

Rudolf Bultmann und die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft der Gegenwart

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Kerygma and History

Bultmann's Hermeneutical Theology in North America Today

David W. Congdon

Any attempt to separate Rudolf Bultmann's theology and exegesis inevitably fails, since as Ulrich Körtner points out, he was "not merely an exegete *and* a systematician of distinction, but rather he was a systematic theologian *as an exegete*."¹ Bultmann was one of the last to be able to achieve this synthesis. Part of the reason for this is the growing tension, at times bordering on incommensurability, between the conceptual frameworks that structure each discipline: for exegesis the key concept is history, while for systematic theology the key concept is the kerygma, the constructive norm for theological reflection.² Bultmann's synthesis of theology and exegesis was achieved by holding kerygma and history in a dialectical unity, neither reducing one to the other nor isolating one from the other – that is, without confusion or separation, as the Chalcedonian definition puts it. Bultmann constructed his mature hermeneutical program on this twofold foundation. Demythologizing, he clarified in 1952, has two aspects that necessarily belong together: "Negatively, demythologizing is *criticism of the world-picture of myth* insofar as it conceals the real intention of myth. Positively, demythologizing is *existentialist interpretation* in that it seeks to make clear the

¹ Ulrich H. J. Körtner, "Enzyklopädische Theologie," in *Bultmann Handbuch*, ed. Christof Landmesser (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 367–73, at 367. All emphasis original unless otherwise noted.

² The word "kerygma" may be misleading here, especially for those who work in biblical studies, where it has a specific historical meaning, referring to the proclamation of the post-Easter Jesus followers. Bultmann used the term in this sense in his form critical work. Starting in 1926, however, Bultmann increasingly operated with another definition of kerygma. According to this theological version, kerygma refers not to any historically situated set of beliefs about Jesus but instead functions as a synonym for what the other dialectical theologians referred to as divine revelation, the word of God, and the Christ-event – namely, the norm for theological reflection, what previous liberal theologians called the essence of Christianity. Bultmann's unique variation on this norm emphasizes its prereflective character and utter indefinability. His conception of the kerygma as theological norm thus bears striking resemblance to Schleiermacher's "feeling of absolute dependence" (*schlechthinniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl*).

intention of myth to talk about human existence.”³ Put another way, demythologizing negatively concerns history and positively concerns the kerygma: the historical criticism of the mythical *Weltbild* and the existential translation of the kerygma are both equally essential to his program.

From the start, the reception of Bultmann’s *Entmythologisierungsvortrag* was characterized by an emphasis on one term over the other – exemplified initially by the responses of Helmut Thielicke and Fritz Buri.⁴ The situation has hardly improved in the decades since, especially in the Anglo-American, and particularly North American, context, where the disciplinary tensions between biblical studies and systematic theology have arguably always been sharper. The question Bultmann poses to all his critics, then and now, is whether they accept the possibility and necessity of *translating Christianity* from one historical moment to another. As he put the matter in his 1957 defense of exegetical presuppositions, the biblical texts wish to be understood as “witnesses of faith and proclamation” (i.e., witnesses to the kerygma), but they are “historical documents” that “speak in a strange language with concepts from a distant time, from a strange world-picture.” As a result, “they must be *translated*, and translation is the task of historical scholarship.”⁵ Bultmann’s assumption that translation is the task of exegesis is the crux of the matter, and this is precisely what has been lost (or, rather, rejected) in more recent work in the area of New Testament interpretation and theology. Using the concepts of history and kerygma to frame the analysis, what follows will examine both indirect and direct responses to Bultmann in the field of New Testament studies, focusing on work since the turn of the century. After assessing the extremes on both sides – history without kerygma, and kerygma without history – I will look again at Bultmann’s dialectical synthesis, which hangs precariously on the edge of a knife, requiring both an unrestricted historical criticism and a prereflective kerygmatic norm. While there are some North American scholars who seem to grasp Bultmann’s program, the state of hermeneutical theology today suggests that it is a difficult program to sustain, at least without a firm commitment to the underlying theological framework.

³ Rudolf Bultmann, “Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung,” in *Kerygma und Mythos, Band II: Diskussion und Stimmen zum Problem der Entmythologisierung*, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch (Hamburg-Volksdorf: H. Reich, 1952), 179–208, at 184.

⁴ See Helmut Thielicke, “Die Frage der Entmythologisierung des Neuen Testaments [1942],” in *Kerygma und Mythos, Band I: Ein theologisches Gespräch*, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch (Hamburg: H. Reich, 1948), 177–210; Fritz Buri, “Entmythologisierung oder Entkerygmatisierung der Theologie,” in *Kerygma und Mythos, Band II: Diskussion und Stimmen zum Problem der Entmythologisierung*, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch (Hamburg-Volksdorf: Herbert Reich, 1952), 85–101.

⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, “Ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich? [1957],” in *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 4 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1933–1965), 3:142–50, at 145. Hereafter cited as *GV*.

1. History

The nineteenth-century project of theological encyclopaedia, as conceived by Friedrich Schleiermacher, differentiated between the normative (philosophical and practical) and historical disciplines in theological *Wissenschaft*, placing the study of the biblical anthology on the side of historical inquiry – a distinction that has endured long after the decline of the encyclopaedia tradition. In his 1926 review of the then-latest Protestant theological scholarship, for instance, Bultmann distinguished between systematic theology, including dogmatics, ethics, and the philosophy of religion, and “the historical disciplines, i.e., the study of the Old and New Testament and of church history.”⁶ It is thus not surprising that scholars in the area of New Testament studies have emphasized history to the neglect – if not outright denial – of the kerygma. Many follow the approach outlined by Krister Stendahl in 1962, following Johann Philipp Gabler (1787) and William Wrede (1897) before him, who differentiated between the descriptive and the normative, between what the text *meant* and what the text *means*: the former is the domain of biblical theology, according to Stendahl, while the latter is the domain of dogmatic or systematic theology.⁷ Most scholars who follow this line of thought are not content with merely reproducing the normative claims of the text (biblical theology) but instead subject them “to critical analysis and second-order redescription” – moving beyond “what the text meant” to examine critically the multiple traces of meaning within the various layers of the text, often to expose the underlying ideological purposes behind the text’s mythical imagery and normative claims.⁸ A separate group believes that what the text meant *is* what the text means, that the normative claims made by the text ought to remain normative today. This group collapses the task of systematic theology into the task of historical description. For both groups, the task of historical scholarship does not involve translation, either because the kerygma is irrelevant (or nonexistent) or because the kerygma has been conflated with history; to engage in translation either violates the critical distance required for the descriptive task or it denies the normativity of the text’s “original meaning,” at least as the historian has reconstructed it. Naturally, it follows that both groups oppose Bultmann and accuse him of engaging in poor historical scholarship.

⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, “Die evangelisch-theologische Wissenschaft in der Gegenwart [1926],” in *Theologie als Kritik: Ausgewählte Rezensionen und Forschungsberichte*, ed. Matthias Dreher and Klaus W. Müller (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 156–66, at 156.

⁷ Krister Stendahl, “Biblical Theology, Contemporary,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 1:418–32.

⁸ Emma Wasserman, *Apocalypse as Holy War: Divine Politics and Polemics in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 19.

1.1. Paul within Judaism

Among those that emphasize history without a kerygma, the scholars associated with the “Paul within Judaism” (hereafter PWJ) camp stand out – as much for the quality of their scholarship as for their contrast to Bultmann’s approach to New Testament theology. As a self-identified *Schule*, PWJ is a recent phenomenon, originating with the Paul and Judaism Consultation in November 2010, though the groundwork for the PWJ interpretation was laid by Lloyd Gaston, John Gager, and Stanley Stowers in the 1980s and 1990s.⁹

To better understand this contrast, it will help to briefly sketch the history of Pauline scholarship.¹⁰ The traditional anti-legalist reading of Paul claims that Judaism required adherence to the law in order to obtain salvation, and since complete obedience was not possible, the result was despair – a despair that the Christian gospel then addresses by offering grace in place of works-righteousness. Bultmann, who arguably remains the preeminent representative of this approach to Paul, offered a twist on this interpretation by placing the anti-legalist reading within an eschatological and existential horizon. Salvation is freedom from the past (sin) and for the future (grace), and the necessity of the gospel arises not because one fails to keep the law, but rather precisely when one succeeds in keeping it (as Paul claimed: Phil 3:6), because then a person is bound all the more to the past – to their past righteous deeds in which they boast – and is thereby barred from a life of genuine freedom. In response to the anti-legalist tradition of Pauline interpretation, the anti-ethnocentric interpretation (still commonly called the “new perspective,” even though it is a half-century old), which arose in the second-half of the twentieth century in response to the challenge of the Shoah and the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, claims that the anti-legalistic position “was based, not on an adequate description of ancient Judaism, but on a Christian caricature.”¹¹ This school of thought – originating with Stendahl, Markus Barth, and E.P. Sanders (unwittingly, since Sanders’s views did not align with the “new

⁹ Matthew V. Novenson, “Whither the Paul within Judaism *Schule*?,” *Journal of the Jesus Movement in its Jewish Setting* 5 (2018): 79–88, at 79. For the sake of simplicity and clarity, I will use “PWJ” as a collective noun to refer to the group of scholars who have aligned themselves with that label, or whose work shares the same stated commitments and concerns. Given the parameters of this chapter, I will focus on the more recent representatives of PWJ, especially Paula Fredriksen.

¹⁰ For a more extensive version of what follows, see Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 4–11. I follow Thiessen in using the labels “anti-legalistic” and “anti-ethnocentric,” as opposed to “Lutheran” and “new perspective,” respectively.

¹¹ Magnus Zetterholm, “Paul within Judaism: The State of the Questions,” in *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, ed. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 31–51, at 44.

perspective”),¹² and developed most extensively by James D.G. Dunn and N.T. Wright – argues that Paul’s critique of Judaism is not soteriological so much as sociological: the problem is not that Judaism is legalistic but that it is ethnically exclusive and particularist. The Christian gospel is not grace in contrast to works, but gentile inclusion in contrast to exclusion. Dunn, for instance, claims that Paul objects to Judaism’s “zeal for the law” that renders gentiles “beyond the Pale.” And Wright claims that Judaism’s problem “is not legalism but ‘national righteousness’” and the use of the law as “badges of national privilege.”¹³ While the anti-ethnocentric reading avoids a soteriological anti-Judaism, scholars in recent years have argued that its contrast between Jewish particularism and Christian universalism repeats the Judaism/Christianity antithesis at the sociopolitical level. Despite its efforts, the anti-ethnocentric interpretation thus ends up sustaining Christian supersessionism in a different form.

According to PWJ, the entire contrast between Judaism and Christianity is ahistorical and anachronistic. Paul was concerned not with these two different religions (gentile Christianity did not yet exist), but instead with two different ethnicities: Jew and pagan. Over against the “colorblind” theological universalisms of the anti-legalism and anti-ethnocentrism positions, the PWJ school emphasizes historical and ethnic particularities. For these scholars, Paul was a committed Jew and, so far as we know, never practiced or thought of himself as anything else.¹⁴ Paul’s gospel was not directed against his native Judaism but instead had two distinct messages, one for Jews and the other for pagans (i.e., gentiles). To his fellow Jews, the message was simply to prepare for the kingdom’s imminent arrival; they were God’s people “and God . . . will come through in the End.”¹⁵ To the pagans, however, Paul’s message was to become something new – indeed, a “new creation” – neither an ex-pagan convert to Judaism nor a “god-fearing” pagan. They instead were called to become what Paula Fredriksen calls “ex-pagan pagans,” retaining their native ethnicities while adopting certain marks of Jewish identity, namely, committing “to the worship of Israel’s god alone and eschew[ing] idol worship.”¹⁶ Contrary to the traditional Protestant interpretation of Paul as having a law-free mission, Paul’s actual gospel entailed a

¹² See Mark Chancey, “Foreword,” in E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion, 40th Anniversary Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), xi–xxvi, esp. xvii–xxi.

¹³ See James D.G. Dunn, “Noch Einmal ‘Works of the Law’: The Dialogue Continues,” in *Fair Play: Diversity and Conflicts in Early Christianity: Essays in Honour of Heikki Räisänen*, ed. Ismo Dunderberg, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 273–90, at 278; N.T. Wright, “The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith,” *TynBul* 29 (1978): 61–88, at 82.

¹⁴ For the most extensive account of this interpretation, see Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans’ Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

¹⁵ Fredriksen, *Paul*, 162.

¹⁶ Fredriksen, *Paul*, 74, 117.

kind of Judaizing, though he rejected the version that required circumcision.¹⁷ Crucially for PWJ, however, the eschatological inclusion of the gentiles does not annul the ethnic distinction between Israel and the pagans: “Israel remains Israel, the nations remain the nations.”¹⁸ For PWJ, therefore, all universalizing – both theological and sociological – is forbidden. Even Paul’s deity is the specifically “Jewish god,” in contrast to the pagan gods, since religion and ethnicity are inextricable categories within antiquity.¹⁹

PWJ’s opposition to all theologizing places that school in sharp contrast to Bultmann’s methodological principle, stated in a letter to Hans Lietzmann, “that historical and ‘theological’ investigation of history must proceed as one.” Like Lietzmann, PWJ “divorces the believing and evaluative conception of history from its scientific investigation and presentation,” restricting itself to the latter while handing the former over to the theologians.²⁰ Even though PWJ and Bultmann both share a full embrace of historical criticism, including a willingness to let the historical inquiry run its course without theological guardrails, Bultmann does not think such inquiry can or should occur without personal involvement and existential presuppositions. Fredriksen, on the other hand, complimented Troels Engberg-Pedersen in an online symposium about her work for the fact that she has “no idea” what his own religious convictions might be based on reading his scholarship, because he is “too good a critical historical thinker.”²¹ The implication is clear: to be a “good historical thinker” one’s subjectivity should be eliminated so that the work is as objective as possible. This valorization of neutrality stems from the conviction that “this research discipline [of Pauline studies] has indeed been negatively affected by Christian normative theology.”²² Bultmann is usually not the target of this critique; PWJ is already two paradigm shifts removed from Bultmann’s New Testament theology and has little reason to engage his work.²³ PWJ’s criticisms are typically reserved for more

¹⁷ For more on this, see Paula Fredriksen, “Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul’s Gospel,” *NTS* 56, no. 2 (2010): 232–52; Paula Fredriksen, “Why Should a ‘Law-Free’ Mission Mean a ‘Law-Free’ Apostle?,” *JBL* 134, no. 3 (2015): 637–50.

¹⁸ Fredriksen, *Paul*, 116.

¹⁹ Fredriksen, *Paul*, 32–42. See also Paula Fredriksen, “How Jewish Is God? Divine Ethnicity in Paul’s Theology,” *JBL* 137, no. 1 (2018): 193–212.

²⁰ Rudolf Bultmann to Hans Lietzmann, 21 June 1939, in Hans Lietzmann, *Glanz und Niedergang der deutschen Universität: 50 Jahre deutscher Wissenschaftsgeschichte in Briefen an und von Hans Lietzmann (1892–1942)*, ed. Kurt Aland (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1979), 967.

²¹ Paula Fredriksen, “Once More (Last Time!) into the Breach: Third Rejoinder to Troels Engberg-Pedersen’s Three Responses to *Paul: The Pagans’ Apostle*,” *Syndicate* (September 29, 2020), <https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/paul-the-pagans-apostle/>.

²² Zetterholm, “Paul within Judaism,” 31.

²³ In contrast to Bultmann, the PWJ scholars seem to share a (well-deserved) admiration for the work of Albert Schweitzer, both *Von Reimarus zu Wrede* (1906) and *Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus* (1930). Fredriksen frequently invokes his name – typically alongside Stendahl, the two of whom she calls “my giants” – and her account of Paul’s imminent apocalyptic

conservative contemporary scholars who dominate the field of Pauline studies. But PWJ's resistance to the way Christian normative theology has impeded a historically accurate understanding of the biblical anthology has led them to resist any normative language. Wasserman, for instance, criticizes those in the "apocalyptic Paul" school (about which I will say more below), especially Martinus de Boer, for the way they use "critical categories that quickly shade into normative confessional claims." But then she also criticizes Bultmann and Ernst Käsemann for interpreting Christian apocalypticism as "enduringly relevant," as if any exegesis that has contemporary Christian faith in view is inherently problematic.²⁴ Caroline Johnson Hodge criticizes "traditional Pauline scholarship" for positing an account of Christianity "as a universal, transcendent religion that escapes the particularities of history and culture."²⁵ Rafael Rodríguez charges Douglas Campbell and Michael Gorman with interpreting Paul as a "Christian theologian" who "wax[es] philosophically about the human condition. This reading of Romans is not so much *unhistorical* as it is *transhistorical*."²⁶ For her part, Fredriksen says she does not know whether "a historically constituted Jesus or Paul" would be "theologically usable for current communities." Such a question can only be answered by theologians. "I speak here, again, only as a historian. . . . And it is as such that I state my wish, namely, that New Testament scholars stop wrapping their theological work in the rhetoric of historical investigation."²⁷

PWJ is surely right to protest the frequent conflation of historical inquiry with normative theology, which implicitly imposes present-day claims and categories

eschatology owes much to Schweitzer's work. See Paula Fredriksen, "Ethnic Eschatologies: A Response to Jennifer Eyl," *Syndicate* (May 26, 2020), <https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/paul-the-pagans-apostle/>; Paula Fredriksen, "Review of N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*," *CBQ* 77 (2015): 387–91, at 390–91. Thiessen lists Schweitzer, alongside Gustav Adolf Deissmann and William Wrede, as one of the pre-new perspective scholars who did not fit into either the anti-legalistic or anti-ethnocentric camps (Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem*, 173, n. 16). Wasserman credits Schweitzer with recognizing the nonuniqueness and nondualistic character of Jewish apocalypticism, in contrast to later scholars on the apocalyptic Paul (Wasserman, *Apocalypse as Holy War*, 5–6). One possible reason for the preference of Schweitzer over Bultmann, despite their agreement about the historical context of the New Testament, is that the former had no interest in trying to understand what remains usable and normative in Jewish apocalyptic eschatology.

²⁴ Wasserman, *Apocalypse as Holy War*, 9, 6.

²⁵ Caroline E. Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6.

²⁶ Rafael Rodríguez, "Romans 5–8 in Light of Paul's Dialogue with a Gentile Who 'Calls Himself a Jew,'" in *The So-Called Jew in Paul's Letter to the Romans*, ed. Rafael Rodríguez and Matthew Thiessen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 101–31, at 102–3.

²⁷ Paula Fredriksen, "No, Seriously: How Jewish Is God? Response to Eric Barreto," *Syndicate* (June 16, 2020), <https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/paul-the-pagans-apostle/>. Fredriksen first used this line in her review of N.T. Wright's *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, where she says that Wright "wraps his theology in the rhetoric of historical investigation." Fredriksen, "Review of Wright, *Paul*," 387.

onto the ancient texts. The question to raise in response to this body of scholarship, however, is whether the texts *themselves* make transhistorical claims that lend themselves to transhistorical interpretations. In an effort to resist the latter – presumably because most transhistorical interpretations either distort the history or generate anti-Jewish theologies – the PWJ school tends to deny the former, going to great lengths at times to repudiate any possibility of Paul speaking about a divine act or reality that applies to all people. But is this an accurate reading of the text? In response to Hodge’s work, for instance, John Barclay points out that Paul relativizes the significance of given ethnicities by stating that Jews and non-Jews alike relate to Abraham in terms of their common πίστις (Gal 3:7; Rom 4:23–24), which “is not something that can be imitated or inherited, but an orientation to a divine reality which is not within the determining power of the persons concerned.”²⁸ Without disregarding the significance of distinct ethnicities, Barclay argues that, according to Paul, God constitutes the identity of both the Jew and the gentile who share kinship with Abraham; their identity “is not a given but a gift, an identity received ‘from above.’”²⁹ Barclay here stands in continuity with Bultmann’s claim that grace is “*God’s eschatological deed*,” which “is effective for everyone who recognizes it as such and acknowledges it (in faith).”³⁰ If the anti-ethnocentric reading imposed values of liberal inclusivity and colorblind diversity upon the first-century Paul, is it equally possible that PWJ has imposed an anti-colorblind concern with ethnic particularity upon Paul to the neglect of his theological claims? Denying such claims exist may be an effort to preclude the way Paul is used as a partisan in present-day theological agendas, but at what cost to our understanding of Paul’s own thought?³¹

There are two separate issues here, which Wasserman articulates well. First, there is the problem that arises when scholars “impose various sorts of interpretative models where they hardly seem to fit.” While this applies to the anti-legalist and anti-ethnocentric readings, as well as the apocalyptic readings I discuss below, it is not clear that PWJ is free of this charge. Second, Wasserman and others also reject when “interpreters uncritically accept the normative perspective and values of their sources.”³² The question is whether every transhistorical theological interpretation is by definition uncritical, or whether there can be

²⁸ John M. G. Barclay, “An Identity Received from God: The Theological Configuration of Paul’s Kinship Discourse,” *Early Christianity* 8, no. 3 (2017): 354–372, 358–59.

²⁹ Barclay, “An Identity Received from God,” 367.

³⁰ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1954), §32, 284.

³¹ Similar questions and critiques are raised in Joshua W. Jipp, “What Are the Implications of the Ethnic Identity of Paul’s Interlocutor? Continuing the Conversation,” in *The So-Called Jew in Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, ed. Rafael Rodríguez and Matthew Thiessen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 183–203.

³² Wasserman, *Apocalypse as Holy War*, 4.

critical interpretations that nevertheless still discern transhistorical claims in the text. PWJ often seems to deny the possibility of such claims – thereby denying the legitimacy of a New Testament theology, such as Bultmann’s – in an effort to prevent the kind of interpretive impositions found in the work of Wright, to whom we now turn.

1.2. N.T. Wright

If PWJ sharply separates what the text meant from what it means today, N.T. Wright represents those who believe that what the text meant *is* (or ought to be) what it means today. While Wright is a British New Testament scholar, his work has found its primary audience in North America, particularly among conservative mainline Protestant and American evangelical communities. Wright made his name as a leader of both the “new perspective” reading of Paul and the “third quest” of the historical Jesus – the latter being a term he coined himself.³³ In both cases, he championed the use of historical research to discern what he claimed was the true message of the text. Whereas Bultmann’s method, as articulated in the letter to Lietzmann, is to engage in historical and theological interpretation of history simultaneously – each a separate level of analysis that does not compete with the other – Wright believes that only the historical level gives one access to the truth; he disparages the history of theology as a long exercise in missing the real message of the New Testament, which he has finally recovered.³⁴ While his work in Jesus studies and Pauline studies has brought him into sustained conflict with Bultmann, Wright placed the dispute into sharp relief with his 2018 Gifford Lectures, published in 2019 as *History and Eschatology* in a direct nod to Bultmann’s 1954–1955 Gifford Lectures.

Despite the shared title, Wright’s *History and Eschatology* has little in common with Bultmann’s book. Whereas Bultmann provided a study of different accounts of history and historiography as a way to highlight the distinctive approach provided by Christianity’s eschatological faith, Wright hews closer to the original aim of the Gifford Lectures and develops an extended argument for a historicized natural theology. The argument, in brief, is that natural theology has traditionally been constrained by arbitrary limits that exclude the biblical accounts of Jesus as supposedly special, supernatural revelation. If, however, nature is simply the world of space and time, then historical research that studies this world – of which Jesus is a part – should qualify as “natural theology.”³⁵ Wright has implicitly naturalized history (and historicized nature), and thus it is

³³ See Stephen Neill and N.T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1986*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 397–98.

³⁴ The irony, of course, being that Wright’s own historical analysis has come under widespread scrutiny as itself theologically prejudiced and historically suspect.

³⁵ N.T. Wright, *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2019), ix–xiv.

notable that he ignores the chapter in Bultmann's *History and Eschatology* on this very topic, "Historicism and the Naturalization of History." In that chapter Bultmann surveys Enlightenment philosophers of history, such as Giambattista Vico, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Arnold J. Toynbee, all of whom, he argues, "reduced human history to natural history," thereby characterizing the historian as a scientist who is investigating the "facts" of human development.³⁶ According to Bultmann, Toynbee "seems not to be conscious that the historian himself stands within history" and instead sees the historian as one who "stands over against history as a disinterested spectator."³⁷ A similar judgment applies to Wright's work, and it should come as no surprise that he praises both Vico and Herder as representatives of the kind of historical work he is advocating.³⁸ Human beings, Wright claims, "are part of the 'natural world,'" and history deals with this natural world by speaking about the "messy 'real world'" and "real life, real space-time-and-matter existence." Historical texts "talk about real events – events in the 'natural' world," and thus Jesus "lived in the 'natural' world of first-century Galilee."³⁹ He says the historian is "like the scientist" who forms hypotheses and puts them to the test; there is a "continuum" rather than a "gulf" between history and science, and both produce "*real knowledge*" that is equally secure.⁴⁰ The word "real" does an immense amount of work for Wright, giving him complete access to a near-positivist confidence in history's objectivity while also allowing him, when necessary, to acknowledge history's malleability and instability. He calls his position critical realism, drawing from Ben Meyer and Bernard Lonergan, but unlike the term historical criticism, the word "critical" for Wright is merely an acknowledgment that the historian is constructing the account, while the term "realism," as with his other references to reality, does all the heavy lifting. As he says, "to put it crudely, fake news exists, but that doesn't mean that nothing happened."⁴¹

Wright's strategy throughout his work is to use infinitely flexible both-and concepts to escape almost any criticism, or at least so he hopes. His already-but-not-yet approach to early Christian eschatology, which he calls "inaugurated eschatology," is a classic example.⁴² In the context of his account of history, the term "critical realism" functions this way, but arguably the most important

³⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology: The Gifford Lectures 1955* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1957), 80.

³⁷ Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, 87.

³⁸ Wright, *History and Eschatology*, 97.

³⁹ Wright, *History and Eschatology*, 74–75.

⁴⁰ Wright, *History and Eschatology*, 100. On that same page, Wright claims: "We know that the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70 just as securely as we know that 'water' equals 'hydrogen plus oxygen.'"

⁴¹ Wright, *History and Eschatology*, 95. For more on Wright's account of critical realism, see N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 81–120.

⁴² N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 1043–95.

concept he wields is “narrative.” Wright explains the work of the historian as a three-step process: (1) investigate source materials; (2) form and test hypotheses; and (3) “work towards a *narrative* through which readers will know and understand the *events*.”⁴³ By carrying out these tasks and constructing a single narrative – the singleness of the narrative is crucial because history “implies continuity” – that holds the evidence together, “*history produces . . . real knowledge about the real world*.”⁴⁴ Wright’s particular narrative is an all-encompassing macronarrative of creation, fall, covenant, and redemption that interprets Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel’s calling and the resurrection as the “revalorization of the original creation.”⁴⁵ This narrational construct does double duty. On the one hand, the single, continuous narrative between the first century and today allows Wright to criticize modern theologians for not being sufficiently historical and employing concepts and presuppositions that differ from early Christians. On the other hand, the same narrative allows Wright to ignore much of the historical research about Mediterranean antiquity, since “real knowledge about the real world” derives from the narrative, and anything that does not fit into this narrative is not only irrelevant but also effectively disconnected from reality. Using the concept of narrative, Wright thus develops a comprehensive theological framework while still maintaining the claim that the whole structure is entirely grounded in historical research, which ostensibly gives his framework an objective legitimacy that modern theologians lack. Eva Mroczek’s observation regarding David deSilva’s work applies as well to Wright: “What is called history in some corners of biblical studies would not be recognized as history by other biblical scholars, or by any other field. . . . Frustratingly for those who want to do history using ancient texts, confessionally motivated writing is often unmarked as such. It uses the same words – history, scholarship – but means different things.”⁴⁶ Wright’s use of narrative is confessionally and normatively motivated, but he obscures these theological motivations under the guise of doing purportedly neutral historical research to give himself scholarly authority over the theological interpretations he rejects.

The theological importance of narrative becomes particularly apparent in Wright’s critique of Bultmann. “The main problem with Bultmann’s proposal,” Wright says in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, “is that when he insisted that we should strip the early Christian world of its ‘mythology’ he meant . . . that we should reconceptualize the gospel *in a non-narrational form*, reducing it to the pure existential challenge of every moment.”⁴⁷ Wright applies the same critique to anyone who denies a salvation-historical narrative as the key to both New

⁴³ Wright, *History and Eschatology*, 95–96.

⁴⁴ Wright, *History and Eschatology*, 80, 100–1.

⁴⁵ Wright, *History and Eschatology*, xiii. Original emphasis removed.

⁴⁶ Eva Mroczek, “Jesus vs. Judaism . . . Again,” *Marginalia* (April 15, 2014), <https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/jesus-vs-judaism-again-by-eva-mroczek/>.

⁴⁷ Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 457.

Testament interpretation and Christian theology. He thus criticizes Bultmann along with Karl Barth and the “apocalyptic Paul” school (especially Ernst Käsemann and J. Louis Martyn) for proposing “a non-narrative world.” This turns out to be, at best, an exaggeration, for Wright quickly clarifies that they do have a narrative, but it is one “where the main ‘story’ is God’s invasion of the cosmos.”⁴⁸ Apparently, not having the (W)right narrative is the same as having no narrative at all. At issue are the theological norms that come to expression in each narrative, and specifically whether those norms are identical with or separate from a *historisch* narrative. Despite the significant disagreements between these parties, what binds them together, Wright suggests, is that they identify their theological norm with something that *interrupts* history as opposed to something that arises *from* history. Both Bultmann and the apocalyptic school reject every vestige of natural theology and so deny that the general tools of history and narrative reconstruction can reach the ultimate truth about the world and human existence. Wright is thus half-right when he says that “it is actually the *narrative* to which the anti-new-perspective camp are most deeply objecting.”⁴⁹ In truth, it is not so much the narrative itself as the assumption that the narrative (i.e., history) contains all theological norms within itself.

Ironically, despite their antipathy on almost every historical and theological point, Wright can sound very much like the PWJ school when it comes to Bultmann. Both Wright and PWJ bracket out any norms that are not internal to historical research as they understand it. Both are also critical of any hermeneutical theology that holds theology and history together, without separating them (PWJ) or conflating them (Wright). Like PWJ, Wright opposes any effort at translation, though his opposition is rooted in his conviction that theological norms are inseparable from (his account of) the historical narrative, and so translation by definition disregards history; to translate means that the norms can be brought to expression in a new historical situation, and this is what Wright fundamentally denies. Wright thus speaks as much for PWJ as for himself when he says: “Had Bultmann simply said, ‘My construction is not intended to be historical; it is a

⁴⁸ Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 141. Original emphasis removed. Wright claims this story of God’s invasion makes no reference to the covenant, which is either false or begs the question what it means to refer to the covenant. Wright elsewhere says that Bultmann’s theology corresponds to “the implicit narrative of various types of gnosticism,” and later, after once again describing apocalyptic as “anti-narrative,” he adds: “It has its own narrative, of course, but that corresponds, at a cosmic level, to Bultmann’s. . . . This is basically a corporate and ‘cosmic’ version of the same western protestant narrative as before.” Wright’s critique is entirely formal: gnosticism, he claims, has a “three-stage narrative” of (1) sinner before grace, (2) the event of grace, and (3) the renewed Christian living by grace; Bultmann’s theology reflects this narrative; and apocalyptic theology reflects Bultmann. Of course, with such a generic narrative, one could dismiss virtually all theologies as gnostic. See Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 458, 460.

⁴⁹ N.T. Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters: Some Contemporary Debates* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 111.

theological and/or existential proposal', that would have been one thing. But he did not."⁵⁰ In other words, it is acceptable to do one or the other, but not both – and if it were a merely theological program, it could be summarily dismissed.

2. Kerygma

While Bultmann appears theologically conservative compared to recent historicizing movements in New Testament studies, the irony is that Bultmann's reception in North America associated his form-critical scholarship and demythologizing program with a historical reductionism that denied the theological claims of the text. Beginning especially in the mid-1970s, various countermovements to the critical-historical work of the Bultmann school developed. These reactionary movements shared a *critique fatigue* – an exhaustion with the way historical research into early Christianity had become increasingly fixated on speculative reconstructions at the expense of seeing the larger theological meaning of the biblical texts. Additionally, there were significant disagreements with Bultmann's account of the kerygma: the apocalyptic school criticized Bultmann's emphasis on anthropology at the expense of the cosmic scope of the Christ-event, while the postliberal school of theological interpretation criticized Bultmann's use of historicist tools instead of the church's tradition as his hermeneutical key. Both of these warrant further analysis.

2.1. Pauline Apocalyptic Theology

The apocalyptic interpretation of Paul has been around longer than the other trends in New Testament studies surveyed so far, originating in Käsemann's dispute with Bultmann in the 1950s over the role of apocalyptic in early Christianity. This school of interpretation migrated to North America where it took root in the scholarship of J. Christiaan Beker (Princeton Theological Seminary) and J. Louis Martyn (Union Theological Seminary in New York City).⁵¹ At the heart of the apocalyptic interpretation of Paul is Käsemann's contention that Bultmann's demythologizing distorts the texts by stripping away the cosmic context of Paul's thought and focusing entirely on the individual who responds in faith to God's eschatological address. The apocalyptic approach criticizes the "Lutheran" interpretation not primarily for its supersessionist anti-Judaism (though of course it disavows all anti-Judaism) but for its existential individualism.

⁵⁰ Wright, *History and Eschatology*, 63.

⁵¹ See, especially, J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel: The Coming Triumph of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997); J. Louis Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997).

Apocalyptic is therefore not the rejection of the anti-legalistic position but rather its *radicalization*. Apocalyptic not only declares that the law has come to an end but also that the cosmos as such has been nullified with the dawning of a new creation. In contrast to the existential “Lutheran” perspective, the anti-ethnocentric camp, and PWJ, the apocalyptic school, particularly in its post-Martyn form, argues that Paul’s theology “is not only about the relationship among ethnic groups, between God and humanity, or God and the individual. It concerns the much larger apocalyptic battle in which God wages war against anti-God powers, including the powers of Sin and Death.”⁵²

To understand how more recent apocalyptic scholars relate to Bultmann, one first has to clarify the two definitions of apocalyptic in Käsemann’s work, which directly relate to Käsemann’s dual role as historian and theologian – and thus to the conceptual pair at the heart of this essay. The historical definition is the more well-known and originated with Johannes Weiss, who defined the apocalyptic eschatology of Jesus – Weiss did not distinguish between eschatology and apocalyptic – as “the expectation of the *imminently near* occurrence of the End,” which would bring about the establishment of God’s kingdom.⁵³ In his initial historical essays, Käsemann likewise defines early Christian apocalyptic as “the expectation of the imminent Parousia,” which was “prompted by the post-Easter experience of the Spirit.”⁵⁴ The emphasis on Easter is Käsemann’s key historical contribution. He argues that Jesus was an eschatological but not apocalyptic prophet, but after the experience of Easter, Paul was forced to contend with enthusiasts who believed the new age was already present. To counter such views, Paul developed the apocalyptic idea of an imminent End, though such hopes “proved to be a delusion,” resulting in the collapse of apocalyptic.⁵⁵ Käsemann understands Paul as the origin of Christianity, which is why he can say that “apocalyptic was the mother of all Christian theology.”⁵⁶ While the scholars associated with PWJ accept, even emphasize, the apocalyptic eschatology of Paul as decisive for understanding his thought, they reject the notion that Paul’s apocalyptic is uniquely Christian, not only because this is an anachronistic understanding of Paul but also because such eschatological expectations were already circulating within Second Temple Judaism. Bultmann, for his part, rejected the notion that Paul’s use of apocalyptic language was essential to his thought on the grounds that Paul, and especially John, repeatedly highlight the actuality of the

⁵² Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “The Cosmic Power of Sin in Paul’s ‘Letter to the Romans’: Toward a Widescreen Edition,” *Int* 58, no. 3 (2004): 229–40, at 236.

⁵³ Johannes Weiss, *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892), 27.

⁵⁴ Ernst Käsemann, “Zum Thema der urchristlichen Apokalyptik [1962],” in *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen*, 2 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960–1964), 2:105–31, at 106, n. 1. Hereafter cited as *EVB*.

⁵⁵ Ernst Käsemann, “Die Anfänge christlicher Theologie [1960],” in *EVB* 2:82–104, at 104.

⁵⁶ Käsemann, “Die Anfänge christlicher Theologie,” 100.

eschatological new age as something that has arrived in Christ and is present to believers now. The problem with enthusiasm is not the emphasis on the present but rather the notion that the new age is within our grasp as an objectifiable possession. “The End has now become the present,” Bultmann wrote in his response to Käsemann. The eschatological End is not something for which we wait but “takes place rather in the proclamation as an occurrence that happens at any particular time.”⁵⁷ The change between Jesus and Paul is not a shift from eschatology to apocalyptic but a shift from the proclaimer to the proclaimed. In sum: Bultmann sees eschatological continuity between Jesus and Paul, Käsemann sees apocalyptic discontinuity, and PWJ sees apocalyptic continuity.

So far, we remain squarely within the historical territory of New Testament studies. But Käsemann had a theological agenda as well, and alongside his historical definition of apocalyptic he proposed another definition, one that could survive the historical defeat of the nonarrival of the Parousia. According to this theological account, “the center of early Christian apocalyptic . . . is the enthronement of God and of God’s Christ as the eschatological Son of Man, which can also be described as proof of the righteousness of God.”⁵⁸ More importantly, God’s enthronement and dominion is “not merely imminent in the near future,” but “has instead already begun with the word and work of Jesus.”⁵⁹ With this acknowledgment, Käsemann made it possible to hold to a normative account of apocalyptic – God’s cosmic dominion over sin – without taking a position on the imminent Parousia. The distinction between Bultmann and apocalyptic was no longer between present and future eschatology but between existential (demythologized) and cosmic (mythological) soteriology, a distinction reinforced most strongly in Martinus de Boer’s work.⁶⁰ The anglophone apocalyptic interpreters of Paul, especially Martyn and those who follow him, took advantage of this and all but eliminated Käsemann’s historical definition of apocalyptic in favor of a strictly theological account – one that remains timelessly normative irrespective of historical failure. Martyn, whose eschatology is virtually as realized as Bultmann’s, locates Paul’s apocalyptic “in the apostle’s certainty that God has *invaded* the present evil age by sending Christ and his Spirit into it.”⁶¹ Martyn defines apocalyptic particularly in terms of God’s “invasive movement from beyond,” emphasizing not only that human beings are incapable of delivering

⁵⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, “Ist die Apokalypstik die Mutter der christlichen Theologie? Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Ernst Käsemann [1964],” in *Exegetica: Aufsätze zur Erforschung des Neuen Testaments*, ed. Erich Dinkler (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1967), 476–82, at 477.

⁵⁸ Käsemann, “Die Anfänge christlicher Theologie,” 102.

⁵⁹ Ernst Käsemann, *Kirchliche Konflikte*, vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 215.

⁶⁰ See Martinus C. de Boer, “Paul’s Mythologizing Program in Romans 5–8,” in *Apocalyptic Paul: Cosmos and Anthropos in Romans 5–8*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 1–20.

⁶¹ Martyn, *Galatians*, 99.

themselves but also that “the fundamental and determining line of movement is God’s.”⁶² Martyn uses the martial language of invasion and cosmic warfare in order to bring into relief the theological point that human beings are enslaved to “supra-human powers” and in need of God’s redemptive act of liberation, whereby God will vanquish “the enslaving *power of Sin*.”⁶³ In contrast to the PWJ account that limits sin to gentiles, the apocalyptic account understands the entire cosmos, including all humanity, to be under the power of Sin, which is “not a lower-case transgression” by individuals but “an upper-case Power that enslaves humankind and stands over against God.”⁶⁴

The echoes of the anti-legalistic interpretation, with its polemic against works-righteousness, are strongly evident here, albeit conceptualized in cosmic terms. This is why I place the discussion of apocalyptic on the side of kerygma rather than history, since the overriding force of the apocalyptic interpretation of Paul is kerygmatic and normative. It is no accident that much of the work in apocalyptic has been carried on by theologians and preachers, including Nancy Duff, Douglas Harink, Fleming Rutledge, and Philip Ziegler. Wasserman is no doubt right to observe that the widespread interest in seeing sin as an anti-God power stems from the fact that these accounts “fit with the Augustinian-Lutheran interpretation of sin and human nature. By understanding sin as an invading cosmic agent, such theories can project onto the cosmos the Augustinian-Lutheran axiom that the human being is incapable of goodness in itself.”⁶⁵ It is then a very easy step from there to demythologize Paul’s apocalyptic language and “arrive at Luther’s formulation of sin and human nature.”⁶⁶ Indeed, this is why I describe apocalyptic as a radicalizing of the Lutheran interpretation, and also why in my

⁶² J. Louis Martyn, “The Apocalyptic Gospel in Galatians,” *Int* 54, no. 3 (2000): 246–66, at 254–55. To use John Barclay’s account of the six different perfections of grace, Martyn emphasizes priority and incongruity. See John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 70–75.

⁶³ Martyn, *Galatians*, 97. The anti-legalistic interpretation appears in the way Martyn characterizes not only Sin but also the Law as an enslaving power in Galatians, though he points out that Paul changes in Romans to speak of “Sin’s *use of the Law* (Rom 7:11)” (Martyn, *Galatians*, 370–72).

⁶⁴ Gaventa, “Cosmic Power of Sin,” 231. Gaventa elsewhere explores the idea of sin-as-power by looking at Paul’s language of being “handed over” to Sin in Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “God Handed Them Over: Reading Romans 1:18–32 Apocalyptically,” *ABR* 53 (2005): 42–53; Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 113–23. Martinus de Boer examines the notion of Death as an anti-God power in his work. See Martinus C. de Boer, *The Defeat of Death: Apocalyptic Eschatology in 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988).

⁶⁵ Ziegler explicitly connects the account of sin-as-power in Paul to Reformed theology when he comments: “One might well call this state of affairs ‘total depravity.’” See Philip G. Ziegler, *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 107.

⁶⁶ Emma Wasserman, *The Death of the Soul in Romans 7: Sin, Death, and the Law in Light of Hellenistic Moral Psychology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 147.

previous work I have argued for a convergence between Bultmann and Martyn's version of Pauline apocalyptic, despite de Boer's claim that Bultmann's demythologizing of Paul represents a "deapocalypticized Paul."⁶⁷ Assuming Martyn does not mean to metaphysically hypostasize sin and death as literal anti-God agents, one is left with something very much like Bultmann's account. To be sure, de Boer emphatically does not believe we can or should demythologize the idea of anti-God powers, but this prompts the question whether the normative apocalyptic gospel requires belief in traditional mythology; if so, one could argue it conflicts with Martyn's distinction between the gospel as tradition and the gospel as apocalyptic event.⁶⁸ For her part, Wasserman thinks the sin-as-power interpretation lacks historical support, but regardless of one's assessment of the history, she says we need better criteria for distinguishing between metaphorical and literal cosmic language. Apocalyptic seems to depend on keeping the line between the metaphorical and the literal ambiguous, because this enables the line between history and theology to be ambiguous, and the conflation between, or at least commingling of, history and theology is central to the apocalyptic project.

The trend in the school of Pauline apocalyptic has been towards an ever more streamlined – here meaning an ever more *theological* – account of apocalyptic. Käsemann initially deemphasized the historical question of the Parousia, which Martyn then pushed further in his account of the apocalypse as an event that has already occurred in the crucifixion of Jesus.⁶⁹ But more recent accounts have deemphasized, or at least deliteralized, Martyn's talk of cosmic anti-God powers. After explaining sin as a dominating power, Rutledge illustrates this idea by describing how "Americans are *slaves* of marketing and surfaces" and how "we are

⁶⁷ See David W. Congdon, "Eschatologizing Apocalyptic: An Assessment of the Present Conversation on Pauline Apocalyptic," in *Apocalyptic and the Future of Theology: With and beyond J. Louis Martyn*, ed. Joshua B. Davis and Douglas K. Harink (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 118–36; de Boer, "Paul's Mythologizing Program in Romans 5–8," 5. Martyn first levied the charge of deapocalypticizing against Troels Engberg-Pedersen, whose work on the Stoic roots of Paul's thought is reminiscent of Bultmann's work. See J. Louis Martyn, "Deapocalypticizing Paul: An Essay Focused on *Paul and the Stoics* by Troels Engberg-Pedersen," *JSNT* 86 (2002): 61–102.

⁶⁸ See de Boer, "Paul's Mythologizing Program in Romans 5–8," 13–14, where he says that "Paul's cosmological language about Sin and Death as malevolent powers" is an instance where Paul "mythologizes." On tradition versus event in Paul, see Martyn, *Galatians*, 148–51.

⁶⁹ More recent scholars in the Martyn lineage have pushed this still further. Douglas Campbell argues for the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, and Ephesians (which he believes is actually Laodiceans), and the integration of these texts into the Pauline corpus dramatically lessens the futurist dimension of Paul's thought and shifts attention away from the imminent Parousia. Fredriksen points out that Campbell's index to *Framing Paul* has no entries for "apocalyptic," "Parousia," or "Kingdom of God." See Douglas A. Campbell, *Framing Paul: An Epistolary Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 412–14; Fredriksen, *Paul*, 252, n. 5.

in *bondage* to cultural obsessions.”⁷⁰ According to Rutledge, “the key apocalyptic idea . . . is *the sovereign intervention of God*,” something that she regards as true in every age and place.⁷¹ Christopher Morse condenses the concept of apocalyptic into a parable that conveys the message that God’s gracious action is always “*at hand*, but not *in hand*,” or that “what is imminent is not immanent.”⁷² What these and other accounts of apocalyptic indicate is the elision between *Pauline* apocalyptic and apocalyptic *theology*. The slide from one to the other has occurred largely without comment, most likely because there is a shared commitment to the normativity of Pauline thought for Christian faith today, and this normative gospel remains in some sense timelessly valid between Paul’s day and our own.

For all the similarities between Bultmann and apocalyptic theology, however, this is the point where they part ways. It is not over present versus future eschatology, nor is it even over existential versus cosmic soteriology; the real difference is over whether the kerygma requires translation – that is, whether the kerygma is something clearly defined or whether it is something permanently beyond our grasp, which it is the task of New Testament hermeneutical theology to articulate ever anew, perhaps in ways that are not always apocalyptic. The tendency within the apocalyptic school to confine the kerygma to the confessional parameters of traditionally Protestant, and especially Reformed, theology thus places the movement in tension with Bultmann’s emphasis on the ongoing need for translation, which requires holding both history and theology in a dialectical unity-in-distinction.⁷³

2.2. Theological Interpretation of Scripture

The high-water mark of Bultmannian hermeneutical theology in North America occurred in the late 1950s and 1960s, in the wake of the demythologizing controversy going global. The two volumes of *Kerygma and Myth* – the English

⁷⁰ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 190–91.

⁷¹ Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*, 222.

⁷² Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News* (London; New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 53–54.

⁷³ Douglas Campbell is one of the few champions today of what is, formally at least, Bultmann’s project of holding together historical and theological work, and he engages in what could be called a version of translation, even advocating for *Sachkritik* as the method of interpretation. The main difference is that Campbell, like other apocalyptic readers of Paul, loads up his kerygma with extensive normative, theological commitments. Unlike other apocalyptic theologians, however, Campbell draws on more patristic and Eastern Orthodox concepts, so that, as he admits, “Paul ends up being highly ‘Irenaean’ and deeply orthodox.” Campbell thus claims to demythologize according to the example of Karl Barth, who also “demythologizes the Bible, but in very different ways from Bultmann.” See Douglas A. Campbell, *Pauline Dogmatics: The Triumph of God’s Love* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 5, 7, n. 8.

translation of the main essays from the German debate over demythologizing – appeared in 1953 and 1962, respectively, and numerous publications soon followed.⁷⁴ John Macquarrie published *An Existentialist Theology* in 1955 and *The Scope of Demythologizing* in 1961. Schubert Ogden's *Christ without Myth* was also published in 1961.⁷⁵ Having first visited the United States in 1951, Bultmann returned in 1958–1959 to serve as visiting professor of religion at Syracuse University, which furthered the English-speaking interest in his work. Essays by Bultmann's students, Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs, were translated into English in the early 1960s.⁷⁶ At the same time as post-Bultmannian hermeneutical theology was finding a hearing across the Atlantic, secular theology and the death-of-God movement were also gaining momentum and produced a number of controversial books in quick succession.⁷⁷

I recount all of this to place the countermovement of postliberalism and its corollary, the movement known as theological interpretation of scripture (TIS), in historical context. Bultmann was “self-consciously a theological interpreter” of scripture, but his version of theological interpretation was not appreciated by the postliberals who rose up in opposition to his work.⁷⁸ Postliberalism, as I use it here, refers to a diverse, polycentric movement that has two primary concerns: (1) placing the church at the center of Christian theology in conversation with the ecumenical movement; and (2) placing theology at the center of biblical exegesis in contrast to historical criticism. The ecumenical movement grew out of the earlier missionary movement of the nineteenth century, leading to the

⁷⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951–1955); Hans-Werner Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, trans. Reginald H. Fuller, vol. 1 (London: S.P.C.K., 1953); Hans-Werner Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, trans. Reginald H. Fuller, vol. 2 (London: S.P.C.K., 1962).

⁷⁵ John Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology: A Comparison of Heidegger and Bultmann* (London: SCM Press, 1955); John Macquarrie, *The Scope of Demythologizing: Bultmann and His Critics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961); Schubert M. Ogden, *Christ without Myth: A Study Based on the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (New York: Harper, 1961).

⁷⁶ Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963); Ernst Fuchs, *Studies of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1964).

⁷⁷ See Gabriel Vahanian, *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era* (New York: G. Braziller, 1961); Paul M. van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel: Based on an Analysis of Its Language* (New York: Macmillan, 1963); John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963); Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: Macmillan, 1965); Ronald Gregor Smith, *Secular Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966); Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966).

⁷⁸ John M. G. Barclay, “Humanity under Faith,” in *Beyond Bultmann: Reckoning a New Testament Theology*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker and Mikeal C. Parsons (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 79–99, at 84. I argue for reading demythologizing as a theological hermeneutic in David W. Congdon, “Demystifying the Program of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann's Theological Hermeneutics,” *HTR* 110, no. 1 (2017): 1–23.

formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948. The Second Vatican Council of 1962–1965, in particular, sparked widespread interest in ecumenism, especially with the promulgation of *Lumen gentium* in 1964. The ecumenical and liturgical movements of this period brought new attention to the patristic theologians who had been largely ignored or dismissed by both Protestant liberal and orthodox theologians. This context eventually led George Lindbeck to propose a cultural-linguistic approach to the distinctions between religious traditions, to replace the propositional and experiential models that had characterized conservative and liberal theologies, respectively.⁷⁹ As a result of Lindbeck's work, the church came to be seen as its own distinct culture, immune to extra-ecclesial critique on the grounds that those outside the church do not share the church's culture and so cannot properly understand Christian discourse and practice – assuming that, if they did share the culture, they would no longer have any criticism. The notion of secular Christianity was oxymoronic, according to the post-liberals, who saw Christianity and secularity as competing cultural systems.⁸⁰ Concurrently with these developments, other scholars were seeking alternatives to the critical-historical methods that dominated biblical studies in the wake of Bultmann's work. Most notably, Hans Frei completed his dissertation in 1956 on Karl Barth's doctrine of revelation, in which he proposed that Barth's "post-liberal theology" is grounded in a commitment to "Biblical realism."⁸¹ By this Frei meant a "belief in the objective, literal truth" of the events recounted in scripture, but without any interest in reconciling this truth with modern philosophies and methodologies.⁸² Frei later developed his account of biblical realism (or what he called scripture's "realistic narrative") in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, published in 1974.⁸³ Inspired by Frei and Barth, some began to break away from the use of critical methods in biblical interpretation, drawing on premodern, precritical, and also postcritical hermeneutics, especially the ancient hermeneutical quadriga often called spiritual or figural interpretation.⁸⁴ Others began to

⁷⁹ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

⁸⁰ Lindbeck makes this conflict most explicit in George A. Lindbeck, "The Gospel's Uniqueness: Election and Untranslatability," *Modern Theology* 13, no. 4 (1997): 423–50, esp. 430–31.

⁸¹ Hans W. Frei, "The Doctrine of Revelation in the Thought of Karl Barth, 1909 to 1922: The Nature of Barth's Break with Liberalism" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1956), 488, 492.

⁸² Frei, "The Doctrine of Revelation in the Thought of Karl Barth," 150–51.

⁸³ Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

⁸⁴ An especially important article in this movement was David C. Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," *ThTo* 37, no. 1 (1980): 27–38. Rudolf Smend coined the term "postcritical exegesis" in a 1966 essay on Barth and historical criticism. See Rudolf Smend, "Nachkritische Schriftauslegung," in *Parrhesia: Karl Barth zum achtzigsten Geburtstag am 10. Mai 1966*, ed. Eberhard Busch, Jürgen Fangmeier, and Max Geiger (Zürich: EVZ, 1966), 215–37. The interest in all things "postcritical" likely stems from the 1958

advocate for using the *regula fidei* (rule of faith) as the guide for interpreting the biblical anthology, an idea that became more prominent as the turn towards pre-critical and postcritical hermeneutics intersected with the ecumenical movement and the turn towards the church.⁸⁵ All of this coalesced into what has now become known as TIS, marked most prominently by the articles in the *Journal of Theological Interpretation* and the books in the *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* series.⁸⁶

As the above historical context indicates, the entire enterprise of TIS was an anti-Bultmannian effort from the beginning. Bultmann's hermeneutics was objectionable on the grounds that, like Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey before him, it began with general hermeneutics (existentialist analysis) and then moved to special hermeneutics (existential encounter with the message of the text): the particular understanding of the biblical anthology occurs within a general account of human understanding as such.⁸⁷ TIS, by contrast, denies any general hermeneutics. Like Lindbeck's account of religion, TIS sees each cultural-linguistic community as operating with its own distinct hermeneutics, without the possibility of appealing to a general account encompassing them all. According to TIS, one must start with the normative claims of the confessionally orthodox Christian community in order to interpret properly the biblical anthology. As Walter Moberly has recently argued, TIS thus agrees with Bultmann's hermeneutical claim that "no exegesis is presuppositionless" on the grounds that "the presupposition of any understanding interpretation is *the prior life-relation*

publication of Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1958). Those who advocate for postcritical hermeneutics often point to Paul Ricœur's notion of a "second naïveté," which many assume comes *after* criticism and even leaves criticism behind, but according to Ricœur himself the "second naïveté" arrives "in and through criticism," since it is criticism that makes the precritical symbols meaningful to modern humanity. It is only fitting that, shortly after introducing "second naïveté," Ricœur quotes Bultmann on hermeneutical presuppositions. In this sense, the "second naïveté" is more aptly applied to Bultmann's demythologizing. See Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 351.

⁸⁵ Lindbeck, among others, played an active role in this endeavor. See George A. Lindbeck, "The Story-Shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation," in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Stephen E. Fowl (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 39–52.

⁸⁶ In addition to the works named above, relevant programmatic accounts of TIS include: Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998); A. K. M. Adam et al., *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006); Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008); Joel B. Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation: Engaging Biblical Texts for Faith and Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

⁸⁷ The key essay developing this account is Rudolf Bultmann, "Das Problem der Hermeneutik [1950]," in *GV* 2:211–235.

to the subject matter that directly or indirectly comes to expression in the text.”⁸⁸ But TIS opposes Bultmann’s insistence that this preunderstanding “is never a definitive understanding but remains open” for new understandings in the future.⁸⁹ Ironically, whereas Barth was the one who charged Bultmann with having “a normative ‘preunderstanding,’” now it is TIS who criticizes Bultmann for *not* having a normative preunderstanding.⁹⁰ The difference is that Barth claimed (erroneously) that Bultmann’s preunderstanding was defined by Heidegger, while TIS defines its preunderstanding by the *regula fidei*, the received tradition of the church. TIS here understands Bultmann better than Barth did, who persistently understood the concept of preunderstanding as a prejudiced understanding that determines the meaning of the text in advance. Bultmann thus had to emphasize in his response to Barth that “I know of no ‘canonized’ preunderstanding.”⁹¹ By contrast, TIS *does* have a canonized preunderstanding, namely, the “canon” of confessional dogma that a particular Christian community takes to be normative.

Emblematic of TIS’s position in contradistinction to Bultmann’s, Moberly adopts the famous statement of Augustine that “in fact I would not believe the gospel if the authority of the Catholic Church did not move me,” which Moberly recasts in a distinctively postliberal way by describing the authority of the church in sociological terms as the “plausibility structure” for the understanding of scripture.⁹² As a plausibility structure, the church socializes its members into seeing the world in a particular way through personal relationships, social interactions, cultural norms, and catechetical education, thus combining aspects of what Bultmann calls “world-picture” (*Weltbild*) and “worldview” (*Weltanschauung*).⁹³

⁸⁸ Bultmann, “Ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich?,” 147; Bultmann, “Das Problem der Hermeneutik,” 227. See R. W. L. Moberly, “Theological Interpretation, Presuppositions, and the Role of the Church: Bultmann and Augustine Revisited,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6, no. 1 (2012): 1–22. See my response to Moberly in David W. Congdon, “Kerygma and Community: A Response to R. W. L. Moberly’s Revisiting of Bultmann,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 8, no. 1 (2014): 1–21.

⁸⁹ Bultmann, “Ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich?,” 149.

⁹⁰ Karl Barth, *Rudolf Bultmann: Ein Versuch, ihn zu verstehen* (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1952), 49.

⁹¹ Rudolf Bultmann to Karl Barth, 11–15 November 1952, in *Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann: Briefwechsel 1911–1966*, ed. Bernd Jaspert, Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe 5.1, 2nd ed. (Zürich: TVZ, 1994), 186. Against TIS, Bultmann also says here that “the fact that [the NT] is God’s word cannot be made a presupposition from which to derive hermeneutical rules of a different kind.”

⁹² Moberly, “Theological Interpretation, Presuppositions, and the Role of the Church,” 12, 17.

⁹³ See Rudolf Bultmann, “Welchen Sinn hat es, von Gott zu reden? [1925],” in *GV* 1:26–37, at 31–33; Rudolf Bultmann, “Der christliche Sinn von Glaube, Liebe, Hoffnung: Skizze des am 11. Juni 1925 vor der 50. Versammlung evangelischer Religionslehrer an den höheren Lehranstalten der Rheinprovinz gehaltenen Vortrages,” *Zeitschrift für den evangelischen Religionsunterricht an höheren Lehranstalten* 36 (1925): 170–72; Rudolf Bultmann, *Die*

The church in this sense names a totalizing cultural framework that shapes and conditions all aspects of one's existence at the cosmic, communal, familial, and individual levels. On this model, one is only able to understand the biblical anthology as scripture if the cultural-linguistic community of the church is an integral and constitutive element in one's hermeneutics. Such a position makes translation unnecessary since the ancient texts and the contemporary reader supposedly share the same culture, whether mediated by ecclesiastical norms and practices or by western Christendom. Bultmann's justification for translation is that the texts "speak in a strange language with concepts from a distant time," but Moberly says this is false on the grounds that "the NT documents . . . have been substantially embodied in Western culture."⁹⁴ Moberly's remarks here stand in agreement with other postliberal theorists who argue that the kerygmatic content of the church's message and identity is inextricably bound up with the cultural form of the church, so that any effort to translate this message into a new cultural form would be to abandon the kerygma itself. Robert Wilken argues that culture is defined by language, and thus "if there is a distinctly Christian language, we must be wary of translation."⁹⁵ Any translation would lose not only the language, but also the culture defined by the language – in this case, the culture of the church. Wilken argues that Christians should be engaged in assimilation into the church rather than translation across time and space: "There must be translation *into* the Lord's style of language, bringing alien language into the orbit of Christian belief and practice and giving it a different meaning."⁹⁶ Or as Moberly puts it, the language of the biblical anthology needs to be "substantially embodied" in the wider culture.

While the contrast between TIS's use of normative-ecclesial presuppositions and Bultmann's rejection of normative presuppositions is clear enough, Moberly does not recognize the underlying rationale behind Bultmann's position. Moberly sees Bultmann as a typical German liberal of his era, dismissive of dogma and church tradition. There may indeed be some Ritschlian critique of Hellenization or Harnackian critique of dogma at work, but Bultmann elsewhere says that the church's teaching "has the character of tradition, which belongs to the history that it narrates. The tradition belongs to the event itself."⁹⁷ The problem is not tradition as such but whether the tradition is its own standalone norm (e.g., a cultural-historical entity) or whether it is defined by the norm of the kerygma – that is, whether tradition belongs to the event or the event belongs to

christliche Hoffnung und das Problem der Entmythologisierung (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1954), 46–47.

⁹⁴ Moberly, "Theological Interpretation, Presuppositions, and the Role of the Church," 10.

⁹⁵ Robert L. Wilken, "The Church as Culture," *First Things* 142 (2004): 31–36, at 35.

⁹⁶ Robert L. Wilken, "The Church's Way of Speaking," *First Things* 155 (2005): 27–31, at 30.

⁹⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, "Kirche und Lehre im Neuen Testament [1929]," in *GV* 1:153–187, at 160.

tradition. The matter was of more than mere academic relevance. The theological principles underlying the decade-old movement of dialectical theology were tested in the crucible of the *Kirchenkampf* in 1933, and not all the principles survived intact. In June, Friedrich Gogarten composed a memorandum on state and church, indicating his general agreement with the ideas espoused by the German Christian Faith Movement. The opening line echoed the millenarian overtones of Nazi propaganda: “Through the national uprising the German *Volk* has been placed in a new reality.”⁹⁸ The concept of *Volk*, with its roots in eighteenth-century German romanticism, had long named a specific cultural-linguistic community, understood as a natural or organic body of people (“blood and soil”) in contrast to the technocratic categories of Enlightenment rationality, and it was easily racialized to serve Nazi interests in the 1920s, which appears in the original National Socialist Party platform in 1920 with its association of the *Volk* with those who have “German blood.”⁹⁹ The German Christian Faith Movement, according to its 1932 guidelines, saw in *Volkstum* an order of creation given by God. When Gogarten writes that “human beings encounter the law of God in the national and *völkisch* claim,”¹⁰⁰ Bultmann saw in this a clear violation of his longstanding dialectical theological position that God is not a “given entity” within history, and thus one cannot identify the law of God with any cultural identity or tradition – whether benign or malignant, orthodox or heterodox, faithful to tradition or destructive of it.¹⁰¹ Bultmann responded by asking whether Gogarten recognized that this document would only encourage the German Christians in making “the *direct* equation of the [state’s] law and God’s law.”¹⁰² Two months later Gogarten joined the German Christians, and their correspondence ceased for four years. In 1937 Gogarten published a pamphlet against Barth titled *Gericht oder Skepsis*, in which he further developed the views from the *Denkschrift*. After reading it, Bultmann told him in no uncertain terms that his position was “incomprehensible to me.” With respect to the key question of the *Volk*, Bultmann wrote: “I do not understand how you can (or could?) agree to the statement that the law of God is given in *Volkstum*, because the identification of the law of the *Volk* with the law of God seems impossible to me.”¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Friedrich Gogarten, “Denkschrift zum Verhältnis von Staat und Kirche [1933],” in *Rudolf Bultmann and Friedrich Gogarten: Briefwechsel 1921–1967*, ed. Hermann Götz Göckeritz (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 300–2, at 300.

⁹⁹ “Das 25-Punkte-Programm der Nationalsozialistischen Deutschen Arbeiterpartei,” 24 February 1920, no. 4.

¹⁰⁰ Gogarten, “Denkschrift zum Verhältnis von Staat und Kirche,” 300.

¹⁰¹ Rudolf Bultmann, “Die liberale Theologie und die jüngste theologische Bewegung [1924],” in *GV* 1:1–25, at 18.

¹⁰² Rudolf Bultmann to Friedrich Gogarten, 26 June 1933, in *Bultmann and Gogarten: Briefwechsel 1921–1967*, 209.

¹⁰³ Bultmann to Gogarten, 18 April 1937, in *Bultmann and Gogarten: Briefwechsel 1921–1967*, 211–13.

Bultmann's dispute with Gogarten is not irrelevant to TIS, despite appearances to the contrary. What the German Christians called the *Volkskirche* – the church of the cultural community of the *Volk* – is formally (though not materially, I hasten to add) identical to what TIS calls the church as the cultural community in which authentic biblical interpretation takes place. TIS, of course, does not define the church in racial terms, but TIS evinces the same identification of the law of God with the law of a particular culture. To be sure, the direction of identification is different: the German Christians gave ecclesiastical sanction to their own culture, whereas TIS seeks to assimilate its surrounding culture into the church. But in both cases the freedom of the church for new cultural forms – that is, the possibility of translation – is denied.¹⁰⁴ Later in 1933 Bultmann entered into a dispute with the pro-Nazi position of Paul Althaus, Werner Elert, and Georg Wobbermin over the “Aryan Paragraph” in the new civil service law passed on April 7. In his final response, Bultmann rejected the concept of *Volkskirche* and insisted instead that “the church is always a missionary church. It never becomes a piece of the world, but rather always maintains its transcendent, eschatological dimension. The preaching of the gospel always rings out *to the Volk*, never *from the Volk*.”¹⁰⁵ This is precisely what postliberal TIS precludes in its insistence that the cultural-linguistic ecclesial community constitutes the hermeneutic of the biblical texts. While the dogmas of Christian tradition are by no means as problematic as *völkisch* white supremacy, the logic of the two positions is the same. Once we open the door to the church as a distinct culture, we make it possible for someone to identify this culture with white nationalism. Bultmann's hermeneutical theology stood resolutely in opposition to every such identification.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Even the difference in this direction of influence is ambiguous. One could argue that what TIS theologians mean by the “culture of the church” is already laden with white European and Eurocentric norms and practices. The church has never existed in a cultural vacuum of pure liturgy and dogma but is constantly in a process of syncretistic hybridization, as intercultural theologians have long demonstrated. See Henning Wrogemann, *Interkulturelle Theologie und Hermeneutik: Grundfragen, aktuelle Beispiele, theoretische Perspektiven* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 2012).

¹⁰⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, “Der Arier-Paragraph im Raume der Kirche,” *TBI* 12, no. 12 (1933): 359–70, at 365.

¹⁰⁶ While TIS is as diverse a group as the others discussed here, it is perhaps no accident that R. R. Reno, the general editor for the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, became an ardent supporter of Donald Trump's presidency, specifically with respect to Trump's culture war in support of Western white identity. In 2019 he published his argument for restoring Western culture in R. R. Reno, *Return of the Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism, and the Future of the West* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 2019). Reno does not speak for others associated with TIS, but TIS provides a ready home, including ample theological support, for his views.

2.3. Theological Dekerygmatising

What I here call “theological dekerygmatising” refers to those radical, naturalist, or atheist accounts of demythologizing that represent the obverse of TIS – namely, a theology that also disregards historical translation, not because it has a fixed orthodox kerygma but because it rejects the kerygma as such. The initial groundwork for this approach was laid by Fritz Buri’s argument for “a dekerygmatised theology” and Schubert Ogden’s process account of authentic existence as a “possibility in fact” for all people.¹⁰⁷ While this interpretation of Bultmann lost traction with the rise of TIS and other reactionary movements beginning in the 1980s, a few scholars continue to champion this radicalization of demythologizing. I treat this position here because, even though this group does not engage in New Testament interpretation and ultimately rejects the kerygma, their antikerygma nevertheless highlights Bultmann’s enduring commitment to this norm. This group also includes some of the most receptive readers of Bultmann in North America, despite their criticism of his adherence to traditional Christian beliefs.

The most recent representative of theological dekerygmatising is Chester O’Gorman, who belongs to the school of so-called radical theology or Christian atheism that developed out of the death-of-God movement. Drawing especially on Ogden’s argument for a structural inconsistency in Bultmann’s theology, O’Gorman argues in *Demythologizing Revelation* that “Bultmann fails to adequately demythologize or existentialize.”¹⁰⁸ His argument regarding Bultmann is meant as a foil for his constructive use of Slavoj Žižek’s Lacanian philosophy as a more appropriate framework for thinking about divine grace and human salvation. To make his case, O’Gorman criticizes Bultmann with respect to both the *What* and the *How* of salvation. The problem of the *What* stems from O’Gorman’s misunderstanding of the kerygma as merely the “recollection” of a past event that is in fact irrelevant to people today, such that Bultmann’s emphasis on the kerygma becomes “a form of dogmatism or orthodoxy.” O’Gorman believes that the kerygma “replaces” the Christ-event in Bultmann’s theology, so that the actual event of revelation is a datum of the past, while the kerygma is merely the present mediation of this event.¹⁰⁹ He fails to grasp that, for Bultmann, the kerygma *is* the Christ-event occurring in the present; it is not merely the apostolic proclamation about the proclaimer but is in fact the proclaimer’s own self-proclamation for faith. O’Gorman’s misunderstanding seems to stem from his assumption that Christ is trapped in the past in principle and cannot be a present event – an assumption that Bultmann clearly does not share. The criticism of the

¹⁰⁷ See Buri, “Entmythologisierung oder Entkerygmatisierung der Theologie,” 98–101; Ogden, *Christ without Myth*, 153.

¹⁰⁸ Chester O’Gorman, *Demythologizing Revelation: A Critical Continuation of Rudolf Bultmann’s Project* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019), 11.

¹⁰⁹ O’Gorman, *Demythologizing Revelation*, 36, 38, 53.

How naturally follows from O’Gorman’s rejection of the What. He claims that Bultmann fails to provide an existentialist-ontological account for how Christ saves in the present, in effect “expecting something like an existentialist outcome from an existential moment.”¹¹⁰ But Bultmann never expected an existentialist outcome and in fact denied that an ontological account of salvation was possible, on the grounds that divine grace is truly grace and not something visible to or explicable by philosophy. Bultmann’s more “radical” critics persistently fail to remember what Bas C. van Fraassen captured so aptly – namely, that “Bultmann’s theology is not a philosophy.”¹¹¹ The purpose of demythologizing was never compromised by the normative significance of Christ because Bultmann’s explicit goal was to translate this kerygma from its original mythical world-picture into a conceptuality that would enable recipients of this message today to hear the kerygma’s genuine scandal. Bultmann’s response to Ogden thus applies to O’Gorman as well: “Christian faith speaks about the grace of God not as an idea but as an act of God. . . . This assertion cannot be proved by philosophy; indeed, it is a stumbling block, a *scandalon* for rational thinking. And therefore I must ask Ogden whether what he calls the inconsistency of my proposal is not rather the legitimate and necessary character of what the New Testament calls the stumbling block?”¹¹²

A more compelling version of O’Gorman’s argument appeared over twenty years earlier in the underappreciated work of Charley D. Hardwick, who recognizes, in a way that O’Gorman does not, that “nothing could be clearer than Bultmann’s insistence that the decisive issue in the proclamation of the kerygma is an event of God’s redemptive action that happens solely in the present, not in the past – regardless of his apparent attachment to an undemythologized Christ event.”¹¹³ In certain respects, Hardwick largely repeats Ogden’s argument the same way that O’Gorman does, except that Hardwick reconstructs a supposedly nonmythological kerygma using the work of Henry Nelson Wieman and John F. Post, as opposed to Žižek. But Hardwick recognizes Bultmann’s intentions in a more nuanced way and does not lean on the structural inconsistency argument quite as heavily as O’Gorman. Hardwick’s primary objection is that “Bultmann himself was clearly a ‘classical’ theist in some sense, never surrendering belief in an ‘objectively’ existent God,” and while this is certainly true, it does not necessarily follow that God-talk for Bultmann “unquestionably means the absolute, personal ground and source of all being intended by the tradition.”¹¹⁴ Hardwick

¹¹⁰ O’Gorman, *Demythologizing Revelation*, 54.

¹¹¹ Bas C. van Fraassen, *The Empirical Stance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 226.

¹¹² Rudolf Bultmann, “Review of Schubert M. Ogden, *Christ without Myth*,” *The Journal of Religion* 42, no. 3 (1962): 225–27, at 226.

¹¹³ Charley D. Hardwick, *Events of Grace: Naturalism, Existentialism, and Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 124–25.

¹¹⁴ Hardwick, *Events of Grace*, 91, 93.

simply finds any reference to a transcendent divine reality to be inherently mythological and thus seeks to transpose Bultmann's account of grace from a framework of classical theism to his own theistic naturalism, which shifts "the 'God' question from ontology to value."¹¹⁵ Hardwick's creative proposal attempts "to conceive the *truth* of Christianity [in a way] that is consistent with an austere physicalistic naturalism," and thus his project is itself a form of translation.¹¹⁶ But Hardwick's translation is systematic and once-for-all, a response to an "austere" philosophical presupposition about the validity of God-talk and not one rooted in a personal encounter with the *Sache* of the biblical anthology and the dynamics of historicity. While Hardwick's naturalist theology could serve as a model for secular theology in a postmetaphysical world, his abandonment of the kerygma marks a break with Bultmann's project.

3. Demythologizing: Kerygma and History

We return, at last, to Bultmann's program of demythologizing – to the dialectical unity of kerygma and history. The review of recent trends in New Testament studies has served the purpose of disclosing how distant the current hermeneutical conversations are from Bultmann's program. On the one side, both the academic work of PWJ and the apologetic work of Wright and those who follow his approach deny any kerygma independent of historical research. On the other side, both apocalyptic theology and postliberal theology bind the kerygma to specific theological and cultural traditions by loading the kerygma with normative content, while the dekerigmatizing theologians deny the kerygma altogether. In either case, translation becomes nigh impossible, and is often ruled out in principle.

Understanding what Bultmann means by the kerygma is crucial to grasping the inner logic of his hermeneutical theology. Two notable examples of scholars struggling to understand Bultmann's kerygma are found in the essays by Kavin Rowe and Wayne Meeks that appeared in the recent volume, *Beyond Bultmann: Reckoning a New Testament Theology*.¹¹⁷ Rowe perceives that the question to ask Bultmann is simply, "What is the kerygma of the earliest church?" And Rowe rightly recognizes that "the answer is surprisingly elusive," not only because Bultmann does not devote much attention to answering this question outright but also, and more importantly, because "Bultmann does not think that kerygma has

¹¹⁵ Hardwick, *Events of Grace*, 22.

¹¹⁶ Hardwick, *Events of Grace*, 190.

¹¹⁷ The volume also includes two essays by the English-speaking interpreters who demonstrate the best grasp of his hermeneutical program, namely, the British NT scholars, John Barclay and Francis Watson. See Barclay, "Humanity under Faith," 79–99; Francis Watson, "Bultmann and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture," in *Beyond Bultmann: Reckoning a New Testament Theology*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker and Mikeal C. Parsons (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 257–72.

a specific conceptual content.”¹¹⁸ Rowe points readers to the vitally important epilogue to Bultmann’s *Theology of the New Testament*, where we find the clearest articulation of the kerygma as that which “theology can never seize in definitive form,” since to grasp the kerygma in any form is to lose hold of the kerygma.¹¹⁹ The kerygma only appears in conceptual form as a theological interpretation, but this is precisely to bind it to a specific cultural situation. If the kerygma is God’s act of address, then it is necessarily as free from every cultural context as God is, and thus every articulation of the kerygma also misses the kerygma. Rowe perceptively grasps that Bultmann seeks to affirm that the “kerygma is free to remain kerygma,” and for this reason “the kerygma both is and is not in the New Testament.” But this is what Rowe ultimately rejects as being “finally an abstraction” and “at bottom only the fictitious creature of his intellect.”¹²⁰ The kerygma, for Rowe, is not free but is tied to a culturally defined narrative and way of life, thereby ruling out any translation.

Meeks largely concurs with Rowe’s reading of Bultmann. Like Rowe he asks the question, “What *is* the kerygma?”¹²¹ Meeks also recognizes that Bultmann intentionally resists giving a definitive answer to this question as part of his opposition to objectifying God-talk. For this reason, the kerygma is not identical with creed-like statements in the New Testament to which one would merely have to give mental assent. Especially insightful is the way Meeks connects this to translation: “To preserve the radicality of the proclamation of grace, it was essential to *demythologize* the kerygma, and that meant to find a way, not to *remove* the myths, as nineteenth-century liberalism attempted, using philosophical idealism, but to *translate* them, using the philosophy of existentialism.” While Meeks emphasizes the role of philosophy more than I think is accurate, the statement is a near-flawless account of Bultmann’s hermeneutical program; he simply finds it wanting. According to Meeks, the kerygma in this program becomes “little more than a formal operator, a ghostly signal.”¹²² By contrast, he argues, in line with postliberalism, that we need to understand the person as socially enmeshed within a cultural context – what Bultmann calls a world-picture (*Weltbild*) – and thus there is no kerygma for him that is not always already situated in a sociocultural community. This leads Meeks towards a radicalization of the postliberal position. Instead of saying that the cultural-linguistic community provides the hermeneutic of the text, Meeks effectively argues that the community

¹¹⁸ C. Kavin Rowe, “The Kerygma of the Earliest Church,” in *Beyond Bultmann: Reckoning a New Testament Theology*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker and Mikeal C. Parsons (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 23–37, at 31–32.

¹¹⁹ Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 580.

¹²⁰ Rowe, “The Kerygma of the Earliest Church,” 32–33.

¹²¹ Wayne A. Meeks, “The Problem of Christian Living,” in *Beyond Bultmann: Reckoning a New Testament Theology*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker and Mikeal C. Parsons (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 211–29, at 221.

¹²² Meeks, “The Problem of Christian Living,” 221.

is the text: “Without a responsible, interpretive community, the text is silent.” We are thus misguided if we think “the text ‘says’ something. It does not.” And for this reason, Meeks admits his growing conviction “that ‘New Testament theology’ is a category mistake. The New Testament does not have a theology.”¹²³ In other words, there is no kerygma for Meeks outside of the social, moral community, and thus no kerygma as such, at least in any meaningful sense of the term. Here we see the final, unexpected convergence of the PWJ historicists and the TIS postliberals, who are otherwise on opposite ends of the academic spectrum. Both deny a transcendent kerygma as the aim of New Testament interpretation, and thus both end up without a New Testament theology defined by the practice of translation.

By contrast to Rowe and Meeks, Bultmann identified the quest for the kerygma – the unceasing quest to answer the question, “What *is* the kerygma?” – as the ongoing responsibility of New Testament hermeneutical theology, a position he articulates most clearly in a letter to Martin Heidegger in December 1932:

It is becoming increasingly apparent to me that the central problem of New Testament theology is to say what the Christian kerygma actually is. It is never present simply as something given but is always formulated out of a particular believing understanding. Moreover, the New Testament, almost without exception, does not directly contain the kerygma, but rather certain statements (such as the Pauline doctrine of justification), in which the believing understanding of Christian being is developed, are based on the kerygma and refer back to it. What the kerygma is can never be said conclusively, but must constantly be found anew, because it is only actually the kerygma in the carrying out of the proclamation.¹²⁴

For Bultmann, the indefinability of the kerygma follows from his conviction that the kerygma is an act of God in the truest sense of that term. To encounter the kerygma is to encounter God – the word of God to us. As he said in his response to the new quest for the historical Jesus, “the kerygma is itself the eschatological event” in which Jesus is made present, and thus “it is *his* word that confronts the hearer in the kerygma.”¹²⁵ The freedom of the kerygma from any fixed definition is therefore the very freedom of God. Bultmann approaches the task of New Testament interpretation from this vantage point, not as a disinterested scholar of ancient texts but as a person who has been seized by this encounter. Hermeneutical theology, in its effort to express the kerygma, brings to expression one’s personal encounter with the divine word. There can be no definitive kerygma for the simple reason that each person is unique and each hearing of this word is unique. To give the kerygma a fixed, permanent content would be to turn it into either “an enlightening worldview flowing out in general truths” or “a merely

¹²³ Meeks, “The Problem of Christian Living,” 229.

¹²⁴ Rudolf Bultmann to Martin Heidegger, 14 December 1932, in *Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Heidegger: Briefwechsel 1925–1975*, ed. Andreas Grossmann and Christof Landmesser (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 186.

¹²⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Verhältnis der urchristlichen Christusbotschaft zum historischen Jesus* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1960), 27.

historical account,” which is to say, into a fixed form of teaching that communicates purportedly neutral, objective information.¹²⁶ These two alternatives – a general worldview or a merely historical account – capture the two main directions dominating New Testament studies today: kerygma without history, or history without a kerygma.

What Bultmann’s hermeneutical theology finally provides, in distinction from the alternatives, is a program for holding together both critical historical research and a genuine commitment to the kerygma without sacrificing one to the other. Carrying this out requires accepting that subjective presuppositions are not a hindrance to historically honest inquiry, on the grounds that “the ‘most subjective’ is here the ‘most objective.’”¹²⁷ But it also requires accepting an account of the kerygma as an indefinable existential encounter, open to new formulations in response to new situations and historical investigations. For instance, despite Bultmann’s reputation as the principal representative of the anti-legalistic school, his program does not depend on Paul being a Christian who anticipated Luther. PWJ may indeed have the best available account of Paul, but this merely provokes fresh clarifications of the kerygma and new translations for Christians today who encounter an ever more foreign text.

Bultmann articulated his program in his 1934 review of Hans Lietzmann’s *History of the Ancient Church*, in which he posed the challenge of doing history and theology simultaneously, always under the guidance of the quest for the kerygma:

Christianity is where there is a Christian kerygma. Does not church history research have to prove its theological legitimacy by clarifying when and where we can speak of the Christian kerygma – that is, on the one hand, by clarifying the meaning of the kerygma on the basis of an analysis of the historical phenomena and, on the other hand, by asking critically whether and how the historical formations of the ancient church are fashioned from the kerygma?¹²⁸

Bultmann reads church history theologically as a witness to the kerygma and subjects this history to theological judgment for the inadequate ways it gives expression to this kerygma. At the same time, he reads theology historically and subjects Christian theology to historical judgment for the irresponsible ways it seeks to isolate doctrine from historical inquiry and give timeless validity to a single form of the kerygma. The two procedures necessarily occur at the same time. The paradox of kerygma and history corresponds to other paradoxes in Bultmann’s thought, including the christological paradox of “the word made flesh” and the paradox of Christian existence as being “deworldeled within the world.”¹²⁹ This paradox is only possible because the kerygma, according to

¹²⁶ Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 303.

¹²⁷ Bultmann, “Das Problem der Hermeneutik,” 230.

¹²⁸ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theologie als Kritik: Ausgewählte Rezensionen und Forschungsberichte*, ed. Matthias Dreher and Klaus W. Müller (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 295.

¹²⁹ See Rudolf Bultmann, “Das Befremdliche des christlichen Glaubens,” *ZTK* 55, no. 2 (1958): 185–200, at 191–92.

Bultmann, is not a timeless, abstract idea but a *translatable* event that is constantly capable of bearing new historical expressions. To forgo, or even reject, such translation is to imply that there is a single correct form of Christian existence, either in a “golden age” in the past, in the present formation of the church now, or some millennial possibility in the future. Bultmann denies this and insists instead that the Christian kerygma can take a multiplicity of historical forms, and the question then is: what kind of kerygma can provide the transcendental condition of possibility for this historical pluriformity?

Bultmann’s hermeneutical theology is thus an effort to answer the old question, “What is the essence of Christianity?” He replaces “essence” with “kerygma,” but otherwise his entire hermeneutical program is an attempt to clarify this issue. Ernst Baasland has correctly observed that “the really constant element in Bultmann’s work was his search for the ‘essence’ (‘Wesen’) and the impact for theology.”¹³⁰ Like the other dialectical theologians, Bultmann was dissatisfied with Adolf Harnack’s endeavor to answer this question “solely in the historical sense” using only “the methods of historical research.”¹³¹ Harnack’s route – like that of Gogarten and the German Christians thirty years later – was, in Bultmann’s opinion, the real anthropologizing, since such historical methods could never actually speak of *God*. Bultmann’s hermeneutical program began from the presupposition that our aim should always be to speak of God, even if such God-talk inevitably fails. The fractured state of New Testament studies today perhaps reflects our resignation to such failure and our abandonment of this lofty purpose. As long as people still have normative Christian commitments and acknowledge the ongoing historical translation of the kerygma, however, there will be a need to reflect on this hermeneutical process. This may well be one of Bultmann’s most noteworthy legacies in service to the academy, the church – and the world.¹³²

¹³⁰ Ernst Baasland, “Consistent Jesus Research? Bultmann’s *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (1921) and *Jesus* (1926) Revisited,” *ETL* 91, no. 3 (2015): 415–60, at 418.

¹³¹ Adolf von Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums: Sechzehn Vorlesungen vor Studierenden aller Fakultäten im Wintersemester 1899/1900 an der Universität Berlin gehalten* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1900), 4.

¹³² I am grateful to Beverly Roberts Gaventa, Evan Hershman, and James F. Kay for their perceptive comments on an earlier draft. All errors are my own.