also study the Bible differently, namely from the point of view of history of religion. For the OT this means that one examines the ancient Israelite religion in its interaction with other ancient religions of, e.g., the Canaanites, the Babylonians, and the Egyptians. Moreover, to those who are considered as false prophets in the OT the same “impartial” attention is paid as to the canonical prophets (as far as this is possible, for we do not have the sayings of the other prophets at first hand). In this approach, the Jews who venerate the “Queen of heaven” (e.g., Jer. 7:18; 44:17ss) or Tammuz (Ezek. 8:14) are not considered as idolatrous, for the qualification of idolatry is unusable in the approach of history of religion. In the study of the NT, one is very careful not to adopt the negative and rhetorical qualifications of the Jews who do not believe in Christ (e.g., Mat. 23; 27:25; Rom. 2; 1 Thess. 2:14-16). In this merely historical approach, those whom Paul decries as his opponents are not considered as opponents of the gospel, but as other Christians who disagreed with Paul, e.g., because they kept closer to their Jewish background. Moreover, it is most important that, in this historical approach, the boundary of the NT canon does not have any value. If one wants to describe early Christianity as a whole, the apocryphal and other early Christian texts are on the same footing as the canonical ones; all these texts witness to different sorts of Christianity. In this approach, the question of religious truth or divine inspiration is unimportant. This implies that, in principle, sayings of Jesus that occur only in the Gospel of Thomas are equally valuable as canonical sayings.

Thus far, I gave a brief sketch of what I want to expound. Now we will examine the question of Biblical theology and the other, historical approach of early Christianity more in depth.

### **The origin of Biblical theology**

Usually, Johann Philipp Gabler is considered as the scholar who introduced the program of Biblical theology in his inaugural lecture in Altdorf in 1787. Gabler proposed to distinguish between Biblical theology and dogmatic theology. In his view, dogmatic theology was a sort of philosophy that was changeable in the course of the centuries and in different countries. The variations of all sorts of dogmatic theology were brought about by human and other contingent factors. In comparison with dogmatic theology, Gabler considered Biblical theology as a historical discipline that dealt with the religion which is described in the Bible. To be sure, his intention was that Biblical theology would be used as a basis for dogmatic theology. In order that Biblical theology might perform this function, one had to distinguish between the divine and the human or temporary elements in the Bible. Most of the OT institutions were considered as temporary, since Christ had already abolished them. But even the NT contained contingent and human elements, as it appears in Paul’s epistles. As an example, Gabler mentions Paul’s instruction that women have to cover themselves in the assemblies of the congregation. In Gabler’s view, Biblical theology should give a description of the different views of the Biblical authors and of those teachings which, as *dicta classica*, are truly divine. This pure religion should function as the basis for dogmatic theology. Thus, Biblical theology had a mediating function in the whole of theology.

From a modern perspective, it is clear that Gabler’s intention was fairly optimistic and even naïve. For who decides which texts are meant to be divine and classic and which texts are not? However, it is most important that Gabler basically wanted to free the Bible from the way it was used in dogmatic theology, as a book full of proof texts that could sustain the Church doctrine, and that he wanted to point to the Biblical religion as an independent phenomenon. Moreover, he was aware of the fact that the Bible contained different voices, which had to be distinguished before they were put together in one comprehensive system.

## The history of early Christianity

We will skip the studies that have been carried out in line with this program in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and go on to another classic in the history of Biblical theology, namely William Wrede's essay *Über Aufgabe und Methode der sogenannten neutestamentlichen Theologie* (On the Task and Method of the so-called New Testament Theology), of 1897. After mentioning Gabler's lecture and several 19<sup>th</sup>-century studies, he proposed an approach of the matter that differed from Gabler's. Wrede's interest was not to describe the contents or the so-called theology of the NT and of its separate writings. He castigated the minute and utterly detailed studies of his time, in which NT scholars tried to establish far-fetched "theologies" of the different NT authors. Wrede's interest was to establish how early Christianity as a whole had developed and what sort of religion it was. He declared that the doctrine of divine inspiration of the Scriptures and the delimitation of the Biblical canon were of no use for the historical study of early Christianity as he envisaged it. This implies that Clement's epistle to the Corinthians (of ca. 96 CE), the epistles of Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 110), the epistle of (pseudo-) Barnabas, the Didache, apocryphal gospels, Justin Martyr, and whatever other texts give information about the beginnings of Christianity, have the same value, in principle, as Paul, the deuteropauline epistles, the Gospel of John, etcetera. In Wrede's view, the discipline of NT theology had to establish "the history of the early Christian religion and theology". For that reason, he suggested to call the discipline by this name, or: "early Christian history of religion" ("*urchristliche Religionsgeschichte*"). In his view, it cannot be the purpose of historical research of early Christianity to serve the Church, although this may be the scholar's private intention.

We see that Wrede's intention is definitely different from Gabler's: Gabler wanted to free Biblical theology from dogmatic theology, but Wrede wanted to shift from NT theology to the history of early Christianity, without taking account of ecclesiastical motives.

This was written in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but Wrede's program was not fully carried out. Although some important *religionsgeschichtlich* studies on the background of the Bible and the Bible itself were undertaken in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I will not concentrate on the interesting results of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, as it is called (some names: Wilhelm Bousset, Johannes Weiss). The First World War, the rise of Karl Barth's dialectical theology, and the Second World War caused that in general other needs were felt than the purely historical study of the Israelite and early Christian religions. In this context one may refer to Gerhard von Rad's OT theology, which had an important theological impact. In the last decades, several NT theologies were written by, e.g., Hans Conzelmann (1967), Leonhard Goppelt (1976), Joachim Gnilka (1994), Hans Hübner (1990-1995), Georg Strecker (1996), Peter Stuhlmacher (1992-1999), and Ulrich Wilckens (2002). The authors of all of these books tried to give a congenial description of the contents and overall theology of the NT. Their intention is to highlight the *kerygma* about Christ the Saviour or the justification of the impious. As a matter of fact, the NT is considered as a book of the Church, which is to be read for personal and communal edification of faith and which is to be preached about. Another tendency was, to combine OT and NT theologies; thus Brevard S. Childs wrote a *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testament* (1992), and Gisela Kittel published *Der Name über alle Namen* (in two volumes, 1989-1996). These books emphasize the fundamental unity of the Biblical canon and of God's covenant with Israel and the new covenant in Christ. Usually all of these "theologies" were written for other theologians, like Church ministers. Sometimes one can read them as learned sermons. Often the overall content corresponds in some way with the confession of the scholar's Church. E.g., Gisela Kittel centred her two volumes on the theme of faith/confidence in God (OT) and in Jesus Christ (NT). This reminds one of the Lutheran emphasis on justification by faith.

### **The history of early Christianity: recent developments**

For our theme (teaching *newer* insights in biblical theology) it is important to notice that in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Wrede's program was deliberately taken up as a renewal of Biblical theological studies, or even as an alternative to Biblical theological studies. As I noted earlier, I will mainly pay attention to the NT and to early Christianity, not to the OT.

In 1990 the Finnish scholar Heikki Räisänen published *Beyond New Testament Theology*, in which he gave a survey of the history of the discipline (including Gabler and Wrede). He particularly drew attention to the fact that Wrede's program, to study early Christianity from a merely historical standpoint, had not yet been carried out. A second, enlarged printing appeared in 2000.

Perhaps Klaus Berger was influenced by this study – but it is also possible that he had the idea to write a history of the theology of early Christianity directly from Wrede and independently from Räisänen. In any case, in 1994 he published his *Theologiegeschichte des Urchristentums*, yet subtitled *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, of which a second, enlarged printing appeared in 1995. Berger declared that he wanted to carry out Wrede's program. His book is far too thorough and too lengthy to fully review it here, but I will give a brief impression of it. Like in other NT theologies, Berger deals with the function of the OT, the image of God, Christology, soteriology, eschatology, and the sacraments. It is typical for Berger that he explicitly pays attention to mystical experiences, to early Christianity as a charismatic movement, and to metaphorical acts like the holy kiss as a sign of reconciliation. He deals with unusual themes like the apotropaic character of baptism and exorcistic practices, and thus he points to the similarity of the Christian sacraments and contemporary magic. Berger tries to describe the trajectories of early Christian traditions geographically, distinguishing between Palestine, Antioch, Ephesus, and Egypt. In line with Wrede, he refers to the NT and to other writings, like the Gospel of Thomas, other apocryphal gospels, the Apostolic Fathers, and Apologists like Justin Martyr. To give some examples of his “impartial”, historical approach: he considers Simon the Magician (Acts 8:9-24) as a representative of Samaritan Christianity, which had originated independently from the Christians in Jerusalem. Thus, historically speaking, Berger does not accept Luke's polemical description in Acts according to which Samaritan Christians needed the blessing and approbation of the apostles from Jerusalem (§ 89). Likewise, Paul's opponents are presented as Christians in their own right (§ 312-314). Berger looks upon early Christianity as a tree with many ramifications, and does not look for a central or major theme of the whole of the NT.

A disadvantage of Berger's huge book is that it contains much fragmentary information and a lot of speculation about the different traditions. Räisänen concludes (2000, 136) that as a synthesis it is hardly readable – and I agree. Yet it is also refreshing, since it gives an independent and stimulating look on early Christianity in all its embarrassing strangeness and huge diversity.

The last book I want to mention is Gerd Theissen's revision of his lectures on *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion*, held in Oxford in 1998-1999, published in German as *Die Religion der ersten Christen. Eine Theorie des Urchristentums*, in 2000. This book has been highly praised as a really renewing approach of early Christianity. Theissen is positive about the NT theologies that have been written and admits that they are useful for ministers and future ministers. But like Berger, and yet very differently from him, he tries to describe early Christianity historically (“*religionswissenschaftlich*”). He writes that he is a Christian and a minister himself, but in order to write for a broad scientific readership he intends to describe Christianity from the perspective of an outsider. He presents himself like a guide in a cathedral, of which he likes to explain the whole and the details to interested visitors – and not necessarily to believers. He deals with religion as a semiotic phenomenon and as a cultural sign system. In this sign system he distinguishes between myth, rite, and ethos: i.e., the stories about the

gods or God, the sacred acts, and moral behaviour. By means of religion mankind can deal with this world and give sense to life. Religion is a most important social factor and shows how to overcome crises and conflicts. From this perspective, Theissen describes, e.g., how it happened that Jesus was divinized and what early Christian morality was like. Like in NT theologies, Theissen deals with the sacrificial meaning of Jesus' death, but as for its existential truth he tries to keep distance. Like Berger, he pays attention to – as he calls it – the ritual sign language of early Christianity, which is expressed in gestures like the laying on of hands, the washing of feet, the unction of the head or of the whole body, the holy kiss, and he pays attention to speaking in tongues. Theissen is positive about the emergence of the NT canon and critical about second century Gnosticism, which he considers as an adaptation of Christianity to its Hellenistic environment. However, in his view the Gospel of Thomas is neither a Gnostic nor a heretical text, so that it merits to be recognized as yet as a legitimate witness to Christian mysticism. He sums up 11 characteristics of early Christianity which make up its coherence: God, Wisdom, miracles, alienation from God, renewal, the motifs of vicariousness, divine indwelling, faith, love, the change of high and low positions, and judgment. At the end of the book, he tries to show in how far the early Christian religion, and thus the Christian religion as a whole, is plausible. In this final chapter he seems a modern apologist of the Christian faith. He presents himself as a guide in the semiotic cathedral of Christian faith, but it is very difficult for him to deny his Christian conviction. Yet he intends to present his religion from the viewpoint of an outsider.

It is most stimulating to read Theissen's book; I consider it – as many readers do – as an impressive accomplishment. It was written as an alternative to NT theologies, but in fact there is very much of NT theology in it.

As a critical remark about Theissen's attempt, I would repeat that although he tried hard to keep distance from his theme as if he were an outsider, he not always succeeded in doing so. In fact, the Christian preacher Theissen appears both in short inconspicuous evaluative remarks throughout the book, and in the end, where he tries to show the plausibility of early Christianity. I wonder if this book, just like Berger's, will find other readers than those who also read NT theologies: theologians, ministers, and theological students. But since many Christians in Western Europe are not so sure about their religion anymore, they may feel comforted by such a book which is presented as if it had been written from an outsider's perspective. So I think that the inner secularisation of Christianity in Europe is an important reason why Christian theologians appreciate Berger's and Theissen's books. However, I wonder if non-Christian historians, who are interested in early Christianity, will really reach for them, as if finally there are some impartial descriptions of early Christianity. If they do, they may be less hindered by the assumption that everything that is described in it witnesses to God's revelation that is supposed to be true for the readers.

### **Evaluation and conclusion**

An advantage of the historical, *religionsgeschichtlich* approach of early Christianity is that it confronts us with its relative strangeness in comparison with the daily practice of traditional middle-class (“bourgeois”!) Protestantism. These historical studies confront us with a type of Christianity that we can find nowadays among Pentecostals, in independent African Churches, or, e.g., in the Rumanian countryside. If we take early esoteric and Gnostic Christian texts into account, we see some similarity with the convictions of “New Age” Christians. Biblical theologies tend to give a treatment or even a selection of the Biblical material that suits middle-class Protestants or Catholics, but as soon as one abandons this Church interest, the same material appears to contain some neglected features that reappear in charismatic Christianity or in esoteric groups. So the paradox is that the merely historical approach of the NT

and other early Christian texts prepares us for the dialogue with Christian traditions that diverge from our own ones.

## Literature

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