

Thomas Fabisiak  
History of Interpretation Seminar  
Vernon K. Robbins  
Fall 2005, revised October, 2009

### **“I have another Law”: Ruptures and Reconfigurations of Authority in the Modern Interpretation of the New Testament**

The following documents a series of ruptures and reconfigurations of authority - whether that of the canon, the church, positive history, or theological and anthropocentric notions of God and humanity - in the history of the interpretation of the New Testament since the era of the Protestant Reformation and the early enlightenment. I begin with Martin Luther, whose reading of Paul's treatment of the law in Galatians epitomizes the general movement that I then follow in a number of other cases: Luther's attack on the "law" resituates it at a deeper level, internalizing the law, in effect, while claiming to transcend it and to establish "freedom" in its stead, in keeping with his reading of Paul. In this case as in those that follow through the last three hundred years or so, there is an initial, oppositional break with consecrated forms and dogmas that then contributes to the establishment of new, often more subtle and equally sanctified forms. The latter can be more or less theological.

The narrative that follows from these transformations mingles a sense of progress, especially in considering the numerous fractures and dislocations of authoritative discourses and dogmas that have taken place since the enlightenment era, with a sense of wariness about any claims to have sloughed off dogma, myth, or ideology once and for all. Thus I attempt to stay true to the oppositional, critical movement of the enlightenment while being as self-reflective as possible about its various shortcomings and self-betrayals. To that end, this narrative does not follow an exclusively direct and linear progress, but a series of transformations, each of which is bound to a particular context, and none of which can ever be said to have totally assimilated or done justice to those that preceded it - or to have perfectly prepared the way for what followed. In some cases, as in that of the neo-orthodox interpreters, the interpreters in question engage in an overt effort to salvage certain authoritative theological views. In doing so they sometimes neutralize or reduce the effect of what may have been perceived as threatening, countervailing discourses - to transform Heideggerian existentialism into a theistic or kerygmatic, Christian discourse, for example. In most of the other cases, as in that of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century history of religions school, there is an authentic effort to move into a broader

context of historical and textual inquiry in opposition to any dogma, but there is also an inevitable tendency to run into other, and unexpected ethical or philosophical problems, of, for example, orientalism. I strive in each case to take the interpreters in question seriously, and not to reduce the real contributions of their work, but I also strive to recognize these sometimes problematic dimensions in keeping with insights from the last thirty years from feminists, postcolonial interpreters, cultural studies work on the Bible, and the literary, sociological, and ideological-critical interpretation of the New Testament. In each case, I include the interpreters-in-question's treatment of specific New Testament pericopes. In doing so I aim, first, to demonstrate how they proceeded by focusing on their reading practices. At the same time, however, I aim to show how the biblical text shaped the debate in question, and even how certain transforming conceptions of history, politics, and interpretation drew on the texts which they scrutinized and reconfigured the discourses with which they were exegetically imbricated.

The paper, which is a collation of the shorter seminar papers that we wrote each week during the fall of 2005, moves from Luther to the enlightenment, where I focus in particular on D.F. Strauss and F.C. Baur, then proceeds to the history of religions school at the end of the nineteenth century; from there, I turn to form, source and redaction criticism, and to the apologetic, neo-orthodox interpretations of Karl Barth and Rudolph Bultmann, which are in many ways a reaction to the various ruptures that preceded them, especially to the history of religions school; I turn at the end to the "new quest" for the historical Jesus' return to a form of exceptionalism, and to possibilities suggested by the materialist turn of the social scientific study of the Bible. At the end, I include my seminar paper on deconstruction as an appendix. I have not included it in the body of the paper, in part because it is in many ways as much a response to Thistelton's criticism of deconstruction as it is an examination of any method. However, I have also put it to the side because it encapsulates and reiterates a number of my own motives in reading the various modern interpreters considered here, as well as my overall critical orientation during the course of the seminar, which I considered at the time to have been broadly "deconstructive" in the way that I framed it in that paper.

### **Martin Luther on law and freedom**

From its earliest stages the enlightenment was punctuated by attempts to perceive, whether in the empirical workings of the world or in the abstractions of axiomatic speculation, a moral and rational order at work. Thus Newton, Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Deists confounded

the notions of God and nature, inferring secret natural laws that worked mechanically beneath the apparent confusion of life. There was an increasing sense that individual human reason, purged of institutional obscurantism and illusion, could discover this hidden machinery, a notion that was reinforced in the controversies between the church and Galileo for example. The very term ‘Enlightenment’ resounds with the notion of reason’s beneficent trespass against institutional and worldly darkness, like the logos emerging into John’s prologue. The rhetoric of enlightenment is a Christian rhetoric.

Luther’s declaration that he would stand by what he had written “unless convinced of the contrary by Holy Scripture and clear reason” indicates to some degree how the enlightenment mentality would manifest itself in biblical scholarship. On the one hand, there was the pietistic fascination with the literal meaning of the text and the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, and on the other the humanistic turn to history, literature, philology, and the human mind. Together these opened onto the optimistic, and at times controversial, exploration of the written word: where the empirical and objective study of nature could uncover the foundational machinery of God, the objective and literalist study of the bible could perceive the true meaning therein as God had inscribed it. This hermeneutical process tended to undergird the turn away from heaven toward the human subject and the textual object, gradually apotheosizing human freedom and individual consciousness while still maintaining the primacy of the word of God. Insofar as it moved revelation discursively into the hands of the skilled interpreter, and religious goods into the hands of the masses (i.e. in Luther’s translation of the Bible into German), this transformation was democratizing and anti-institutional. It had a defetishizing tendency insofar as it revealed the way in which texts taken as given were in fact historically formed and contingent, so that already in the fifteenth century Lorenzo Valla had used philology and historical criticism to undermine the apparent validity of the *Donation of Constantine*, and the discovery and emerging study of multiple New Testament manuscripts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries began to work, albeit slowly at first, against the notion of a fixed and given text. However, this enlightenment turn in itself did nothing to undermine the fact that interpretation should conform to dominant traditional ideals, so that Luther tended to be very conservative in notable ways even while espousing a break with the church. What’s more, the freedom of rational thought to explore the world without being beholden to religious conviction was ultimately only the freedom of discourse contrasted to the worldly imperative of physical obedience (thus Kant

writes in “What is Enlightenment?”, “*Argue*, as much as you want and about whatever you want, *but obey!*”(Kant, accessed online October 17, 2009)). The critical point, however, is that reformation and enlightenment interpreters found, in the turn to a free and divinely ordained human mind/spirit lodged within and determined by the demands of the external order, a leverage point by which the boundaries of the discursive universe could be manipulated, by which what was considered to be natural and God-ordained could be determined anew. Thus God’s law and humanly given laws were opposed as the respectively natural and arbitrary, but, conversely, it was only through the power of the human mind that the former could be determinable.

These various facets of enlightenment thinking are reflected in Luther’s reading of Paul’s letters. Here, the notion of an inner freedom defending itself against an external law is directed against the Catholic Church, which Luther imagines as a bastion of corrupt dogma perpetuating unreasoning law onto its subjects. Once this law is relegated to the external ‘old’ man, there is an ensuing ‘freedom of conscience’ that cannot be controlled by the external requirements of Church dogma. However, Luther’s notion of law then begins to creep from the members into the psyche, from an external obligation to the natural/godly predilection concealed underneath layers of blood and tissue. Like Newton’s natural law, Luther-Paul imagines an invisible law that is inconsistent with human law because it is founded internally before the law was externally applied. “I have another Law,” writes Luther-Paul, “which is grace and freedom. This Law accuses the accusing Law and damns the damning law” (Meeks, 241). The deviant or lawless human is therefore not the one who sins against the external law but the individual who sins against the law of nature or God itself: “the works of the flesh are manifest, which are fornication, uncleanness, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, strife, jealousy, wraths, squabbles, dissensions, heresies, envyings, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, which I forewarn you, even as I did forewarn you, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God,” writes Paul (Gal. 5:19-21). Luther echoes the sentiment in describing those who would not tread ‘freedom of conscience’ lightly: “they give in to their desires and turn to greed, sexual desire, pride, envy, etc.... *It is impossible for this people of Gomorrah to be ruled by the gospel of love*” (Meeks, 249). We ultimately read in the Lutheran Galatians a freedom radically subjected, a lawlessness of internalized law, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control; against such there is no

law.” (Galatians 5:22-23). Freedom is only for those who already work by the inner law of the spirit, just as it is only available to those who operate by the inner workings of reason among the enlightened. The notion of universal law directed by reason then, in spite of its pretensions to democratic universality, serves to reinforce notions of that which is deviant, and, in this sense, lawless, godless, and unnatural. Thus while seeming to work in a socially and politically liberative fashion, it simultaneously reinscribes certain socially and politically conservative values as all the more fundamental; instead of constraining the physical actions of the human through an external law, it limits the movement of the body by constructing a universal soul.<sup>1</sup>

In a sense, then, the contours of a symbolic universe in which ‘the law’ is inscribed are perhaps opened to a new kind of critical leverage, but this leverage is only available as long as it meets the demands of the determined boundaries of a preexisting social and moral ‘universal’ order. Conversely, the seeming universality of ‘naturally’ or ‘rationally’ determinable laws is always structured by their objective contingency, by their openness to argument. So, for example, Luther-Paul imagines a singular truth and decries factionalism but at the same time is a center of controversy (Paul is depicted as a brawler and a rabble rouser in the anonymous “Persecutor of the Faith”, and is clearly directing Galatians against other early Christians, and Luther splits with the church where Erasmus, in some ways more radical, remains). There are a whole series of splits, cracks, or crises that therefore take place as new foundations for truth come into conflict; notably the Protestant split, of course, and the many schisms which took place in its wake especially in nineteenth century America. A multiplicity of revelations emerges alongside a multiplicity of empirical or formalistic visions of fundamental truth based on *a priori* givens. And each of these must struggle not only to justify what it determines from these givens, but ironically what it takes as *a priori* or revealed in the first place.

### **Myth and history in the enlightenment**

Thus, centripetal and centrifugal forces prove to be inextricably interwoven. The opening of dogma to demystification is in some sense always a prelude to a newly constructed self-evident universe, and one that can only become self-evident as it moves from the realm of history, contingency, and conflict, to the secure world of apparent naturalness or God-given-ness, of ‘myth’. By ‘myth’ I mean Roland Barthes’ idea of myth, namely form divested of history and

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<sup>1</sup> I take this notion of the soul becoming a prison for the body from Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, where it is admittedly applied to a different era and set of circumstances.

filled with a new historically motivated content that has all the appearances of being natural and timeless. So a picture depicting a black man saluting the French flag in 1957 has only traces of the history of that man, the flag, what he's wearing etc. which are ignored as it becomes an emblem for the timelessness and naturalness of the French empire. The same thing happens when the phrase 'ego nominor leo' is presented in a latin textbook; it's no longer the historical utterance 'ego nominor leo' (as spoken by an historical lion), but the representation of a whole system of learning, grammar, etc. that is understood implicitly by the student (Barthes, 109-158). Conversely, the humanist-enlightenment turn to history hones the intellectual process of demystification or defetishization, of rendering the apparent timelessness of a mythical image in terms of its historical particularity, which in turn is to render what appears apolitical (like 'God' at first, and like 'nature', as the enlightenment mindset grows in dominance) in socially and politically situated terms. The opening of the quest for the historical Jesus, for example, is the opening of a mythologized image, one that appears to transcend historical particularity while communicating an apparently timeless content, to the possibility of social, political, and historical situatedness in the world. To work against myth, then, is not only to think against the supernatural as that which exceeds natural law, but is also simultaneously to think against the 'taken-for-granted' as that which constricts humanity's 'natural' movement in the interest of socio-religiously dominant groups.

None of this is to say that once we have determined an historical lion or an historical Jesus it will mean we have triumphed over myth. Indeed, it's typically easier to find mythmaking at work in the past than it is now. Among members of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Tübingen school, as in the historical lives of Jesus and the work of Schleiermacher or the rationalists, we can find a great deal: Bruno Bauer's notion of true religion as man overcoming nature, Renan's gentle Jesus on the doe-eyed donkey, or Venturini's sense that Jesus was compelled by historical circumstance to perform miracles, for example, have their own self-evident truths inscribed in them. Not to mention the fact that for D.F. Strauss or Thomas Jefferson to rethink the historical contents of the New Testament they had to have an intuitively ingrained and self-evident conception of what constituted natural law. In all of these cases the modern interpreter can easily find form divested of history and hardened into a seeming timelessness. Renan's gentle Jesus presents itself as natural as much as Bauer's idea of a dominating authority holding humanity's spirit in check from the time of the Roman empire to his present. Schweitzer's *Quest*

*of the Historical Jesus* argues successfully that each manifestation of the historical Jesus is only a reflection of the place and era in which Jesus was depicted, that the transformation of history into myth took place even in the strictest rationalism (which tended to make the historical Jesus a rationalist) or philosophical idealism (which tended to make the historical Jesus a philosopher). To write Jesus in rationalistic terms is in fact not to elevate the historical Jesus, but to focus on the figure of an idealized rationalism, which is the true subject of the ensuing narrative. Again, then, the demystifying turn of intellectual freedom only serves to underwrite the emergence of a new hegemony of understanding; there is no once and for all demystification. Most notably, the singularities of church dogma and political authority are fragmented into the multiplicity of competing claims for origins and original revelation, but the quest for origins itself, as the quest for a genealogical foundation for worldly authority, remains unquestioned.

D.F. Strauss' *Life of Jesus* represents a fascinating series of developments in this context, and in particular consideration of the question of "myth." Strauss undermines the historical pretensions of the New Testament stories about Jesus by reading them as one form of ancient mythoi among others. He distinguishes between those myths that have historical facts at their root, but which, through a process of narrative snowballing, have evolved into myths, and myths that are utterly unfounded. The former and the latter are both, in his view, the product of communities, unlike legendary material which is supplied by the author for narrative purposes, but in the unfounded myths we find the deliberate work of deceit in the interest of some ideological need. As far as the ideologically motivated myths are concerned, the more particular party affiliations are invested in a story the more likely it is ahistorical; as for those with supernatural contents, the case is the same the more a myth departs from natural law. Thus Strauss turns from taking for granted the contents of the story (which the rationalists tended to do) in favor of exploring the way in which the story was formed, and what its formal characteristics mean. The turn to myth is thus in some sense always a turn away from content and towards form, which takes the place of content as that which the story communicates. To suggest that this formality overwhelms the historical content, as Strauss does in opposition to former supernaturalist and rationalist readings, is to undermine the historical value of the text in general, and to radically call into question its whole historicizing mythology. The New Testament offers a particularly interesting case for a Barthesian analysis, since the gospels present their mythical content in a resolutely historical narrative form. In many ways we might

ask if this historicizing movement is not intrinsic to the whole apparatus of Western mythologizing, even when it takes the more recent forms on which Barthes fixates. As a result, Strauss “demythologizes” at the same time that he “mythologizes,” that is, at the same time that he elides “empirical history,” in the mode of the rationalists, in favor of a history of mythoi. Many of Strauss’ contemporaries found this break with history to be profoundly threatening, as the “history” of the esteemed “personality” of the God-man is transformed, in Strauss’ hands, to a history of communities’ traditions. Just as importantly, Strauss reduced the story of Jesus to a myth “like any other” religious story from any other religion, in the vein of many enlightenment interpreters, and presaging, for example, the history of religions school.

Strauss notes in the preface to the *Leben Jesu* that the birth narratives, along with the resurrection, were among the first parts of the gospel narratives to succumb to mythologizing interpretations in the recent past in his own era. He analyzes them, according to his typical procedure, by first showing the inadequacy of supernaturalist and rationalist interpretations, and then showing how the mythical interpretation offers a more satisfying explanation. He notes that Gabler had described the birth narratives as products of the mythical mentality of their age, demanding, for example, that angels be present at the birth of an exalted individual. Nevertheless, Strauss notes that Gabler’s initial step in the direction of a mythical explanation is compromised by his continued reliance on certain details that he takes as historical, namely the birth in a shepherd’s dwelling. Strauss, on the contrary shows that this notion of the birth before shepherds is perfectly suited to ancient narrative forms, so that, for example, it is comparable to Romulus’ story as told by Livy. For Strauss, all of the details of the narrative can be traced in this way, to their deep imbrication in related traditions and in messianic expectations.

Thus Strauss’ “demythologizing” develops a rather complicated and challenging relationship to historicity, as well as to mythology, by focusing on the peculiarly historical-mythological narratives of the New Testament and resituating their mythical, and historical dimensions. He also opens up the fascinating possibility of situating the Bible firmly within a plethora of ancient texts. It bears insisting, still, that he never entirely does away with the historical Jesus, contra some of his worst detractors. What’s more, Strauss sought in many ways to return to the theological “kernel” of Christianity, precisely by moving away from a historical reading - away from, for example, the rationalist interpretations that pictured Jesus in largely



negative terms, to one that could hold on to the intrinsic truth of Christianity. Many of his subsequent editions reflected this increasingly apologetic and dogmatic tendency.

### **F.C. Baur and the matters of universality and division**

Strauss represents one among a number of democratizing and anti-authoritarian tendencies exemplified by certain radical interpreters during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In many ways his work is, as F.C. Baur argued, a culmination and reproduction of certain key insights from this era, rather than the devastating and original work for which it had been taken. During this time, there came to be an emerging textual plurality, not only in the many manuscripts uncovered and unleashed by textual criticism, but in the voices recoverable from the New Testament. The synoptics were divided from John, Peter was divided from Paul, and Jesus was divided from the epistolary authors. Thus for example F.C. Baur's work on Paul sought out original Christian 'thought' and found it in Paul, rather than in the depiction of Jesus in the gospels: Jesus had been, for nineteenth century thinkers in the Hegelian mold, a great idealist, reaching through self-willed intellectual-spiritual investigation into the heavens of philosophical forms. His character and ideals were elevated, even if his historical personage could not be anything more than conforming to the natural laws of the universe and the sociocultural manifestations of the era. It was not his body, or the physical effects of his miracles that lay at the root of his power, but the penetrating insight of his thought. This philosophical thought, moreover, is precisely what divided Jesus from his historical circumstances and rendered him universal, infinite, immortal. And yet Jesus' thought was only recorded here and there, and possibly nowhere at all. So the question naturally became, where should one turn for the Christian form if the greatest Christian thinker is nowhere to be heard? For Baur, the quest for an unmediated and original thought led him to Paul. Paul's conversion was "the outward reflection of an inner process," Paul's knowledge of Jesus was an "inner secret," "the great fact of the death of Jesus came all at once to stand before his soul," etc. (Meeks, 278).

Distinct from thought, for Baur, was form, by which he meant the specifically human shell in which a pure concept was concealed. Paul, by his own admission, had through Jesus Christ snipped himself free from the umbilical cord of humanity: "God," says Paul, "who separated me from my mother's womb" (Gal. 1:15). For Baur Paul's church is motherless, while the Jerusalem church is the offspring of its Jewish context: "Antioch thus became the *seat*

of the first church of the Gentile Christians, as Jerusalem was the *mother church* of the Jewish Christians” (Meeks, 278). Paul himself is not interested in the facts of Jesus’ life, but derives his notions of Christianity from a substance without form, an idea without a derivative image; the image *is* the idea: “The great facts of the death and resurrection of Jesus make it what it is. Around these facts (Paul’s) whole Christian consciousness revolves; his whole Christian consciousness is transformed into a view of the person of Jesus which stands in need of no history to elucidate it” (Meeks, 278). And the *koilias*, the human and historical form, from which Paul and his thought had extricated themselves, was not that of any mother, but of a second temple period Jewish mother. Baur opposes “the more spiritual worship of God” to “the externalism of the existing temple worship,” (Meeks, 277) and declares that Paul transcended “Jewish national consciousness” and “the particularism of Judaism” (Meeks, 279). “We ourselves are Jews by birth and not gentile sinners,” writes Paul, “yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal. 2:15). *Physis* is opposed to *pistis* as the critical element; not the Jewish mother, the Jewish law, or the Jewish practices, which all inhere in particular ways in this world, but faith, the inner, spiritual, and for Baur, philosophical means of transcendence.

This in turn meant a division between Gentile and Jew, and ultimately between Paul and Peter, distinguished as evangelists of each respectively. Gentiles were associated in this view with philosophy and universal concepts a la Plato, while Jews were associated with a past of messianic tradition. Paul, for Baur, is the proponent of “the principle of Christian universalism” against the “cramping and narrowing” (Meeks, 280) form of Jewish Messianism.

And of course Baur is critical of any attempt to reconcile the two strands, for that would be like reconciling the universal human idea with a human particularity that will not accept it. The only way to reconcile the two is for the universal to be recognized as truly and genuinely universal. And like the nineteenth century theologians who refused, in spite of Strauss, Baur, Bauer, et. al. to pursue the way of the mind freed from its earthly trappings, the book of Acts fails to pursue Paul free from Peter, and the supposedly non-Pauline epistles fail to pursue a Christianity free of the law. In this vein it is interesting to note Baur’s contention that it was only the Gentile church, not the Jerusalem church, that suffered persecution; he thereby inscribes himself into a new history of persecution at the hands of tradition, law, and particularity, in contrast to his apologetic peers who avoid persecution in avoiding the high road of principled

conviction. He likewise shows Paul as a staunch defender of a discovered principle against his naysayers: “on the one side was the apostle Paul refusing with immovable firmness to be shaken even for a moment in any point which his principles required him to maintain” (Meeks, 292). The claim to an original and universalizable thought allows Baur, and in his mind, Paul, to be grounded in something more fundamental than socially and institutionally determined protocol. Nevertheless, in the course of this break the universal is ultimately identified with Gentiles, a people, and with Paul, an individual, just as particularism is identified with Judaism and Peter. “God accepts no human person,” (Gal. 2:6) declares Paul, and in 1 Corinthians 1:10-17 he distinguishes four competing factions from the singular of Christ. The universal had no need of factions, because it settles the dispute once and for all by the fact of being universal. Or, in other words, “no one needs to argue as long as they accept that I am right” or better still, “as long they accept that what I am saying, which is not from me but from God, is right.” “Has Christ been divided?” (1 C 1:13) asks Paul, and, like an idea unthought, Christ cannot have been divided. Like Luther and like Paul, Baur’s seemingly self-evident universalism is ironically a source and signifier of enduring division.

Just as his work was divisive among those who studied the NT, Baur played a critical role in opening up what has now become the fragmentation of historical Christianity and of any claim to a self-evident line of orthodoxy. Baur’s shift from the singularity of Jesus’ thought to conflict between Pauline thought and Petrine form put into operation the effects of a growing sense of the polyvalence of human history and the biblical text, even though Baur espoused the singularity of universal human philosophical thought. The nineteenth-century faith in the triumph of human subjectivity opened unto the particularities of multiple human subjects, and ultimately unto the late nineteenth and twentieth century discoveries of the unconscious (Freud), of labor (Marx), and of the contingency of good and evil (Nietzsche), all of which decentered the philosophical, conscious subject.

### **The history of religions school and the dissolution of Christian exceptionalism**

Also working against it was the early twentieth century history of religions school, which was inspired by emerging research and discoveries in philology, folklore, and ethnology, and which posited religion as the ground of philosophy (so even Plato, for Reitzenstein, was influenced by Iranian religion), and the ‘orient’ as the ground for Christian thought. As they undermined the dominance of philosophy, history of religions thinkers worked against theology

insofar as the latter was grounded in certain taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature and possibilities of human thought inscribed by a particular Western history. They turned instead to the unfamiliar and often apparently ‘strange’ areas of ritual and myth, the areas in which ‘thought’ and specifically philosophical thought, was apparently absent. There was a turn toward the uncanny other (which in this case was the ‘orient’) as the grounds for the Western, Christian self. In an orientalist and colonialist romantic vein, there was a sense in which the ‘orient’ could enrich the increasingly boring world of systematic theology and philosophy, a sense undergirded by emerging discoveries of multiple new texts in new archaeological excavations. Thus Wrede presages this turn in his intention to escape the “boring” world of systematic theology and its belaboring of every inch of the New Testament text into a rich and tangible world of living, organic material that expresses an “average” Christianity. What’s more, the discovery of the ancient orient tended to fit into an evolutionary or colonialist schema in which its history was its history of appropriation and transformation in the hands of Judaism, the Greeks, and Christianity.

At the same time, this turn, whatever its colonialist precedent, functioned to undermine the taken-for-granted hegemony of the Western Christian philosophical subject insofar as it reversed the priority of philosophy and religion, orient and occident, etc. Even where the description of ancient religion culminated in a triumphant Christianity, it simultaneously decentered that Christianity by locating its origins in unexpected places, and especially in the unfamiliar and the average realms of religious ritual and myth as these were experienced, not by philosophers, but in the lived religions of the time. Christianity’s articulation was contingent on its emergence into the language of ‘Hellenistic’ religious life, and thus the conscious origins of Christianity, its seeming theological matrix, especially Paul and John, were not original 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophical geniuses, but were rather the inheritors of a Hellenistic religious life that came to inevitably shape their religious productions. At the same time the canon assumed no priority, but was a series of religious documents among a plethora of the same in the ancient context.

Especially important were Mandaean and Manichean documents in which Richard Reitzenstein located the precedent for a ‘primal man’ myth of a gnostic redeemer that was picked up in John the baptist’s Jewish baptizing sect, and in particular by Jesus, who was later disowned by the Mandaeans; hence the disputes between Jesus’ disciples and those of John. Thus for

example he interpreted the account of Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin (Mk. 14:53-65), and specifically his declaration that he was the Son of Man, by turning to the *Geniza*, which he sees as a first-century apocalypse traceable to John the Baptist and his disciples. He had argued that John the Baptist and his followers had expected a revolutionary messiah-man who would destroy Jerusalem and the temple. Jesus' acknowledgement, whatever the reason for it, was then read by the high priest in this light. Reitzenstein was similarly concerned with the development of the confession as a precedent for a death sentence in the Roman community (Reitzenstein, 139-143), and here it is again the fear of revolutionary or antisocial cults that is at stake. The Roman Empire had already been invested in punishing certain dangerous mystery cults (Bacchanalian) and thus had developed a notion of punishing cult members for their confession of membership. In the case of the Christ cult they were presented with the difficulty of reconciling this standard with the apparently less dangerous nature of the oaths taken by the participants in the mysteries. Here again, then, the crux of the confession of Christianity, and of the Christian confession that Jesus is the Son of God, can be taken to be a kind of blasphemy in this new context, and again it is taken as such because it is potentially a militant or aggressive revolutionary confession rather than because it threatens the theological interests of the Jewish and Roman communities respectively. In this way it reflected Reitzenstein's own sense of his work as strictly scientific, recovering the ancient mythic and ritual precedents that had been subsumed in a dominant philosophical/theological matrix.

Wilhelm Bousset picked up and elaborated on Reitzenstein's work, but with greater attention to theological significance. He focused, especially in *Kyrios Christos*, on hellenistic mystery religion as the cultic precedent for early Christianity on the one hand, and on the formulations of the early Palestinian community on the other. Both were informed by oriental religion, and both were 'enthusiastic' cultic contexts in which religious experience came to dominate any historical kernel. Thus, for Bousset significant elements of Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin can be numbered among the later additions of a Palestinian community interested in finding in Jesus' death the death of a Messiah. He thinks it unlikely that Jesus' affirmative response to the question "are you the Christ, the son of the blessed one?" (Mk. 14:61) was in itself sufficient according to Mishnaic law to condemn Jesus to death. The transformation of the notion of Son of God from *pais theou* to a *huios theou*, which, "from the standpoint of Christian faith... already had a metaphysical meaning", (Bousset, 73) could instead form the precedent for

the charge of blasphemy. Thus it is a product of “Christian dogma,” rather than of “Jewish legal views” (Bousset, 73). The mention of the Son of Man likewise corresponds to a community formulation of faith. Bousset perceives the Lukan account as earlier, in that the Son of God designation is split off from the question of Messiahship. Unlike Reitzenstein, then, Bousset sought to claim a place for a moderate Christianity in the person of Jesus that was not the strange, cultic phenomenon that accumulated to it in the later enthusiastic additions. He likewise saw each Christian author as uniquely reworking the materials that he received, and therefore held onto the ideal of some conscious power of production. For Reitzenstein, Jesus was more thickly and explicitly bound by the oriental origins of his life and thought, and the Christian tradition was the product of its precedents. They thus prefigured redaction and form criticism respectively in notable ways. In either case, however, there was a non-Christian, non-Western origin for Christianity in its Western, modern manifestation, and thus the history of religions school participated in the emerging fragmentation of textual origins and of triumphant human consciousness that characterized modernity. At the same time it still held onto origins, and particularly philologically and archaeologically locatable racial and ethnic origins, as sources and guarantors of meaning.

### **Form- and source-critical fragmentation and the return of the Author**

The modernist tendency toward fragmentation was taken up in form, source, and redaction criticism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, insofar as these have been variously concerned with an analytic process of tracing discontinuities in the New Testament accounts, a process of division that creates from the apparently unified work a whole range of sources (Mark and Q), of influences (Hellenistic, Jewish), and of authors (tradition, communities, individual theologians). In form criticism the conscious will of some directing ego had disappeared altogether in favor of an almost inevitable process of forms coalescing into narratives, a development out of the precedent set by the work of Reitzenstein and other history of religions scholars. At the same time what is divided in form criticism and source criticism is in some sense reunited in redaction criticism in the figure of the redactor and his theological work, on the one hand, and on the other in an original theological/historical kernel in the teaching of Jesus that drove the whole project of gospel-writing forward and allowed the redactors to enter into dialogue with the needs of communities.

As modern interpreters grappled with the eschatological character of Jesus' sayings in the gospels, there was an emerging sense of the threat that this particularly strange idea posed to the hope for a rational or philosophical gospel directed toward the needs of the universalizable present. One could therefore read source, form, and redaction criticism as inheritors of the early Christian redactive struggle to maintain an original message informed by the cognitive/religious needs of the churchly community. In both cases the problem of eschatology is one that needs resolution, at once an original cognitive dissonance and an unrealized image of the fulfillment, that is to say the perfection, which is in turn to suggest the resolution of difference, particularity, inconsistency, etc., in the gospel. If Christianity begins with eschatology, there it must end. The discovery and resolution of aporias, breakdowns of meaning and continuity within the text, opens a multitude of sources to source criticism and it in turn begets the explanations of form criticism and finally redaction criticism, which attempts to reconcile an original eschatology and the need to make it meaningful both in the case of the early redactor and the modern exegete. Redactors are therefore typically seen as exegetes themselves. In the figure of the redactor, what is original about Christianity is made coherent by their attempt to unify the Christian message from apparently incoherent original sources. The kerygma comes to be that which can be seen to be unified, coherent, and to some degree original about the tradition.

And yet there is still a desire to allow that eschatological kernel that Schweitzer had taken to be so dangerous to linger. It always bears asking, however, whether this enduring focus on eschatology was not merely a reflection of ongoing cognitive dissonance, a need to neutralize a threatening element by focusing obsessively on it. In any case, it moved people, in some ways, away from the figure of Jesus. Modern interpreters had begun to posit inconsistency, incongruity, and particularity (in the localized responses of theologians and community) as the origins of Christianity and therefore had begun to tell a different kind of story than those that had accumulated around the singular person of Jesus in the earlier nineteenth century accounts. If you take Conzelmann, for example, it is the very fact of inconsistency and the tensions of eschatology brought into a continuing future that makes Luke's theology possible. So in other words, Christianity, and Christian theology only begin with the need to resolve a foundational incoherence. And, in good humanistic fashion, coherence is rediscovered in the authorial, theological coherence of a redactor's thought. Thus the inroads made against triumphant

Western consciousness and the humanistic triumph of the author was undermined in part by the turn to the redactor.

### **Karl Barth and the neo-orthodox return of transcendence**

Karl Barth also worked to preserve the theological foundations of Christian singularity and exceptionalism by taking up both the questions of Bousset's enthusiastic Christianity and of the fundamental and original incoherence of Christianity, and by categorically extricating the former from the understanding of the text and by using the latter as a pivot for a unified foundation for Christianity. He likewise returned to the authorial, canonical text, as the final source of meaning. In *The Resurrection of the Dead* Barth reads Paul as an opponent of sectarianism and in particular of Christianity built around practices but devoid of a unifying faith, which corresponds to his (Barth's) argument against 'mysticism' and 'piety' cultivated in religious experience. He is concerned that 'enthusiasm,' a worldly feeling of achieving a pneumatic state, is historically grounded but as such has nothing to do with the essence of the Christian religion.<sup>2</sup> This concern seems in turn to be directed at a kind of happy Christianity built around religious practices, which, whether or not moral and directed, cannot contend with the utter incommensurability of this world and God, a specifically intellectual and philosophical quandry. Thus he is working directly against Bousset's conception of Pauline piety developed within the context of cultic collective effervescence and its concomitant development of an inner-worldly ethic, even as Bousset had seen this as an accumulation that had little to do with Jesus himself (who Bousset, perhaps in spite of himself, elaborates as an historical figure in his work). Barth, however, wants to save Paul along with Jesus, and therefore he envisions a Pauline *faith* that develops around the resurrection, not as historical fact, but as the intangible atomic particle in which is condensed the whole boundary between the divine horizon and human life: "*pantes de allagēsometha en atomō; en ripē; ophthalmou en tē; eschatē; salpingi*" (1 Cor 15:51-52).

The last trumpet does not occur in human reality, because its sounding represents the very impossible and infinitesimal moment of crossing a threshold from human time and space into a time and space that is utterly incommensurable with human existence. Like the

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<sup>2</sup> In the American context, I know that enthusiasm was especially associated with popular religiosity, the Holiness and Pentecostal movements for example, and the great revivals, and was despised by the more philosophically-oriented majority of the members of the dominant social strata and classes. Bousset had already made inroads against enthusiastic Christianity as an accumulation not native to the moderate Christ, and Barth would take up and continue this process.



transformation of a seed into a plant, this will take place in the transformation of a ‘soulish’ to a ‘spiritual’ body (15:35-44), but unlike that initial transformation it represents the second stage in the movement of the spirit of God as life-giver. In the first instance it helped to bring Adam to life, and in the second it marks the end of time as the transformation of human life into spiritual life. The point of faith is not to achieve this moment of transformation, not to build the kingdom of God in this world, but to hope for it: *en tē; zōē; tautē; en Xristō; ēlpikotes esmen monon* (15:19). The fact of Christ’s death means that this hope can exist, that a kingdom of Christ has been inaugurated, and though it has marked history with the presence of the divine, the kingdom of God cannot be built on these foundations.

A pneumatic existence in the world is an impossibility; the world, like ‘religion’ itself, is only the realization of a moment in history, a moment which, compared with infinity, is nothing, is already dead. Thus the history of religions school has gone astray, for Barth, in characterizing Paul as someone whose thought is traceable to his historical influences. Like the Corinthians they have strayed into worldliness, into history, and no matter how diligently this inner-worldly orientation is exercised (for example in “piety”) it misses the point. The sources for the text do not tell us what the text is, but point in the text to that which is its real essence, namely faith in the resurrection. Faith in the resurrection is the single point in which the boundary between the two worlds (history/kingdom of God, death/life, time/eternity) is condensed. It is like the present insofar as it is a condensation of past and future that can never be grasped (since it can be signaled but never signified). The ‘twinkling of the eye’ and the ‘*atomō;*’ are all present in the hope of the believers for the ‘last things’, and like the present they create a foundation for the believers’ bleak and difficult relationship to the world. This bleakness is in turn founded on a radical doubt and an incessant crisis, totally opposed to Bousset’s concept of certainty grounded in religious enthusiasm that comes back into the world.

Barth moves against the liberal tendencies of the nineteenth century in particular in his contempt for the ‘natural’ (*psychikon*, 15:44-45) world, and for proofs derived thence from enlightenment-type inquiries. For example, the historicity of the resurrection is irrelevant: the list of witnesses in 15:5-8 is not written to furnish historical proof but to point to a unified message, so there’s no need to get *behind* Paul to the Jesus of the gospels: Paul’s emphasis on the resurrection is the critical emphasis of Christianity, and unlike Bousset the story of Jesus’ death is not about a sacrifice for the sake of a community. The mention of the burial is not a

historical fact but an ironic condensation of the boundary between life and death. The effort to try to show a scientifically verifiable process at work in 15:35-44 is utterly misguided. Human achievements for Barth are mere ‘prolegomena’ and are never perfected. No human work can be a ‘last thing’, and as such can never mediate the relationship between the human and divine. To look at the text in an enlightenment vein is only helpful insofar as it represents a serious and diligent examination, so Barth is not against the historical enterprise per se; but to look beyond the text to the sources (instead of to the paradox) is to divide it beyond recognition; to see a series of different elements in Corinthians is to ignore its central foundation, namely the fifteenth chapter. And to ask, along with the Corinthians and perhaps along with the liberals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century “*pōs egeirontai hoi nekroi? Poiō, de sōmati erchontai?*” (15:35) is to engage in a human critical investigation that has nothing to do with Paul and his faith. Faith and human knowledge are irreconcilable.

The problem, for Barth, is that the whole project of looking for sources denies the unity of the message that is inscribed in the work by the carriers of tradition. To move outward toward sources, contexts, communities, etc. is to deny the fact that in the author’s thought is condensed the fundamental theological kernel that unites it. Thus he is utterly opposed to those who, like Wrede, or particularly Reitzenstein, take the texts of the New Testament here and there alongside other non-canonical and non-Christian texts as historical evidences for particular kinds of religious experience. Wrede’s indictment of the nitpicking theologian lingering over every single detail of the text is contrasted to (or could eventually be directed at) Barth’s insistence on the unity of the work and on loyalty to the author. And the whole division of the New Testament that we saw take place in the nineteenth century in favor of an enlightenment/natural law conception of living in the world becomes for Barth the kind of sectarian division that tore the Corinthians away from the central and unifying message of *the* church. To read, then, is not ever an exercise in finding sources, but in interpreting a singular message that is carried over in tradition (in the kingdom of Christ).

Thus in Barth there is a movement towards unity in faith, but it is not a unity grounded in the kingdom of God as that which can be built in the world. It is a unity built around a fundamental conception that tears the human being out of the world and out of history into the travails of belief in the impossible. In his increased emphasis on the distance of God, on the sheer ineffable divinity, what we find especially is an anthropology in which the human is no

longer the *theios anthrōpos* but instead the simple human. No person is deified in Christian worship as in Bousset's reading of the forerunners of Christian pneumatic life, and in terms of the dialectic of history this means that people ought not to hope to transform their world in a God-like fashion, but should always place their hope utterly outside of themselves.

There is also a tendency in Barth to want to move away from radically individualistic thinking and against what Bultmann calls "bourgeois religious mediocrity" and its complacency. In this vein it is at the same time a movement toward a community founded first and foremost on an overarching principle of love rather than on a worldly and individualistic mysticism. Bultmann is similar to Barth insofar as he focuses on the exceptional moment of faith and its paradoxical crisis to work against this-worldliness, a this-worldliness which was perhaps responsible for the horrors of a human history written by the actions of apparently triumphant humans (especially during the world wars). Instead he turns to the unintelligibility and ineffability of a reality that, like that envisioned by Barth, compromises humanistic hubris while saving theology from the ravages of an excessively scientific attitude that had opened human history to unforeseen terrors.

### **Rudolph Bultmann, and the neo-orthodox return of transcendence in "existentialism" and demythologization**

In John 3:11-12 Jesus questions Nicodemus' ability to comprehend the heavenly essence of a teaching housed in an earthly garb: "Truly I say to you that we speak of what we know, and we bear witness to what we have seen, and you don't accept our witness. If I say earthly things to you and you don't believe, how will you believe if I say heavenly things?" In Bultmann's view part of the critical shortcoming of existentialist philosophy is the confidence that reality is intelligible and communicable among humans, that it can be represented and consequently that authentic existence can willfully be taken on outside of individual experiences of faith. He claims that the New Testament describes the inevitable failure of human will, and demonstrates that humans need to succumb to their own need for Godly intervention. In this sense there is a terribly thin safe area of theological explication between mythology on the one hand and existentialist philosophy on the other, in that one cannot describe the transcendent in the immanent, since to do so would be to mythologize, but on the other hand it is the need for Godly intervention and the Christ event that overcomes the shortcoming of pure existentialist philosophy. He believes that to try to take hold of authentic existence is a false goal beyond the

reach of self-assertion. Instead, the realization of God's love (as in John 3:16) becomes the crux of the matter that transforms one into a being with the potential for authenticity.

This potential is realized in individuals and in given moments. The Christ event as a unique historical occurrence is secondary, and indeed it can never in its fullness be historically verified. As such Bultmann turns towards that which is in fact verifiable in reality and in history (and beyond mythology), which is the experience of faith. Thus the resurrection is not the literal physical event, but the emergence of the original faith in the resurrection. The Christ event becomes possible then, beginning with Jesus and his death and the emerging faith in his resurrection, as long as the word of God can be received by individual believers (through Christian speech). Speech is thus transformed into a medium for conveying truth, but only insofar as it is speech given and received by those who are similarly transformed. Such speech exists in the same kind of thinly bounded area between profane philosophy and the strangeness of myth.

As such this word is not reducible to a general or representable truth. In the New Testament Jesus is forced to make recourse to mythical language to represent the unrepresentable and intangible, to speak an earthly language of the heavenly, though he sees its futility, demanding, "how will you believe?" And yet he continues, "and no one has mounted into heaven except the one who descends from heaven, the son of man... it was necessary for the son of man to be raised so that everyone who believes in him should have eternal life" suggesting the possibility that belief in eternal truth is still a possibility for individuals in spite of its mythical container. This means that neither history nor myth fully represent the kerygma since in both cases the problem of mythical elements overshadows the central question of the Christ event as all events of decision toward faith, rather than as a singular and objective 'once and for all' moment. Such events are in turn not themselves once and for all, but are realized throughout the course of a whole variety of human experiences.

Bultmann's recourse to certain facets of particularly Heideggerian existentialist philosophy is central, a philosophy that he appropriates into the mold of NT theology. For example anxiety is represented in the human tendency to live in the flesh, an inauthentic (fallen) existence. Thus Jesus tells Nicodemus that he needs not to be born of the flesh but of the spirit, to emerge as a new creature directed toward authentic existence. This life is spiritual insofar as it is directed toward intangible realities, but it is this spirituality that for Bultmann makes it

authentic, like the inquiry into the grounds of being (though unlike it in that it is never self-willed), which moves beyond the realm of the apprehensible and secure world of nature (visible) into the conditions of its possibility (self-understanding), and thereby commits itself to the future (invisible). Bultmann perceives the New Testament and existentialism to be already similar, where Barth sees him as misrepresenting the New Testament because of his reliance on (modern) existentialism. In either case there is a desire to overcome the pretensions of an existentialism that would exceed the bounds of theology in favor of human particularity and subjectivity. Unlike the history of religions, then, human consciousness is not exceeded by the multiplicity of historical particularities, but by the unity of the divine.

As mythology, in Bultmann's view, the NT typically makes recourse to immanence in transcendence, but appears at the same time to provide the key to the central question that can fulfill what Bultmann takes to be the existentialist shortcoming, namely that existentialism still retains the idea that humans can move into authentic being by an act of self will. To demythologize then is to get at both the existentialist kernel and, interestingly enough, the possibility of being of existentialist philosophy that is housed within the mythical framework. Jesus' call to be born *anōthen* is at once a call to authentic existence and a call to recognize the possibility of such authentic being in the love of God, in the death of Jesus (the ontic event which represents the state of the believer, in Barth's reading), and in the faith in resurrection (the noetic easter event which represents the state of belief in Barth's reading). And Nicodemus, like the "modern man," finds it difficult to separate such eternal truth from its mythical cloak, focusing instead on the impossibility of any reconciliation between the earthly and transcendent: "*Pōs dynatai anthrōpos gennēthēnai gerōn ōn? Mē dynatai eis tēn koilian tēs mētros authou deutron eiselthein kai gennēthēnai?*" (John 3:4).

Bultmann had seen in the history of religions school the precedent for regarding much of the New Testament as mythical accumulation, or as the earthly (*epigeia*) husk that has accumulated around the invisible and transcendent (*epourania*) element of truth. If much of the New Testament is housed in the peculiar language of Hellenistic, and in Bultmann's reading, especially of Gnostic and Jewish influences, this only goes to prove the degree to which the NT emerged into a mythical frame of mind. These Jewish and Gnostic elements need to be reinterpreted to find that transcendent element lurking in their mythological *form*. This is rather unlike Barth, where these Hellenistic elements are not forms but signals which point along with

everything else in the NT to the paradoxical eschatological question whose essence lies in the resurrection from the dead. Thus Bultmann, in Barth's view, shifts the focus from a central and incomprehensible message to comprehensible forms that require translating, an act which suggests he already understands the NT (i.e. as existentialist philosophy).

For Barth Bultmann's use of existentialism hinges on a kind of excessive subjectivity that, rather than establishing a dialogue, tends to ignore the NT message in favor of obedience to a new law grounded in modern philosophy. That is to say that it winds up doing precisely what it seeks to avoid, mythologizing, insofar as it renders the universal transcendent in an earthly and immanent mode. Barth demands, "What kind of myth is it that recognizes the existence only of the human subject, and so requires an exclusively existentialist and anthropological interpretation?" (Barth, 116). This is a rather interesting claim, namely that the anthropological understanding is itself a kind of myth, which assumes particular traits as central. We could see then in Bultmann's translation a misrecognition of the fact that he is translating one particular language into another rather than, as he perhaps thinks, from a particular language into a universal one. We might well say the same thing of the various efforts to translate the ancient world into the language of modern anthropology, social science, historical criticism, etc. as long as such efforts claim to be creating universal and replicable information rather than understanding themselves as particular instances of language. Jaspers, in the same vein, argues that mythmaking is a quality of any and every age, and that the problem is not to escape mythmaking but to transform myths into new myths. Of course, it bears insisting that there's a kind of disingenuousness in Barth's claim, since his anti-anthropocentrism is only a return to theocentrism, rather than a real break, in the spirit of the Copernican revolution, with the theological-dogmatic centrality of the human world and its creations.

### **The new quest and a new exceptionalism**

As the twentieth century progressed, in the new quest for the historical Jesus, the emerging myth is one of Jesus' break with his context, and in this sense there is a desire to get at history while still holding onto Christian particularity, and to mark those notable breaks with ancient context, specifically with Jewish and Gentile influences. The former is considered to be part and parcel with the portrayal of Jesus as human while the latter is the precursor for docetic influence. In this sense there is a strong reliance on earlier history of traditions and history of religions work insofar as the search for Jesus lies precisely in showing what cannot be traced to

an inauthentic precursor, but it is also what cannot be traced to the early church. We could read Perrin's treatment of 'son of man' in Luke 7:34 as exemplary in certain respects of these facets of the New Quest (he is working in the wake of the new quest but is certainly in continuity with it in notable respects): the fact that Jesus references himself as 'Son of Man' is for Perrin evidence of an early Church confession at work. The translation into Greek renders the more innocuous *bar nash* a meaningful confessional statement. Here Perrin uses the criterion of dissimilarity in line with the history of traditions and history of religions, showing both Jewish and Hellenistic forces at work in the received statement. The Aramaic usage is 'historical' insofar as it does not have any supernatural content but is strictly a non-sacred self-referential term, in contrast to its Aramaic usage in Daniel 7:13. Insofar as the term is translated into Greek this translation sets the stage for the reappropriation of the term by the early Christian church.

Perrin, however, does not extensively pursue the question of either where the son of man term came from, nor the question of whether Jesus might have originally said it, but instead uses this as the catalyst for the next part of the saying, which he takes to be the crux of the matter, namely that Jesus represents either a shattering or a synthesis of these two perspectives. The 'son of man' sets the stage for the transformation that will follow. Thus, Perrin reads the tax collectors and sinners of Luke 7:34 as Jews playing Gentile roles. For him Jesus' radicalism expresses itself here as an embracing of deviant categories constructed around kinds of ritual impurity and in particular around sin as such; the running together of Jewish and Gentile modes of being would constitute a sully of ritual purity, and here Jesus makes himself known historically precisely because his actions can't be explained as contextually reasonable but represent a move toward a radical fellowship around God's table.

In the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus' radicalism again expresses itself as an embracing of the sinful/impure in fellowship, for Perrin. The parable's authenticity is tangible at once in its continuity with the early context and the radical way in which it breaks off from this context. Thus Perrin shows the similarity of Rabbi Meir's parable and notes that the two both reflect a desire for forgiveness in the return to god. They diverge, however, with the addition of the detail of the son being a swineherd, a direct marker of impurity and of taking on a gentile's work. The forgiveness is in this sense radicalized and separated from its context, and the elder son's response is the perfectly natural reaction in context. In the parable of the lost sheep we again find someone in a Gentilic profession featured prominently. Perrin again places this in the

Palestinian context and again notes the radicalism of Jesus' saying insofar as it breaks with received wisdom about good practice. In both parables here, then, there is continuity with the story about eating with tax collectors and sinners insofar as table fellowship with sinners, which breaches the purity of a Judaism always in danger of foreign influence, is treated as part of the kingdom of God, presumably a most radical and offensive opinion.

And Perrin likewise cordons Jesus off from Gnostic influence: he marks the Gospel of Thomas as radically different from the synoptic tradition, and different because of its Gnostic coloring, which he regards as a secondary overlay of original sayings. In this vein it is similar to the synoptics with their own peculiar visions (as Käsemann likewise maintains), but their overlay tends to be orthodox. In Käsemann's formulation, which is important for Perrin, this would mean that the Gospel of Thomas is less likely to contain any grain of authenticity since the kerygmatic Christ of orthodoxy tends to reflect the historical Jesus in important ways. At the same time, however, he maintains that Thomas is still important for discovering the earliest tradition, precisely because of the importance of all evidence and the semi-independence of Thomas. In Thomas 107 we have a saying that is more comprehensible in the context of the time, and which is typically employed, according to Perrin, in a Gnostic context distinct from Jesus' authentic teaching.

Käsemann holds a similar view of Jesus' radicalism, noting that Jesus' 'particularity' expresses itself in breaking down barriers between the ancient sacred and profane. In his work there is an effort to distinguish an orthodox theology of the preaching of Jesus that is reflected in the early church's kerygma of the risen lord, but that is in any case not to be conflated either with a pure and recoverable historicity or the miraculous. Instead it is a unique radicalism that is also the particular province of the early church as opposed to excessively Judaizing and Hellenizing elements on either side; in this sense the New Quest establishes a line of continuity that extends from the preaching of Jesus to the early church and into modernity insofar as the seeds of orthodoxy were already sown with Jesus and emerge in a modern Christianity that is neither too enthusiastic nor too optimistically obsessed with recovering the entire historical life of Jesus. In this respect Käsemann is explicit about wanting to place Jesus in line with church dogma against the tendency of the earlier search for the historical Jesus, which had tried to discover an original Jesus that would work as evidence against the constrictions of church dogma. For Käsemann the idea of wholly recovering a historical Jesus as such is a fantasy, and



instead the historians come inevitably up against the early Church. This is a good thing though, since there is strong continuity between the early Church's notion of the risen lord and the preaching of Jesus, and since the early church was embroiled in precisely the same struggle against docetism/enthusiasm and Judaism/historicism. Of course, the early church also provides one of the negative criteria for determining the authenticity of the Jesus tradition, but this is precisely where the early church has de-radicalized Jesus. For Perrin this notably occurs when Jewish influences are at work in the early church. Thus in Matthew 9:10-13 the addition of "learn what this means 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'" takes the edge off the radicalism of Luke 5:29-32 by placing it in line with the tradition. The allegorizing explanations of the parables, in the same vein, are the work of the early Church. We can therefore still see some tendency to want to mark off Jesus from churchly appropriation, but of course only churchly appropriation of a particular kind.

Käsemann seems to have reinvigorated the importance of the synoptics after Bultmann by deriving a precedent for examining the life of Jesus before John and Paul come on the scene. Perrin states that Käsemann's contribution was partially in noting that a purely kerygmatic Christ can set the stage for Docetism and therefore for mysticism or moralism. His desire to establish continuity is a continuation of the hermeneutical project that wants to keep the gospel relevant as emerging in the present, but now it does so in terms of Jesus' teaching as well as the death and resurrection of Christ.

In Fuchs and Ebeling, Perrin says, this continuity is expressed more and more in the 'word-events' of Jesus' life, which are hermeneutically rendered in imitation in the present day; in this vein Perrin says they have arrived at a particularly Lutheran achievement. He himself divides between 'historical knowledge' which is what is essentially like 'factual knowledge' or 'data', 'historic knowledge,' which has relevance for the present, and 'faith knowledge,' which is only achieved in religious experience. He says that the New Quest has tended to blur the distinctions between the first and last kinds of knowledge. For Perrin, faith knowledge is justifiable insofar as it is consistent with historical knowledge. Interestingly, then, historical knowledge can be the grounds for testing faith claims made around either the kerygmatic Christ or Jesus. History thus comes back into the picture as a new foundation for theological thinking.

## **Gerd Theissen, Social Science, and the possibility of renewed materialism**

The last notable turn in new Testament scholarship before the last thirty years that we explored in the seminar was the social scientific turn, and specifically the work of Theissen, which moved definitively back into the ancient context, and tended to eschew the hermeneutical and philosophical bent of the neo-orthodox interpreters in favor of the more scientifically and historically oriented bent of some of his predecessors. The social science perspective can be geared toward moving beyond the symbolic or literary level of discourse to the material level of underlying realities and forces, which in turn shape and are shaped by the literary level. This would mean initially differentiating between these by noting how the social world in question is in tension with the rhetorical and discursive representation that one finds in the texts in question. Thus in his chapter “Social Integration and Sacramental Activity” Theissen writes,

In various ways a demand has been expressed not only that the meaning of what has been transmitted be developed, but that this also be confronted with its own empirical realities- in other words, that the conflict between the past’s interpretation of itself and a critical analysis of that interpretation be made clear. (Theissen, 145).

In this vein he is able to detect two distinct strands within 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 that are in conflict with one another, the “reality” of “an early Christian congregation’s quarrels” and its “understanding of itself as an eschatological community of love.” To focus only on the latter is to participate in a theologized understanding of the early Christian community that does not recognize its situatedness within a context of human experience. In this sense, as Theissen notes on page 145, there is a move not only against the self-understanding of the past, but against the self-understanding of the present. In this vein Theissen is able to move against the notion that the groups in 1 Corinthians are first and foremost theologically bound to Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and Christ, by reflecting that the people who probably had the closest relationship to itinerant apostles were those who gave them food and lodging. Thus he notes, “their relationship to the missionaries cannot be strictly like those within a mystery cult, for they have a manifestly material basis” (Theissen, 54).

The transmission and translation of meanings, which had been so important for the hermeneutical work of Barth, Bultmann, and the New Quest for the Historical Jesus can be placed alongside the question of social setting and relations, which Theissen sees as a

development of form criticism's focus on *Sitz im Leben*. At the same time for Theissen this is "a placing alongside" rather than a replacement. He does not claim that getting to the social situation is equivalent to achieving a "definitive interpretation" (Theissen, 147). In this sense the social scientific and anthropological modes could be said to add another layer to the examination of the text, but not to provide a final reading in and of themselves. For example by supplementing history of religions and form critical work with an emphasis on class stratification, a more rich picture of the ancient world is able to surface that does not exist only on a literary or symbolic level within ancient self-representations, but exists in the very day-to-day experience of those who created them and those who are depicted within them.

The trick to moving beyond self-representation is to pick up on details that are not a critical part of the text's argumentation but which seem instead to point to the contours of a social world. A kind of profanation takes place where categories like Christology and Ecclesiology take second place to questions about food, money, and clothing, which, as material and symbolic resources, are in turn indicators of questions of social hierarchy and conflict. To supplement the literary representation of these it is necessary to turn then to other resources from the ancient world, in terms of both symbolic and material culture, which can provide a rich setting for the emergence of particular works and the issues they address. Paul's letters become important for social scientific work insofar as they directly address practical questions that would have come up in accordance with particular social problems. An initial instance of working within a "social-scientific mode," then, would be when Theissen focuses in on Erasmus' title *oikonomos tēs poleōs* at the end of Romans. He spends nearly ten pages discussing this title. Unlike, for example, *kurios* or *huios theou*, the title is an official title for a first century bureaucrat and as such has no theological or even symbolic meaning. Theissen's conclusions are therefore altogether measured and lacking in any particulars that could easily lend themselves to a compelling theological reading. He notes that Erastus was probably not wealthy or powerful, but might have been a Roman citizen and had some private wealth: "...we may perhaps imagine him a successful man who has risen into the ranks of the local notables, most of whom are of latin origin" (Theissen, 83). Thus Theissen's social scientific reading moves beyond meaningful elements to produce what appears to be a more historically accurate and plausible picture that does not idealize Paul's stance against the society but notes his complicity within it.

In the same way Theissen describes the social stratification that underlies the apparently theological quarrels of 1 Corinthians. Rather than a diverse variety of theological perspectives, he uncovers a series of interested groups by focusing on status indicators, most notably the “wise,” “powerful,” and “of noble birth” of 1:26. As I mentioned before he claims that the conflict between these individuals or groups is based on their material interest in supporting the right missionary. He then picks out another group, those described as “Chloe’s people” and distinguishes them from the others as belonging to lower social strata, those who are, following 1:26, not wise, powerful, or of noble birth. He claims that they were probably slaves because they are called “Chloe’s people” rather than by their father’s name (i.e. their family name). Thus he is able to show a conflict between interested groups and in turn between social strata.

He is careful, however, not to ascribe any value to those who Paul joins with “from below.” For example, having described the social divisions that are manifesting themselves in the Corinthian community’s Lord’s Supper, he goes on to say, “We ought not to make the mistake of raising moralistic objections against the wealthy, as historical and sociological analysis makes possible a more measured evaluation” (Theissen, 161). He then goes on to list a number of reasons why the actions of the wealthier group are perfectly reasonable in their particular time and place, and later on notes that “the Corinthian conflicts between rich and poor were built into the very structure of things” (Theissen, 168). By reading in this way Theissen neutralizes theologically and ethically oriented readings that would seek to establish any kind of eschatological faction-less ‘brotherhood’ from Paul’s criticism of divisions. Instead he naturalizes social divisions, taking up Paul’s “*dei haireseis einai*” to signify a factual social reality. In this way he indirectly emphasizes his claim in the first chapter that Paul was not like the rural itinerant charismatics taking up a radical call against social structures and divisions, but was instead interested in building and maintaining communities and as such already encountered problems of working in concert with, rather than against, social structures.

At the end of the first chapter, Theissen had noted that both movements, however, were socially divergent, deliberately taking up deviant behavior against the prescribed norms of society. His critique here is rather interesting, namely that when a religion ceases to be the ‘soul of soulless conditions’ (notably taking up Marx’s less quoted characterization of religion than his famous line that ‘religion is the opiate of the masses’) it has in some sense ceased to be a religion, that it has expired and cannot be “rekindled” by any “interpretive art” (Theissen, 59).

I'm not sure to whom this is directed, or even if I'm understanding it correctly, but it seems at least to imply that mining Paul for theological meaning when his theology is in fact complicit in, rather than radically deviant from, mainstream social structures, as in Cor. 11:17-34, is a lost cause. It also implies that even though sociological examination does not offer a definitive interpretation, it can in fact preclude other kinds of interpretation.

The social scientific perspective presages the final possible break with a hermeneutically oriented, text-based process, in favor of a text that extends into the peculiar social realities and lived experiences of ancient persons. In this way it functions to decenter any self-secure reliance on either the divine or human ordering of the New Testament text in favor of the study of its implications and implicatedness in the lives of different groups of ancient humans.

## **Conclusion**

I hope that in the preceding discussion I have pointed out a number of ways in which significant breaks with the theological and anthropocentric notions of God, Jesus, the biblical canon, etc. have taken place in the exegesis of the New Testament during the last three hundred years. At the same time, I hope also to have shown how this oppositional movement has been inexorably imbricated in certain countervailing apologetic and more obscure, but still dogmatic, tendencies toward establishing new ideals and authors in the face of a defeated Christian god or historical Jesus. In many cases, Christian exceptionalism has prevailed in the face of, or even because of, the pains taken by forward-thinking theologians and exegetes. Nevertheless, the critical impulse that is at work even in the most apologetic of these thinkers has culminated in certain dislocations and fragmentations that skewed the New Testament and its interpretation, even if only for a time, in the direction of a greater openness to difference. Ideally, I hope to have pointed out, in some cases, areas where thinkers developed insights that do not fit in any clear narrative of progress, but that offer continuing resources for the ongoing work of historical and theological interpretation. I also hope that I've shown that the latter has been, at least since the enlightenment, bound at its best to a critical and oppositional orientation that insists on taking contradictions and problems seriously and that would ideally brook any scholarly or ecclesiastical fundamentalism. Finally, I hope that I have avoided a strictly teleological narrative in which we might, finally, divest ourselves of all religious illusions, or in which we might decenter the New Testament once and for all. As I see it, the New Testament is an ongoing

resource for continued forms of fragmentation and opposition precisely because of its important role in various modern, Western narratives of suffering and glorification, of sacrifice, of struggle, etc. that continue to inflect the experience of being an American in the twenty-first century, for example. To that end, it can always function as both a resource and a source of antithetical energy in any subversive or liberatory movement that is equally bound to those narratives, in solidarity or in opposition.

### **Appendix:**

Seminar Paper, Fall 2005

What do semiotics, linguistics, and deconstruction have to do with respected traditions of interpretation?

I think for my part I'm going to discuss the question of the implications of deconstruction (and in particular Derrida's notion of deconstruction) for "respected traditions of interpretation," partially apologetically, and after some initial discussion I'll try to frame this in the context of Philippians 3:1-11 to make it comprehensible.

Deconstruction displaces Western metaphysical presuppositions long enough to call them into question, and in doing so to open up the manifold possibilities that are inscribed in the composition of their own exclusion. As such, Derrida is particularly taken up with questions of those parts of texts and traditions that are rendered as supplemental, parasitic, derivative, etc. because he wants to show the manner in which Western tradition is predicated on the exclusion of that which constitutes its very essence. Thus his work is dedicated to opening up the tradition to the 'other.' The opening passage of *de la Grammatologie* notably calls attention to the ethnocentrism of the "logocentric" tradition which, he argues, is perpetuating itself over the planet. Deconstruction is not based on a claim that 'there is only the text' and that the social world it refers to is non-existent in interpretation, as Thiselton seems to believe. Instead, deconstruction is based on the recognition that systems of exclusion and domination predicated on the dominance of singular meanings require intervention, and this intervention is best effected by showing how all exclusions and dominations include within themselves, and are even built upon, that which they already exclude/dominate (think of the sorcerers and fornicators who linger on at the end of Revelation though the book claimed they were destroyed; or consider how

the existence of the *basileia tou theou* includes the very earthly notion of *basileia*, how the New Jerusalem is made of gold in the wake of the destruction of Babylon and her riches).

What's more, to say that something is always written upon the possibility of its radical decontextualization, as Derrida does, is not the same as saying that context (or authorial intention for that matter) is irrelevant. In a sense it would seem to imply the opposite insofar as it is a critique of the notion that meaning can stand once and for all outside of its context, that it can be transcendent. What this radical rethinking does is to call our attention to the possibility that what seems self-evident about claims to transcendent and singular meanings is in fact predicated on exclusion. It is therefore context itself which is at stake if we claim that meaning is present once and for all insofar as context is thereby subordinated to meaning; deconstruction entails allowing the possibility for the hidden contours of context to emerge where they have been suffused by hierarchical claims about the priority of one meaning or another. Thus Derrida is less concerned to discard any reference to context as to highlight the impossibility of representing context in any rigorously pure form (which would then subject context to meaning). In this sense we could see a number of the shifts in New Testament interpretation over the last few centuries as having some deconstructive tendencies: the history of religions school, for example, aptly demonstrated the possibility of extending context far beyond Biblical parallels. Their efforts would also correspond extraordinarily well to Barthes' claims about textuality in "From Work to Text" and "The Death of the Author" insofar as they pursue a kind of "weave of citations" that extends the possibilities of what initially appeared to be a closed and self-contained "work" paradoxically beyond the limits maintained by tradition and its interests.

However, in Derrida's formulation deconstructive work does not posit new meanings in place of the old ones, and indeed it eschews hermeneutical inquiry; instead it calls the whole logocentric system into question in pursuing its effects. At the same time, however, to deconstruct is to acknowledge that one is working within the system that one seeks to displace, so there is a kind of 'taking on' of the tradition both in the sense of following in the footsteps of the tradition and intervening to decenter the tradition. The agenda is certainly political, but it does not 'dispense with' the past by any means.

In Philippians 3:1-11 we find a kind of sloughing off of the supplemental that Derrida would have probably immediately picked up on. Paul writes in 3:4-6 that he has more reason than anyone to have confidence in the flesh, and enumerates his qualifications as a Pharisee, a

member of the people of Israel, his circumcision, etc. He then goes on to characterize these qualifications as *skubala*. In a kind of simple way we can note that Paul's claims are predicated on his rejection of that which is in fact the central part of his argument: to prove the legitimacy of his claim to having overcome "confidence in the flesh" he has to insist on his qualification in various kinds of *skubala*. He claims to have cast them off once and for all, yet he still feels the need to write them into continuing existence. Or we could say somewhat better, I think, that for Paul the very possibility of rejecting 'the flesh' is predicated on emphasizing it. Indeed, Judith Lieu has demonstrated that Paul is far more interested in circumcision than his contemporaries, that in a sense he insists on the problem of circumcision as a means of creating a new group through caricaturing the old group. This is the sort of move that a deconstructive reading would pick up on in particular: to create a frontier, a difference, one has to predicate one's actions on the excluded other that already inheres in one's very act of founding that frontier (in this sense the frontier does not exist even if it is communicated as such). There is no detectable instant at which Paul is separable from those he critiques; his claim to the presence of those who are "in the circumcision and, who worship in the spirit of God, and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh" is founded on the possibility that no such person exists (as Paul himself is not such a person).

We could also read this in another way: Paul's claim is to a kind of immediacy of faith in Christ that is unsullied by the law, which, he rightly notes in Romans, can never be fulfilled. The law is rendered as derivative or secondary to faith. And yet he is reduced to writing his credentials under the law. What's more, his faith does not appear to have a final or evident meaning that would render it able to be followed any more than the law: his incessant indictments of fornicators and the licentious, for example, show that the clear simple meaning of this faith was not in fact readily communicable. Paul's claim to the presence of "faith" is belied by the internal difference of the community, on the one hand, and by the fact that up until the present no one has been able to formulate a concise statement of faith in Paul that would render further conversation unnecessary. In this sense to say that writing is endless, as Derrida does, is to insist on this impossibility of writing a text to end all texts, but the point is not to bring meaning into question but to question the system of which meaning is an effect.

My impression was that Thiselton's critique should in reality have been directed at Saussure more than at Derrida or Barthes, insofar as Saussure insists on linguistic inquiry as that



which has to be undertaken with no consideration of external linguistics, i.e. history and context, because language is a closed system. It is precisely in Saussure's formulation that we find language "abstracted from patterns of life and judgment in the inter-subjective world." On the contrary, Derrida and Barthes seem concerned to find the implications of Saussure's critique for substantial realities beyond language conceived merely as discrete instances of speaking. Barthes notes, for example, how Saussure's focus on form can lead one into an inquiry into myth as that which divests form of history and fills it with a new content, and thereby explicitly puts himself in the position of the historical reconstructionist. And when Derrida says "*il n'y a pas d'hors-texte*" (there is no outside-the-text) this is not to reject everything that is outside of the text, but on the contrary to imply on the one hand that there is nothing that is not structured in the same way as writing (for example the present "now" is always already represented by separation as a "now that was then"). On the other hand it implies that there is no marginal element that can be conceived of as a mere supplement to the text: the '*hors-texte*' in French is text intercalated into the structure of a text but that is not given page numbers.

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