

Apocalypticism and New Testament Theology

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In his article on biblical theology, Krister Stendahl (1962) argued that the distinction between what the Bible meant and what it means only came sharply into focus with the work of the history-of-religion school. This distinction began to have a significant effect on biblical theology in the 1920s. Before that, conservatives and liberals alike were convinced that the Bible contained revelation of eternal truths that could be extracted from the cultural and historical forms in which they were expressed. The conservatives emphasized the passages that fit with their own theological and ethical values and then harmonized the others with those so that they could claim that the whole of scripture was revelatory. The liberals arrived at their notion of pure revelation by more drastic, reductionist measures. By source- and other kinds of criticism, they arrived at the "original" teaching of a prophet or of Jesus, which often fit well with their own values. Karl Barth's commentary on Romans, however, as well as Rudolf Bultmann's Theology of the New Testament and Oscar Cullmann's Christ and Time all reflected, in different ways, consciousness of the historical and cultural distance between the biblical texts and the modern situation. In his own programmatic essay, Stendahl advocated that a distinction be made between descriptive study of the actual theologies that are expressed in the Bible and attempts to construct a normative and systematic theology that could be called biblical.

Stendahl's proposal may be seen as one of the results of a long process of change in the interpretation of the Bible and in hermeneutics, the study of the principles and rules of interpretation, that has been described and analyzed by Hans Frei (1974). In the West before the rise of historical criticism in the eighteenth century, Christian reading of the

Bible was realistic, that is, both literal and historical. Precritical realistic reading assumed that the Bible described historical occurrences and that all of these could be combined into one great narrative that included the past of the biblical writers and the present of the interpreters. Figural reading helped to unify all the stories into one comprehensive narrative. Earlier biblical stories were seen as figures or types of later ones. Beginning already in the seventeenth century, however, readers of the Bible, both progressives and conservatives, began to make a distinction between biblical narrative and historical reality. The question then arose whether the biblical narratives can be confirmed by the study of historical reality. Thus the realistic narrative reading of the Bible began to break down. Literal or verbal meaning was separated from historical meaning. Figurative or typological reading became problematic. It was problematic logically because it came to be assumed that any statement has only one meaning. Historically, it became incredible that sayings and events of one period of time could predict those of a later time. Literal and figural reading, which were once united, came apart. Their successors, historical criticism and biblical theology, had different values and methods and became more and more difficult to combine. The interpreters that Frei studied focused on Genesis 1-3 and the Synoptic Gospels. Much of the discussion, however, is relevant for the theme of apocalypticism, since apocalyptic ideas and expectations are often expressed in narrative form.

A Selective History of Relevant Scholarship

Many see the beginning of the discipline of biblical theology in a lecture of Johann Philipp Gabler (1787). He "was the first to state clearly that dogmatic theology must depend on the results of exegesis, which to him meant historical-critical analysis of the texts" (Frei 1974: 163). Like most interpreters of the late eighteenth century, he gave the subject matter of the texts priority over their actual wording (1974: 254). He attributed a historical origin to biblical theology, but a didactic origin to dogmatic

theology. Dogmatic theology, in his view, teaches what each theologian philosophises rationally about divine things. He argued that one must distinguish between the opinions that pertain only to a particular time and place of the past and those that pertain to the unchanging doctrine of salvation. Gabler did not mention the topic of apocalypticism or eschatology in his lecture. This lack may be explained, in part, by the lecture's quite general and abstract character. Another important factor is that apocalypticism was yet to be "rediscovered" (Koch 1970).

As historical criticism advanced, the unity of the New Testament was questioned, as well as the unity of the Bible as a whole. Hegel interpreted history as a process in which the Spirit was progressively unfolding itself. Ferdinand Christian Baur used this idea as his hermeneutical principle in his New Testament theology (1864). He raised the question whether Jesus' understanding of the kingdom of God was similar to what he called the material ideas that Jews of that time had about the messianic kingdom. His answer was an emphatic no. Jesus spiritualized the concept of the messianic reign to such a degree that nothing was left of those material ideas. On the contrary, the kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus was a community based on ethical and religious conditions, whose ultimate aim lay in the transcendent world (70).

Baur interpreted the parousia and the End in Paul's teaching as the triumph of the principle of life over the principle of death and the overcoming of evil. All creation returns to God and becomes an eternal unity (202-205). Whereas Paul departed from Judaism to the greatest extent among the writers of the New Testament, the author of the book of Revelation, whom he took to be John the son of Zebedee, is the closest to it (211). The thoroughly figurative language of the work is not unique in the New Testament, just more elaborate. He opposed the particularism of the Apocalypse to the universalism of Paul, inferring from chapter seven, for example, that Gentiles are saved only insofar as they join the community of the twelve tribes of Israel (212). In his discussion of the Christology of the book, he remarked that the author speaks from

below. Everything metaphysical is outside his worldview (214-219). Baur's treatment of the work concludes with the comment that the imagistic character of the Apocalypse makes it impossible very often to express its ideas in a particular dogmatic concept (230).

Bernhard Weiss' New Testament theology is an example of the conservative approach in the second half of the nineteenth century (1868; 3rd ed. 1880). His treatment of the delay of the parousia is apologetic and harmonizing. In the section on the return of the Messiah and the judgment, he acknowledged that many passages imply that at least "some of His hearers, will yet see the coming completion of the kingdom of God" (1. 148). He also noted passages that seem to imply a long delay, but declared that it was "mere critical arbitrariness to regard all such statements simply as a later expression of disappointed expectations" (1. 149). Rather, Jesus warned his hearers not to be deceived by false Messiahs and that the end would come suddenly and unexpectedly.

In the same context, Weiss made a valiant attempt to salvage the precritical understanding of the unity of biblical narrative and history. He argued that:

Although the consummation of all things is not brought about in the natural way of historical development, it is nevertheless a condition of its commencement, that the time has become ripe for it (1. 149).

Weiss inferred that, since the judgment is linked to the consummation of all things, the End cannot come until the world has made itself ripe for judgment by "making full the measure of its guilt" (1. 150). He argued that, in the first century, only the Jewish people had filled up the measure of their sins by rejecting the Messiah. Thus, the destruction of Jerusalem was the beginning of the final judgment. In Weiss' theology, the destruction of Jerusalem in the first century serves as a figure or type of the final judgment.

Since Weiss took the position that Paul had written 2 Thessalonians, he was able to harmonize Paul's teaching on the parousia with the synoptic apocalyptic discourse, which he accepted as "Jesus' words of prophecy." Both texts, in his view, express the

expectation that the parousia will also be the day of judgment on which the Antichrist will be annihilated (1. 313-315).

With regard to the book of Revelation, he concluded that the thousand-year reign is the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament, but for the true Israel, rather than literal Israel. Here again, typology serves to unite the two Testaments. This hope for an earthly consummation splits the idea of the day of the Lord into two parts. The first leads to the triumph of the kingdom of God on earth. The second, to its final, heavenly consummation (2. 263).

Whereas Weiss' work is a prominent example of conservative historically oriented New Testament theology, the textbook on the topic by Heinrich Julius Holtzmann (1911) is a liberal example. An important event, however, had taken place between the publication of the third edition of Bernhard Weiss' New Testament theology and the first edition of Holtzmann's. That event was the publication of a book by Bernhard's son, Johannes Weiss (1892). Johannes was also the son-in-law of Albrecht Ritschl, and respectfully delayed the publication of this book until after Ritschl's death. In this work the younger Weiss applied the research of the history-of-religion school to the apocalypticism of the New Testament. In the process, he pointed out the significance for the interpretation of the New Testament of the rediscovery of ancient apocalypticism in the nineteenth century. He argued that the kingdom of God, as proclaimed by Jesus, was not an ethical society to be brought about by human effort, but a radical transformation to be effected by divine power. This new perspective is one with which Holtzmann grappled in constructing his New Testament theology.

Under the influence of the history-of-religion school, Holtzmann interpreted the historical Jesus and all the writings of the New Testament in relation to contemporary forms of Judaism. By reducing the relevant apocalyptic passages through the application of various types of criticism, however, he was able to conclude that only a simple apocalypticism could be attributed to the historical Jesus, which had its characteristic

expression in the metaphor of the "thief in the night" (Luke 12:39/Matt 24:43). The purpose of such apocalypticism is not to communicate eschatological knowledge, but to admonish the audience to faithfulness and watchfulness. Those passages, in contrast, that involve a technical, organized pattern of ideas, serving the quest for eschatological knowledge, belong to a later stage. These synoptic traditions belong to the same category as 2 Thessalonians and the Johannine Apocalypse (1. 403-404). He argued that the history of the exegesis of all these passages manifests a pathological hue. In his view, the religious need for self-deception is evident in these texts. It is impossible to find a logical unity in all the scattered and various synoptic eschatological materials or to avoid the painful fact of a still unfulfilled prophecy. The last remark is made in explicit criticism of Bernhard Weiss (1. 404-405). It is the attractive simplicity of the ethical genius of Jesus that underlies the various forms of Christianity and that keeps his memory alive (1. 418).

Holtzmann viewed the book of Revelation as an artistic example of the genre "apocalypse" attested by contemporary Jewish texts. He followed contemporary exegesis in concluding that the work contained Jewish sources and had come into being in successive stages of composition and editing. It is thus not surprising that he considered it to lack theological coherence and unity: "Unadulterated Judaism and fully developed Christianity lie without any connection side by side" (1. 539-540). The vivid depiction of the end-time serves the work's purpose of rousing and strengthening the spirits of the communities. The result is the extravagant portrait of the future that is characteristic of nationalistic messianism (1. 542).

Karl Barth revived theological-biblical exegesis and challenged the focus on historical research favored by the liberals and the history-of-religion school. In his comment on Rom 7:6a, "But now we have been discharged from the law," he redescribed Paul's eschatology in the following terms:

The heaven which bounds this world of ours is rent asunder in the eternal
'Moment' of apprehension, in the light of resurrection, in the light of God, in order

that our vision may have space to perceive, not what men think and will and do, but what God thinks and wills and does. . . . we stand, nevertheless, already in the primal and ultimate history where all ambiguity, all polarity, every 'not only—but also', is done away, because God is all in all. We stand already where the temporal order, from which we cannot escape, stands over against us as one completed whole, bounded by the Day of Jesus Christ; where we know ourselves to be finally liberated from the coils of our humanity, in which as religious men, we are bound and throttled (1919; 2nd ed. 1922; ET 237).

Barth created a constructive analogy between Paul's language about Law and his own critique of contemporary religion. But his redescription of Paul's eschatology did not take sufficiently into account its temporal dimension and Paul's insistence on individual transformation in a communal context.

Rudolf Bultmann's (1948-1953) theological interpretation of the New Testament dominated much of the twentieth century because he combined the highest level of scholarly research, valued by the liberals and the historians of religion, with the emphasis on the text and theology revived by Barth. Rather than adopt a biblicist position, however, Bultmann took a hermeneutical approach. He included a discussion of the message of Jesus, but only as one of the presuppositions of New Testament theology (1. 3-32). He found the dominant concept of Jesus' message to be the kingdom or reign of God. Like Holtzmann, Bultmann interpreted the notion of the kingdom of God as an eschatological concept. That reign will come in a miraculous way, brought about by God with no human assistance (1. 4). Although Bultmann placed the message of Jesus in the context of Jewish eschatological expectations, he argued that his thought was not determined by the national hope of a restoration of the idealized kingdom of David. Rather, the perspective of Jesus was more similar to the hope attested by Jewish apocalyptic literature, according to which a cosmic catastrophe will abolish all conditions of the present world. He described this type of hope as pessimistic and dualistic: the

present age is evil because Satan has gained control of the world; the new age to come will be glorious (1. 4-5). Like Holtzmann, Bultmann concluded that Jesus took over the apocalyptic picture of the future "with significant reduction of detail" (1. 6). Bultmann redescribed the message of Jesus in terms of existential philosophy. He proposed "that 'eschatological existence' bears all the marks of what Martin Heidegger call[ed] 'authentic existence'" (Kelsey 1975: 77). The exhortation to "Keep ready or get ready" for the reign of God that is breaking in is restated as a "call to decision" in the present time which is "the time of decision" (Bultmann 1948-1953: 1. 9).

Bultmann's discussion of the theology of Paul is organized according to anthropological concepts, not dogmatic or doctrinal topics. There is no separate treatment of Paul's eschatology. The discussion of faith includes the topic "Faith as Eschatological Occurrence." Bultmann took up the common expression "salvation-occurrence," referring to Jesus' death and resurrection, and placed it rightly in its ancient context by rephrasing it as "the eschatological occurrence." He then redescribed the latter in existential terms: faith, as "the newly opened way of salvation" is a "new possibility" for authentic existence. The possibility of faith is actualized in "the individual's decision of faith," which is itself "eschatological occurrence." The "existing of a Christian in the faith that operates in love is eschatological occurrence: a being created anew" (1. 329-330).

The book of Revelation is treated briefly under the headings of "The Development of Doctrine" and "Christology and Soteriology." Bultmann concluded that it "has to be termed a weakly Christianized Judaism" (2. 175).

In the epilogue, Bultmann affirmed that his presentation of New Testament theology stands:

on the one hand, within the tradition of the historical-critical and the history-of-religion schools and seeks, on the other hand, to avoid their mistake which consists of the tearing apart of the act of thinking from the act of living and hence of a failure to recognize the intent of theological utterances (2. 250-251).

He also affirmed that, in this work, the reconstruction of the history of early Christianity stands in the service of the interpretation of the New Testament writings "under the presupposition that they have something to say to the present." Connecting theological thoughts to the act of living means, for him, "explication of believing self-understanding" (2. 251).

Until about 1960, apocalypticism was an obscure field studied by specialists. In that year, however, Ernst Käsemann published an essay in which he argued that "Apocalyptic was the mother of all Christian theology—since we cannot really class the preaching of Jesus as theology" (1960: 102). Around the same time, apocalypticism had attracted the attention of the systematic theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, who argued that the apocalyptic concept of history was "both the presupposition of the historical thinking of the west and the horizon which spans the whole of Christian theology in general" (Koch 1970: 14).

Pannenberg's position may be clarified in comparison with that of G. Ernest Wright. In his book God Who Acts, Wright argued that the authoritative aspect of Scripture is biblical narrative, which is to be construed as confessional recital concerning God's self-revelation in historical events (Kelsey 1975: 32-33). Pannenberg's work is similar to Wright's to the extent that he also finds the authoritative aspect of Scripture in biblical narrative because it reveals God's acts and thus reveals God. He differs from Wright in two important respects. First, Pannenberg argued that revelation occurs by means of history, but not in any particular event or series of events. God can be known only in the final event which provides the vantage point from which all history may be seen as God's activity. The final event is anticipated in the resurrection of Jesus. Secondly, Pannenberg rejected the distinction, made by Wright, between "facts" and "evaluations" and the related notion that revelation occurs when events are interpreted "by the eyes of faith." For Pannenberg, biblical narrative, as word, foretells or promises God's action and forthtells the ethical obligations that revelation imposes. The one event

that can be reported is the resurrection of Jesus because it is the only event that is revelatory in itself (Kelsey 1975: 53-54). By "report" Pannenberg (1961: 154) does not mean "an objective and detached chronological description of" the event of the resurrection, but rather the proclamation that was set in motion by the appearances of Jesus.

Like Gabler, Pannenberg (1991: 7) distinguished between "what is historically relative in the traditional teaching and what is its abiding core." Unlike Gabler, he did not speak about unchanging and truly divine ideas. He did, however, speak about some kind of "truth" that underlies the various historically and culturally determined formulations. Each epoch has to reformulate that truth in its own terms, but "the truth which systematic theology tries to reformulate should recognizably be the same truth that had been intended under different forms of language and thought in the great theological systems of the past and in the teaching of the church throughout the ages" (ibid.). But if, as he admits, the forms of language and thought are "passing," it is hard to see how the "truth" that underlies the various thoughts and forms of language can be discerned. The rationality of his thought and his insistence on a transcendent truth is in tension with the imaginative and figurative language of apocalypticism. Pannenberg (1969: 52) rightly saw, however, that the eschatology of Jesus as expounded by Bultmann and the young Barth "is timeless and deprived of its temporal meaning."

Some later developments will be discussed in the next section.

Approaches to New Testament Theology in a Pluralistic Situation

There are two main ways of construing the audience and purpose of New Testament theology. One way is to say that the activity of constructing such a theology takes place in and for the Church. David Kelsey has provided an analogous construal for theology in general. He has argued that Scripture is not a "perfect source" for theology and that the relation between Scripture and theology is not genetic. The normativity of

Scripture for theology means that theological proposals ought to be apt in a Christian way. In other words, theological proposals "are assessed over against a discrimen," that is, a pair of criteria, namely, "the presence of God among the faithful in conjunction with the uses of scripture in the church's common life" (1975: 193). The other way to construe New Testament theology is to say, as Bultmann did in his epilogue, that the discipline stands in the service of the interpretation of the New Testament writings "under the presupposition that they have something to say to the present" (2. 251). This general formulation suggests that it is worthwhile to interpret the New Testament in a way that may be intelligible to unbelievers as well as to believers. The work of Paul Tillich seems to have had a similar goal, as have all projects described as "public theology" (Tracy 1981).

Even if one decides to produce a work of New Testament theology for the Church, one needs to come to terms with the fact that the Church is diverse. Not only that, but many denominations themselves are made up of members with widely varying views about what it means to be Christian. So for both reasons, the desirability of constructing a public New Testament theology and the diversity of the Church, it is wise to affirm that apocalypticism may be related to theology in a variety of ways. This variety may be imagined as positions on a spectrum that ranges from those based on non-theistic philosophical approaches at one end to fundamentalist approaches at the other.

The work of Max Horkheimer is an example of non-theistic philosophical thought which could serve as a starting point for articulating the significance of apocalypticism today. Horkheimer, a critical theorist of the Frankfurt School, saw the critical task of philosophy "in salvaging the truth in religion in the spirit of the Enlightenment" (Habermas 2002: 95-96). In his view,

The productive form of criticism directed to the way things are, which expressed itself in earlier periods as belief in a heavenly judge, is today the struggle for more reasonable conditions in social life (Horkheimer 1970: 36).

He "once expressed the quintessence of his critical theory in the remark: "The longing that the murderer should not triumph over his innocent victim"" (Moltmann 1973: 223; Horkheimer 1970: 11). He considered "the longing for perfect righteousness" to be characteristic of living religion. Perfect righteousness

can never be realized in secular history; for even if a better society were to resolve the present social disorder, it could not make good past misery nor neutralize past distress in an all-embracing nature (1970: 69).

In Moltmann's account of Horkheimer's critical theory, "innocent suffering puts the idea of a righteous God in question," and conversely, "longing for the righteousness of the wholly other puts suffering in question and makes it conscious sorrow." Consciousness of sorrow is a protest against suffering that is "not content with any answer and keeps the question alive" (Moltmann 1973: 225).

Tina Pippin's (1992) feminist reading of the book of Revelation may be placed at the non-theistic, public end of the spectrum. In her book she moves from ideological and political readings to Marxist-feminist readings and makes use of studies of the fantastic in her interpretation. Her main methods are ideology-critique and narratology. Her study is one critical way of asking what this apocalyptic work has to say in the present.

Again with respect to the non-theistic end of the spectrum, let us consider how the work of Jürgen Habermas may provide a framework for interpreting apocalypticism in the context of a public theology. Habermas was one of Horkheimer's successors in the Frankfurt School. He argued against Horkheimer's late philosophical thought by stating, for instance:

The idea that it is vain to strive for unconditional meaning without God betrays not just a metaphysical need; the remark itself is an instance of the metaphysics that not only philosophers but even theologians themselves must today get along without (2002: 96).

Habermas characterizes modernity or postmodernity as "postmetaphysical" because he believes that Immanuel Kant and others have offered an "irreversible critique of metaphysics" (2002: 99; Meyer 2004: 128). He thus rejects an absolute or theistic understanding of unconditional meaning. Instead, he adopts Charles Peirce's pragmatic understanding of language and reason and proposes a more modest "transcendence from within," which is grounded in the inescapable presupposition of an ideal communication community that underlies the validity claims of everyday speech. It is this more modest secular hope, which "recovers the meaning of the unconditional without recourse to God or an Absolute," that distinguishes postmetaphysical thought from religion (Habermas 2002: 108; Meyer 2004: 128).

Although Habermas "denies the cognitive claims and public role of religion, [he] has, over the past few decades, come to accept a limited role for religion as a source of private consolation" (Meyer 2004: 129). He distinguished the philosophical "significance of unconditionality" from:

an unconditional meaning that offers consolation. On the premises of postmetaphysical thought, philosophy cannot provide a substitute for the consolation whereby religion invests the unavoidable suffering and unrecompensed injustice, the contingencies of need, loneliness, sickness and death, with new significance and teaches us to bear them (Habermas 2002: 108).

The consolation of which Habermas spoke is a particularly powerful effect of apocalyptic texts of the New Testament. The book of Revelation depicts suffering in the framework of a conflict between the creator, the redeemer and those loyal to them, on one side, and the deceitful, slanderous Satan along with the murderous and exploitative powers associated with him, on the other side. In an important step toward the Christian idea of the martyr, Revelation portrays the one who suffers because of loyalty to the forces of creation and redemption as a "witness" and boldly describes such suffering and death as "conquering." The Gospel of Mark employs an apocalyptic trope in arguing in a narrative

way that it was necessary that the Son of Man suffer, die, and rise from the dead. In its teaching on discipleship, the suffering that the followers of Jesus meet is depicted as taking up one's cross and following Jesus. Suffering or death resulting from the violence of other human beings or from any other cause is transfigured and made meaningful by association with the account of Jesus' suffering, death and ultimate vindication.

At the other end of the spectrum are fundamentalist interpretations like those of Hal Lindsey. A strength of Lindsey's interpretation of the book of Revelation is his recognition of its deep and extensive political character. Weaknesses are the one-dimensional interpretation of biblical symbols and the lack of a critical attitude to the politics of American society (Yarbro Collins 1984, 1986; Rowland 1998: 543-544).

In contrast to Lindsey, William Stringfellow rejected the common practice of construing the Bible from an American perspective and aimed at understanding the America of the early 1970s biblically (1973: 13). Instead of the usual procedure of identifying the beast and other figures of chaos and evil with the enemies of the United States, he applies those images to America, as a death-dealing world power.

Near the same end of the spectrum, are evangelical and other conservative Christians of our time who can read or hear the apocalyptic narratives of the New Testament in a way similar to the precritical, realistic mode described by Hans Frei. Some of these readers, like Hal Lindsey, take the texts literally and still work at harmonizing their diverse perspectives and expectations. Others take them seriously, but not quite so literally. The important thing for them is the fulfillment of prophecies about the return of Christ and the last judgment, to be followed by appropriate rewards and punishments.

A number of positions occupy the middle of the spectrum. Some of these are explicitly theistic; others are not. One such position is analogous to "the fundamental moral intuition that guided Horkheimer throughout his life" (Habermas 2002: 96). This is the approach that interprets apocalyptic literature in terms of moral education and

formation. One could argue, as Socrates does in the Phaido, that the stories about the fate of the dead, which describe a better afterlife for those who have led good lives and terrible punishments for egregious sinners, are not certainly true, but likely. Or, one could suspend disbelief and experience the rhetorical power of the narratives in a kind of second naiveté. The latter seems to be the approach suggested by Plato's Socrates, when with humor and irony he describes language about the afterlife as "magical spells" that we should sing to each other every day in order to heal our souls (Phaido 77e, 115e; Klauck 2004: 20).

As Lautaro Lanzillotta has argued, "The moral educational purpose of apocalyptic literature" is evident in "its subjects, its characters, and its scenarios" (2003: 133). Often, "the scenario of the Last Judgement. . . displays before the eyes of the righteous a complete inversion of the unjust state of things according to a system of values implicitly defended by the text." The chaotic situation in which the wicked and the unjust prosper and oppress the weak, the defenseless and the innocent will be transformed into order when all receive appropriate retribution for their deeds. The readers or audiences of apocalyptic texts are moved to accept the normative values in the displayed value-system, which provides "the touchstone for correct behaviour" (Lanzillotta 2003: 134-35).

Some apocalypses, such as Daniel and the book of Revelation, take up traditional combat myths, normally used to assimilate the human king to the divine king and to celebrate the establishment, renewal or continuation of a particular king's reign. Daniel and Revelation, however, invert the myths so that the current human king is associated with the rebellious monster, rather than with the god who conquers the beast (Yarbro Collins 1998: 176-184). A similar revolutionary perspective is evident in the implicit moral teaching of apocalyptic texts. The day of the Last Judgment describes the fall of those whose consistently unjust and exploitative behavior has established the norm of the status quo. The scenario in which their fall is narrated "implies the superseding of the

unjust current system of values by a righteous one." Apocalyptic texts may therefore also be called revolutionary from a moral perspective, since their vivid depiction of judgment, reward and punishment subverts what counts as acceptable behavior in the present (Lanzillotta 2003: 136).

Another position in the middle of the spectrum is the liberal strategy of deriving abstract ideas from the narrative detail of the texts. This activity is not so different from some kinds of precritical reading. Besides the realistic historical kind of reading, precritical interpretation included a distinction between the "narrative level of the Bible and the deeper theological meaning or spiritual significance implicit within it" (Steinmetz 1997: 27). In his essay on the superiority of precritical exegesis, David Steinmetz has argued that "What appears to be history may be metaphor or figure. . . . The interpreter must demythologize the text in order to grasp the sacred mystery cloaked in the language of actual events" (28).

For example, one could argue that apocalyptic texts express the idea of the sovereignty of God over all creation, that is, over time, space and human destiny. Such a deity is the classic dogmatic Deus revelatus. Or, in cases like Mark's affirmation that Jesus' death was part of the divine plan, one could argue that a God who makes such a plan is a hidden God, a Deus absconditus (Guttenberger 2004: 343-344).

R. H. Charles praised the authors of apocalyptic texts for transforming the traditional expectation of an endless "existence in the unblessed abode of Sheol or Hades" into "the hope of a blessed immortality" (1914: 9-10, 17-18). Charles also defended the value of apocalypticism against scholars like "Harnack in Germany and Professor Porter in Yale University" (15). He argued, against most scholars of his time, that the move from prophecy to apocalypticism was not a decline, but an advance, because it grasped the unity of all history—human, cosmological and spiritual—"a unity following naturally as a corollary of the unity of God preached by the prophets" (24); whereas the scope of prophecy was limited with regard to space and time, "that of

apocalyptic was as wide as the universe and as unlimited as time" (32). With regard to ethics, Charles confirmed the consensus that prophecy was "the greatest ethical force in the ancient world" (29). But he rejected the attempt by "advanced liberals" to differentiate prophecy and apocalypticism "on the ground that apocalyptic and ethics are distinct, and that ethics are the kernel and apocalyptic the husk, which Christianity shed when it ceased to need it" (30). In the language of his time, Charles affirmed the unity of form and content in apocalyptic texts, arguing that apocalyptic language as such is imbued with ethical import.

Another approach that may be placed on the middle of the spectrum is the process of interpretation in which analogies are found between a biblical text and its way of addressing its original situation and the way the interpreter wishes to address a contemporary situation. The book of Revelation played such a role in late-twentieth-century liberation theology. In her preface to a short commentary on the book of Revelation, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1981) made an analogy between the deaths of Oscar Romero, Elisabeth Käsemann, Karen Silkwood and Steve Biko, on the one hand, and those murdered unjustly in John's time. Allan Boesak related the images of the beast and Babylon to the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. The notes in the Brazilian Bíblia Sagrada aimed at putting the book of Revelation into dialogue with the situation of its readers, recalling Christians to a prophetic role of involvement in liberating activity. The goal is radical transformation, the birth of a new world of justice. John's Apocalypse played a similar role in the basic ecclesial communities in Latin America (Rowland 1998: 547-549). A related way of reading Revelation in the northern hemisphere is:

as revealing the true nature of a world in which violence and destruction are prevalent. The story of the Lamb who is slain offers a critique of human history and of our delusions, of the violence we use to maintain the status quo, and of the lies with which we disguise the oppression of the victim (Kovacs & Rowland 2004: 249-250).

This self-critical approach has some of the same virtues as Stringfellow's reading.

Some Recent Developments

In 2004, I. Howard Marshall published his New Testament Theology, subtitled Many Witnesses, One Gospel. His approach has four stages. First he describes the theology of the individual documents. Second he analyzes the theology of each work with regard to its theological framework, "central thrust" and "detailed outworking of it." Third he explores, to some extent, the development of "these various expressions of theology," and fourth, considers the degree to which the various theologies may be synthesized (46-47). He treats the books of the New Testament in groups, arranged roughly in canonical order.

In a preface to his discussion of the book of Revelation, Marshall expresses his main interpretive principles: 1. that the purpose of the book is "to prepare and encourage a group of churches. . . to face a future in which faith would be tried to the limit" (548); 2. "a theological presupposition" underlying the work is "that it is possible to foretell what is going to happen by the will of God and also how people will respond to it." He concludes that the theology of Revelation "does not differ significantly in its broad features from that of the other books" of the New Testament (578). Basically, he sees the work as "a highly symbolical account of the ongoing conflict between God and the evil forces opposed to him" (548).

Although Marshall's theological commitments are relatively conservative and his book is published by InterVarsity Press, his approach has much in common with those of the liberal modernists.

Earlier this year, Frank Matera published an article in the Catholic Biblical Quarterly entitled "New Testament Theology: History, Method, and Identity." He gives a brief history of the discipline and discusses some recently published theologies of the New Testament. He treats the works of Georg Strecker and Joachim Gnilka under the

heading "Diachronic Approaches" and those of G. B. Caird and François Vouga under the heading "Thematic Approaches." He also discusses the works of Peter Stuhlmacher and Ferdinand Hahn, but finds them more difficult to categorize.

In his own view, the goal of New Testament theology is to "seek to provide a theological interpretation of the New Testament that integrates and relates the diverse theologies of the New Testament into a unified whole without harmonizing them, as elusive as this task may be" (16).

As a way to achieve this goal, he proposes taking "into account the implied narrative that underlies what the NT writings claim about Israel, Jesus and the church," thus communicating what the "writings say about God through the narratives they tell or presuppose" (16). A narrative approach, in his view, can disclose "the way in which particular writings or blocks of material inscribe the story of Christ and the story of the church into the story of Israel" (17).

He proposes beginning with the four Gospels, continuing with Acts, and then the Pauline corpus, Hebrews and the Catholic Epistles. "The Book of Revelation would then serve as an appropriate conclusion to a narrative NT theology by pointing to the final victory of the Lamb."

The narrative approach proposed by Matera has the great strength of providing a framework and a procedure that is both theologically and literarily satisfying and appropriate. It has, however, one major weakness. It is, at root, a revival of the precritical realistic reading of the Bible. If a realistic reading of the New Testament can be done in a post-critical way, well and good. But the danger is that aspects of the grand narrative may be taken uncritically as history, for example, the role of the Jews in the death of Jesus.

Conclusion

So where do things stand with the proposal by Krister Stendahl with which this address began? The project of attempting to understand and describe what a particular passage, book of the Bible or biblical writer "meant" is clear enough in its aims and

methods. The interpretive community of historical critics has rules and procedures that are applied in judging whether an article or book is successful in its attempt to do so. But when biblical scholars attempt to articulate the meaning that a passage, book or biblical writer has for their own time, the distinction that Stendahl called for is not made, at least not in a clear and clean manner. It seems that when biblical scholars aim at expressing "what it means," they do not begin with a historical description of what the relevant part of Scripture "meant." Rather they read and construe Scripture in a different manner.

The most successful of the works of New Testament theology treated here is Bultmann's. Although there are important dimensions of the texts that he did not take up into his theological interpretation, his work was effective in large part because he did not distinguish between "what it meant" and "what it means" in his works addressed to a general audience. He began with description of the texts from a historical point of view, but moved quickly and almost imperceptibly from that approach into a deceptively simple philosophical and theological reading. His work is like a seamless garment in which the textual and the historical are woven together with the philosophical and the theological threads. Another reason for his success, from a scholarly point of view, is that his theological interpretation did not conflict unduly with the historical readings of his time. The omissions were significant—the communal and the cosmic dimensions—but his redescriptions had a recognizable structure or shape that could be seen to "fit" the texts, even when read historically. His redescriptions were obviously not identical with the texts as historically read, but they were congruent with them.

Bultmann's synthesis is of course dated today, since existential philosophy no longer has the appeal it had in the mid-twentieth century. For the future, I would argue that Stendahl's proposal be heeded by those who aim at a historical reading of New Testament and related texts. Theological warrants should never be used to justify historical claims. Those, however, who aim at a theological interpretation need not, and probably should not, begin with the results of historical analysis of the texts. What is

needed is a wholistic approach that construes the text in terms of the interpreter's philosophical and theological premises or in terms of whatever conceptual framework takes the place of such premises. Theological interpretations that avoid contradicting the results of historical study, however, are likely to be more persuasive than those that do.

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