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RUDOLF BULTMANN

A Companion to His Theology

DAVID W. CONGDON

DAVID W. CONGDON is associate editor at IVP Academic.

He is the author of *The Mission of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann’s Dialectical Theology* (2015).

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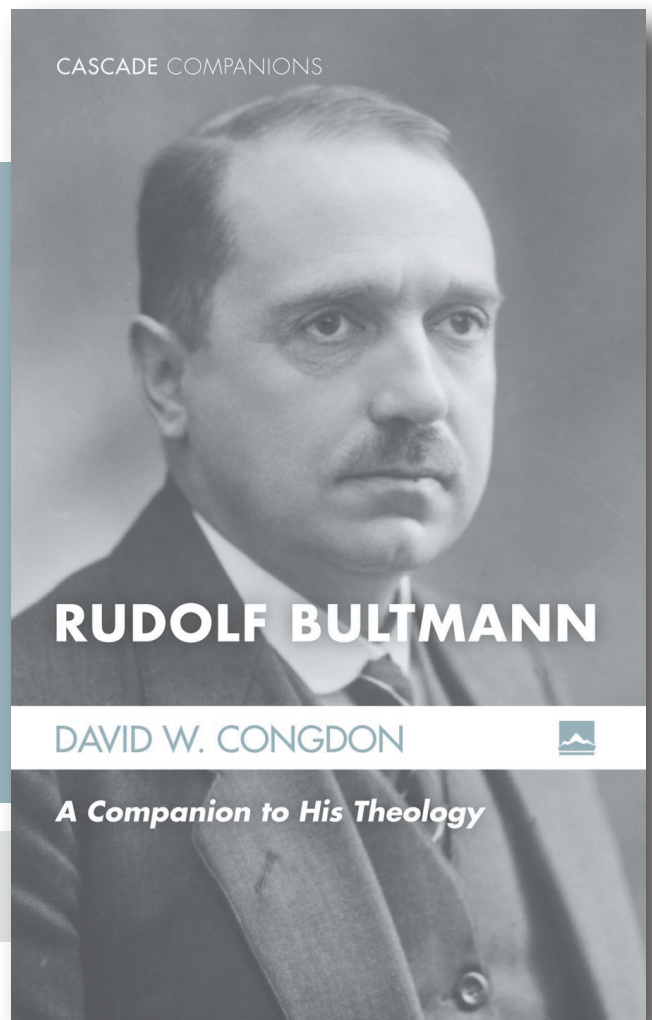
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RUDOLF BULTMANN

A Companion to His Theology

DAVID W. CONGDON



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RUDOLF BULTMANN
A Companion to His Theology

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For Amy,
who understands me
better than I understand myself

ἄρτι γινώσκω ἐκ μέρους, τότε δὲ ἐπιγνώσομαι καθὼς
καὶ ἐπεγνώσθην

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INTRODUCTION

KNOWN FOR HIS WORK in form criticism and his program of demythologizing, Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) was arguably the most significant—and certainly the most controversial—New Testament scholar of the twentieth century. Trained in German liberal theology, his study of early Christianity and his experience of the First World War contributed to his early adoption of dialectical theology, with which he identified until the end of his life. He was a passionate opponent of the German Christians and the Nazi regime during the 1930s and 1940s. His main works include *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (1921), *Jesus and the Word* (1926), *The Gospel of John* (1937–1941), and *Theology of the New Testament* (1948–53). Most of his theological writing, however, takes the form of essays, some of which is collected in the four-volume *Glauben und Verstehen*.¹

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Bultmann was the center of the theological conversation in both Europe and North America. In 1964 *Time* magazine said that “Dr. Rudolf Bultmann’s Marburg Disciples . . . dominate German theology the way the Russians rule chess.”² This state of af-

1. The first volume (except for two essays) is translated as *Faith and Understanding*. The second volume is available in English as *Essays Philosophical and Theological*. Only individual essays from the third and fourth volumes are translated.

2. “Existential Way,” 86.

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fairs could not last, of course. Many of these disciples went on to criticize their teacher in articles and books, while the disciples of rival professors, such as Karl Barth, launched more wide-ranging attacks. The academy suffered Bultmann-fatigue. The hermeneutical talk about the relation between theology and philosophy had become exhausting, so when new movements like narrative theology, political theology, and theology of hope came along, the theological discussions changed almost overnight. Bultmann died in 1976 just as the conversation in North America was turning toward figures like James Cone, Hans Frei, and David Tracy. And despite the important publications about Bultmann during the intervening years, the standard picture of his theology has remained largely static since his death.

Somewhat surprisingly, Rudolf Bultmann is the subject of growing interest again. We can attribute this largely to the publication of documents from his archive in Tübingen. Since the turn of the century, his letters with Friedrich Gogarten, Martin Heidegger, Paul Althaus, and Günther Bornkamm have been published, and many other volumes are in the works. Other recent publications include a volume of his book reviews and a collection of four fairy tales Bultmann wrote for Helene Feldmann in 1916–1917, whom he married in August 1917.³ In 2009 Konrad Hammann published his masterful biography of Bultmann. It is only natural that these texts should inspire a new generation to read Bultmann with fresh eyes. The goal of this brief guide is to assist these new readers.

First-time readers of Bultmann—especially if they have been introduced to him through a survey textbook or course lecture—tend to have two primary reactions that usually occur simultaneously. The first is surprise at

3. See Bultmann, *Theologie als Kritik*; Bultmann, *Wachen und Träumen*.

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discovering that he is not the menacing arch-heretic they were led to believe he was. (A friend of mine, upon finishing the famous programmatic essay on demythologizing for the first time, told me he kept waiting for the sinister demythologizing he had heard so much about but which never arrived. This is not an uncommon reaction.) Indeed, when one reads the vast majority of his writings, and especially his sermons, one is struck by the deep piety and the confident faith in God's revelation. One might even call him *conservative* in his firm adherence to the theology of the Lutheran Reformation. Indeed, he was strongly criticized for this by more liberal theologians who did not understand why he affirmed the exclusive saving significance of Jesus Christ. This brings me to my next point.

The other reaction readers have to Bultmann is perplexity at some of his theological decisions and assertions. He frequently makes claims that seem obvious to him but less than obvious to his readers. His dialectical style of affirming one thing before going on to deny it a few pages later often misleads people who are accustomed to thinkers always asserting what they actually believe. Despite the clarity of Bultmann's writing, one has to be familiar with the underlying network of theological, philosophical, and historical presuppositions in order to interpret his works properly. He is a systematically consistent thinker: he is not only consistent diachronically across the entire span of his academic career, but also consistent synchronically across the entire breadth of his scholarly work—spanning New Testament exegesis, systematic theology, historical research, and hermeneutical methodology. Decisions in one area of his thought cohere with decisions in another area. For this reason, a new student of Bultmann needs to become familiar with the overarching framework of his thought, and that is what this book seeks to provide.

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I should say a few words about what this book is *not*. I do not provide in these pages a true introduction to Bultmann. I eschew the usual discussion of biography. There is no historical account of his career to be found in these pages, no contextual description of his main works. Others, especially Hammann, already offer excellent accounts along these lines. While I discuss historical details where appropriate, especially in the opening chapter, this is not intended to serve as a work of intellectual history. What I aim to do instead is to provide an overview of Bultmann's theology through an examination of ten key themes: eschatology, dialectic, nonobjectifiability, self-understanding, kerygma, history, myth, hermeneutics, freedom, and advent. This is by no means an exhaustive list. Many other themes could have been chosen as a way of exploring his thought. I selected these because of their interconnection and their broad usefulness in understanding Bultmann's theology as a systematic whole. The hope is that readers of this companion will be given the conceptual tools to read Bultmann profitably and responsibly on their own. And that is the ultimate aim of this book: to encourage people to set aside the tired stereotypes and overly simplistic textbook summaries and read the great Marburger for themselves.

I encourage those who find their appetites whetted by this book to pick up more advanced works. There is, of course, no shortage of literature on Bultmann, though the vast majority of it is dated and of questionable value. I have included a short list of recommended primary and secondary sources at the end. For those interested in the relation between Bultmann and Barth, or in Bultmann's program of demythologizing, I recommend reading my previous book, *The Mission of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann's Dialectical Theology*.

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In 1960, amid the heated discussion around his hermeneutical program, Bultmann wrote:

It is incredible how many people pass judgment on my work without ever having read a word of it. . . . I have sometimes asked the grounds for a writer's verdict, and which of my writings he has read. The answer has regularly been, without exception, that he has not read any of my writings; but he has learnt from a Sunday paper or a parish magazine that I am a heretic.⁴

If reading the present work induces anyone to pass judgment upon Bultmann without actually reading him, this work has failed. If a reader is to take only one thing away from this book, I hope it will be a sense that Bultmann's theology is complex and significant enough to demand thorough engagement. Many people will, of course, still find Bultmann's theology problematic, no matter how well it is explained. But at the very least we must make the attempt at a charitable reading. Given how he was treated, we owe him that much.

C. S. Lewis's words in *An Experiment in Criticism* on reading works of literature are appropriate here:

If you already distrust the man you are going to meet, everything he says or does will seem to confirm your suspicions. We can find a book bad only by reading it as if it might, after all, be very good. We must empty our minds and lay ourselves open. There is no work in which holes can't be picked; no work that can succeed without a preliminary act of good will on the part of the reader.⁵

4. Quoted in Schmithals, *Introduction*, 20–21.

5. Lewis, *Experiment*, 116.

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Bultmann may be wrong, but so too may the great doctors of the church. We must lay ourselves open to all, ancient and modern, the beloved and the despised. Like our reading of the Bible, our reading of Bultmann “must not presuppose its results.”⁶ If this guide to his theology helps to increase one’s act of good will towards him, that is all I can ask or expect.

A NOTE ON TRANSLATION

To make it easier for English-speaking readers to explore Bultmann’s writings for themselves, I have tried to cite the best available English translation wherever possible. In many cases, however, I have found those translations deficient. Sometimes I have had to correct the translation to highlight Bultmann’s use of a particular term. In almost every case I have made the translations gender neutral or inclusive. I have indicated in the footnote (“rev.”) where such revisions have taken place.

6. Bultmann, “Is Exegesis without Presuppositions,” 145.

ABBREVIATIONS

- CD* *Church Dogmatics*
DT *dialectical theology*
GuV *Glauben und Verstehen*
LW *Luther's Works*
NT *New Testament*
rev. *revised translation*
TNT *Theology of the New Testament*

ESCHATOLOGY

INTRODUCTIONS TO RUDOLF BULTMANN, especially in English, tend to approach him by first looking at his hermeneutics, his form- and historical-critical scholarship, or his philosophical influences. They start, that is, with some aspect of epistemology (i.e., the study of knowledge, particularly the question of methodology). This is understandable, given how dominant the subject of epistemology is in modernity—especially in modern theology, as the traditional assumptions and sources of knowledge came under scrutiny—and how crucial it is for Bultmann's own theological work. But as an introduction to Bultmann, as an orientation to the way he thinks and why, it is backwards.

Those who want to understand Bultmann must begin not at the philosophical-hermeneutical-epistemological beginning but at the theological *end*—that is to say, at the doctrine of the end, or eschatology. As a matter of biographical history, Bultmann happened to begin his theological studies at a time when eschatology was being rediscovered after centuries of dismissal and neglect. He entered his training at precisely the right moment: after the significance of eschatology was already recognized, but before it had been theologically integrated and developed. He was thus

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perfectly positioned to be a pioneer in the eschatological awakening of modern Christianity, which is exactly what he became.

In order to read Bultmann rightly, therefore, the first thing to realize is that he was essentially an *eschatological theologian*. The theme of eschatology was not merely a central topic of his historical and theological writings; it functioned as a norm and criterion that determined his thinking about every theological issue. Every other aspect of Bultmann's theology derives from the fact that he was, from first to last, a theologian of the eschatological reality of God.

THE TURN TO ESCHATOLOGY

In 1959 Rudolf Bultmann wrote a brief article for the *Expository Times* as part of a series on the books that were most important to a particular scholar's thinking. Bultmann listed six books in roughly chronological order. The third book in the list was the second edition of Johannes Weiss's *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* (ET *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*). Regarding this book, Bultmann wrote: "Here my eyes were opened to the 'eschatological' character of the preaching of Jesus; that is, I saw that the Kingdom of God preached by Him was not a religious and ethical community located within, but a miraculous 'eschatological' entity."¹ To understand the development of Bultmann's theology and hermeneutics, we will need to go back to Weiss and the revolution he initiated in biblical studies.

In early 1892, when the young Bultmann was only seven years old, the Marburg New Testament scholar Johannes Weiss published a short work on the preaching of Jesus about the kingdom of God, which he knew was going

1. Bultmann, "Milestones," 125.

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to upset a lot of people. The issue is that, at face value, the NT texts indicate that Jesus proclaimed (and his followers believed in) the literal, imminent arrival of a new divine kingdom upon earth within the disciples' lifetime (cf. Matt 10:23). This kingdom, of course, never actually arrived as expected. The early church quickly found ways to reconcile their faith in Jesus as the messiah with this great disappointment. The most famous approach was to claim that "with the Lord one day is like a thousand years" (2 Pet 3:8). Having deferred the eschaton indefinitely, the church lost the eschatological consciousness of the early community and focused on itself, on its liturgy and doctrine, on its relation to the wider culture and the government. Ernst Käsemann calls this transition period "early catholicism."² Now that they were no longer expecting the imminent end of history, these early Christians could get on with the business of living in the world. The death of apocalyptic—understood here as the imminent expectation of the messiah's coming—was not the death of eschatology as such, of course. The Christian community continued to believe in and await a future last judgment, along with the coming of God's kingdom for all creation. But the decisive events where salvation was concerned were now all innerworldly; baptism into the church was now the entrance into the new age. Participating in the church replaced waiting for the kingdom.

Everything changed in modernity. Skepticism regarding the nonempirical and the general loss of credence in religious authority created space to question the assumptions regarding eschatology and the afterlife. The speculative hope in a paradisiacal reign at the permanently-deferred end of history could not withstand the Kantian criticism of metaphysics. Immanuel Kant's exclusion of the unintuitable and supratemporal from the realm of reason rendered the

2. Käsemann, *New Testament Questions*, 236–37.

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traditional doctrine of eschatology no longer credible as an article of belief. For these and other reasons, theologians searched for ways of understanding the biblical language of the kingdom that did not require appeal to the supernatural and the metaphysical. They did not have to search far. There was already a long-standing orthodox tradition of identifying the kingdom of God with the church on earth, based on passages like the “keys of the kingdom” (Matt 16:19). And there was certainly a robust moral tradition inherited from medieval theology. It was easy enough for modern liberal theologians to conclude that talk of God’s kingdom in the Bible was actually a metaphorical way of speaking about an idealistic innerhistorical moral community. To belong to the kingdom of God, according to the liberal view, was to adhere to various universal religious and ethical truths. Friedrich Schleiermacher paved the way for this view, but it was Albrecht Ritschl who systematized it.

Weiss was explicitly critical of the liberal position, but this placed him in an uncomfortable position, given that Ritschl was his father-in-law. While Weiss delayed the publication of his book until 1892 to avoid personally upsetting Ritschl, he explicitly addressed his book to those who held Ritschl’s views, which included himself. Weiss exposed the liberal position as an illegitimate imposition of a Kantian framework upon the biblical text. The early Christian community did not use this language symbolically. They genuinely believed in the imminent arrival of God’s messianic reign within their lifetimes. To be sure, Weiss considered such a notion delusional, and so he posed the fundamental challenge for future theologians: to translate the content of the New Testament into the context of the contemporary world. Or as Weiss put it, theologians today must “issue the old coinage at a new rate of exchange.”³ I will return to this

3. Weiss, *Die Predigt Jesu*, 7.

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hermeneutical challenge later, when I discuss Bultmann's program of demythologizing. For now all we need to see is that Weiss set the stage for later scholars, who came along and developed his insight into the eschatological nature of the early Christian gospel.

Bultmann began his theological studies in 1903 at Tübingen University. He then went to Berlin in 1904 before arriving, in 1905, at Marburg University, the goal and climax of his education. There he came under the influence of Adolf Jülicher, Paul Natorp, Wilhelm Herrmann, and, especially, Weiss. By this point, the latter's thesis regarding the eschatological orientation of Jesus was widely accepted. The following year, in 1906, Albert Schweitzer published his groundbreaking *Von Reimarus zu Wrede: Eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, later translated as *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Schweitzer's work not only radicalized Weiss's thesis about Jesus' preaching, but it had the additional effect of bringing the quest for the historical Jesus to a screeching halt.⁴

Bultmann was thus trained within a context that recognized the thoroughly eschatological nature of early Christianity but had no idea what to do with this insight theologically. In the lectures he gave in 1951 at Yale University and Vanderbilt University,⁵ published as *Jesus Christ and Mythology* in 1958, Bultmann recalls the "epoch-making" significance of Weiss: "Weiss showed that the Kingdom of God is not immanent in the world and does not grow as part of the world's history, but is rather eschatological;

4. For more on Schweitzer and Bultmann, see Grässer, "Albert Schweitzer und Rudolf Bultmann," 53–69.

5. These lectures were given at the height of the controversy over his program of demythologizing, which he had announced in 1941. Indeed, in 1951 Bultmann was being subjected to various heresy trials by the Protestant church in Germany, which mostly ceased by the following year. See Hammann, *Rudolf Bultmann*, 443–48.

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i.e., the Kingdom of God transcends the historical order. It will come into being not through the moral endeavour of man, but solely through the supernatural action of God.⁶ Bultmann then recounts the words of his professor in Berlin, Julius Kaftan, who said that “if Johannes Weiss is right and the conception of the Kingdom of God is an eschatological one, then it is impossible to make use of this conception in dogmatics.”⁷ One person who agreed with Kaftan was Wilhelm Herrmann, the much beloved professor of both Bultmann and Karl Barth. When faced with the truth of Weiss’s presentation of early Christian eschatology, Herrmann retreated from talking of God’s kingdom and focused instead on “the personal experience of revelation.”⁸ Or rather he reinterpreted the language of the kingdom to refer to the “inner life” of Jesus himself, safe from the problems of history.⁹

Like many others, Bultmann soon found this way of resolving the conundrum unsatisfactory. For one thing it was an escape from the real challenge and claim posed by the biblical text. The tragedy of the First World War also had the effect of making eschatology existentially relevant once again.¹⁰ But it was not until he encountered the work

6. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ*, 12.

7. *Ibid.*, 13.

8. Chalamet, *Dialectical Theologians*, 46.

9. Herrmann, *Communion*, 60–61: “In the Christian fellowship we are made acquainted, not merely with the external course of Jesus’ lot in life and of His work in history, but we are led into His presence and receive a picture of His inner life. . . . We need communion with Christians in order that, from the picture of Jesus which His church has preserved, there may shine forth that inner life which is the heart of it. . . . Thus we would never apprehend the most important element in the historical appearance of Jesus did not His people make us feel it.”

10. “When *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* was written, the eschatological orientation of Jesus’ and primitive Christianity’s

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of Friedrich Gogarten and Karl Barth in 1919–1920 that he saw a new way forward: an understanding of Christian faith and theology that embraced the eschatological character of the early Christian gospel under the conditions of the modern age.

ESCHATOLOGY WITHOUT APOCALYPTIC

In the second edition of his commentary on Romans, Barth made what was at that time a surprising claim: “Christianity that is not completely and utterly eschatology has completely and utterly nothing to do with *Christ*.”¹¹ But in that same commentary, Barth explicitly denies holding to any literal apocalyptic vision of the coming kingdom, which he calls “enthusiastic-apocalyptic illusions of an anticipated unity of the immanent and the transcendent.”¹² Whatever eschatology means, it cannot refer to some future occurrence in which the “Son of Man” comes down from the clouds, as if God lives in some ethereal abode in what we now call outer space. While apocalyptic in that sense has died, this does not mean that we are necessarily bereft of an eschatological hope, though such hope will have to look very different than it once did.

Barth thus differentiates between *apocalyptic* (understood as the belief in a literal future *parousia*) and *eschatology* (understood as the present actualization of and

message could only bewilder contemporary theology. But for theology after World War I, which no longer understood itself in terms of cultural optimism, but more nearly apocalyptically (*The Decline of the West*), Schweitzer’s discovery provided an orientation for the new understanding of existence.” James M. Robinson, introduction to Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, xxi.

11. Barth, *Römerbrief*, 430.

12. *Ibid.*, 225.

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encounter with the eschaton).¹³ It was this distinction that showed Bultmann how to remain in theological contact with the biblical text without abandoning his modern context. With the liberals Bultmann acknowledged the alien character of the biblical texts, but against the liberals Bultmann affirmed that these texts remain significant for our faith and practice today *precisely in their eschatological character*. He was able to recognize as a historian that *what* the early Christians hoped for proved to be mistaken, while also recognizing that the *expectation itself* is, in some sense, essential to the faith.

While it took a number of years to finally reach its mature form, this distinction between apocalyptic and eschatology eventually turned into Bultmann's distinction between mythological and nonmythological modes of God-talk. We will look at the concept of myth in more depth later, but it is important to point out now that Bultmann's approach to myth is fundamentally determined by his attempt to make sense of primitive apocalyptic thought in the New Testament, given the fact that, for modern Christians, "mythological eschatology has passed away."¹⁴ In *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, after introducing the problem posed by the nonoccurrence of the *parousia*, Bultmann poses the central

13. The concept of "apocalyptic" is ambiguous, due to the fact that it can name a literary genre *and* an intellectual movement. As a literary genre it names various works written in the period of Second Temple Judaism, including Daniel, 1 Enoch, 2 Baruch, 4 Ezra, and the Apocalypse of John. Among these works we find identifying markers, such as the revelation of secret mysteries, visions and seers, and symbolic imagery. As an intellectual-historical movement, we have to differentiate between at least Jewish-prophetic and early Christian apocalyptic, but in general we find common themes like an imminent end of history, cosmic catastrophe, the enthronement of God or the Son of God, otherworldly agents and powers, and the coming of salvation. For more on this, see Koch, *Rediscovery of Apocalyptic*, 18–35.

14. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ*, 25.

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challenge for theologians today: “We must ask whether the eschatological preaching and the mythological sayings as a whole contain a still deeper meaning which is concealed under the cover of mythology. If that is so, let us abandon the mythological conceptions precisely because we want to retain their deeper meaning.”¹⁵ The task for theology, according to Bultmann, is to discern this “deeper meaning”—a task he calls “demythologizing.” With respect to biblical apocalyptic, Bultmann interprets the expected end of the world as referring to “the judgment of God” upon humankind for turning the world “into a place in which evil spreads and sin rules.” This divine judgment “calls men first and foremost to responsibility toward God and to repentance. It calls them to perform the will of God.”¹⁶

In his pursuit of this deeper meaning in the New Testament, Bultmann seeks to answer the question: *what truth comes to expression in primitive Christian apocalyptic that does not depend upon (and can be differentiated from) the ancient conception of the cosmos?* This ancient conception comprises, among other things, the intervention of supernatural forces in everyday occurrences, the enslavement of the cosmos to competing supernatural powers and principalities, and the imminent destruction of the cosmos as part of the arrival of the new cosmic order. Put simply, if their view of the cosmic order was flawed, what was the truth in the ancient community’s theology that remains relevant for people who no longer believe—and no longer *have* to believe—that illness, evil, and suffering are the work of evil spirits or that a divine messiah is going to appear to restore world order? We will never understand Bultmann’s theological project if we do not realize that *this* is the fundamental question underpinning his work from

15. Ibid., 18.

16. Ibid., 26.

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beginning to end. Attempts to approach Bultmann's theology as if it were a program for integrating philosophy and theology inevitably miss the point. They fail to see that one is compelled to ask Bultmann's questions entirely within the terms of the New Testament, read in light of its historical context as a document that seeks to make sense of the early community's confidence in the imminent advent of Christ.

THE CHALLENGE OF READING BULTMANN

Reading Bultmann today is made difficult not only because of these faulty assumptions about his own project, but also because of simplistic dismissals of the problem posed by early apocalyptic eschatology. Following the rediscovery of eschatology, scholars split into two camps: those who advocated a present, realized eschatology (Bultmann, Dodd), and those who retained in some form the imminent, future eschatology of the early church (Käsemann, Pannenberg, Moltmann). Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, conservative scholars found an easy way out of this debate with a classic "both-and" approach, which goes by the name "inaugurated eschatology." Associated originally with Werner Kümmel, the position was popularized within anglophone evangelical circles initially by George Eldon Ladd and today by N. T. Wright. The position is immensely attractive for obvious reasons: it allows one to affirm both the future and present eschatological passages in the NT while avoiding issues of historical context and theological conflict. All problems immediately disappear. Today the phrase "already but not yet" is a theological truism. But its near-universal acceptance means that readers of Bultmann today are likely to find themselves confounded by the way he sets up the task of theology in terms of an eschatological dilemma that most people no longer think exists. We are

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now conditioned to ignore statements about the disciples not tasting death before they see the kingdom of God (Mark 9:1; Matt 16:28; Luke 9:27), or perhaps treating it as an intentional statement of hyperbole, or as a reference to seeing the resurrected Christ, or some other interpretation. We assume that the coming kingdom was always supposed to appear in the distant future. The short-lived idea that it was going to arrive in the near future was just an overly enthusiastic anomaly, but it was never really taken seriously.

These and other similar ideas are fairly widespread today. The reason is obvious: We are deeply uncomfortable with the idea that the people whose views we hold to be authoritative, perhaps even infallible, might have held ideas that were simply wrong or at least profoundly alien to our own way of thinking. We are afraid that, if they were wrong about the imminent *parousia*, they might be wrong about other things more essential to the faith. It is only natural to look for explanations that close up these loopholes and shore up the faith against doubt. But in doing so, many Christians have inoculated themselves against the problems and dilemmas posed by the biblical text and the history of ancient Christianity. Moreover, this strategy secures the faith at the cost of recognizing just how truly *strange* and *other* the biblical world is. The danger in denying the cultural and historical otherness of the text is that we risk creating an environment in which cultural and theological differences are seen as a *threat* to the faith. We start to see multiple viewpoints and divergent interpretations not as an intrinsic part of the diverse body of believers but as a menace to the (idolatrous) security of “knowing” that our way is the right way, that our thoughts are God’s thoughts.

An alternative and increasingly popular approach is to recognize the strangeness of the Bible but to insist that becoming a Christian requires that we abandon our present

world in order to inhabit the biblical world. This approach has the advantage of acknowledging the historical otherness of scripture, which encourages, at least in theory, good historical scholarship. But this position only repeats the same mistake by assuming that whatever cultural world Jesus and Paul inhabit, it has to be *my* cultural world as well. So if they belonged to an apocalyptic-mythological context, then that also must become my intellectual context, regardless of what that might entail. The common (and mistaken) presupposition is that my conceptuality has to be the same as that of the NT. Never mind the fact there is contextual and conceptual divergence *within* the NT itself.¹⁷ What is at issue here is the purported inseparability of the *message* of the Bible from its cultural-historical *context*. Upholding this inseparability is yet another way of denying that plurality is intrinsic to the faith, though denying it can lead to other dangers, especially if we conclude that the gospel message exists in a purely acultural form. Between the reductionist Scylla and the abstract Charybdis lies the path of Bultmann, which requires that we “let all security go” and “enter into inner darkness,” and few have such faith.¹⁸

Reading Bultmann responsibly requires that we open ourselves to the alien character of the Bible. It also challenges us to take this strange world seriously, in all its historical complexity, without thereby assuming that we must somehow make this strange world our own. How this is possible is the task undertaken by hermeneutical theology, which is to say, by all genuine theology that grapples with the problem posed by the dissonance between the world of the text and the world of the reader. Subsequent chapters will explore Bultmann’s way of handling this problem. His

17. Matters become still more problematic when we take the Old Testament into account.

18. Bultmann, “On the Problem,” 122.

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way may not be or become our own, but we cannot make sense of his work if we do not first see the validity and necessity of taking on this task.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What is the eschaton?
2. What does it mean to believe in the “return” or “second coming” of Christ? Can Christianity withstand the loss of belief in Christ’s literal return? If so, how might we interpret the creed’s confession that Christ will come to judge the living and the dead?
3. How does one reconcile eschatological hope with the scientific expectation of a dying sun swallowing up the earth?
4. Is eschatology more than wishful thinking? If so, in what sense?
5. Can belief in the authority of scripture coexist with the claim that the biblical authors were wrong about certain points, some of which were held in high importance (e.g., the imminent return)?