## Assessing the work of Rudolf Bultmann

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Contributors

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**Schubert M. Ogden** is University Distinguished Professor of Theology Emeritus at Southern Methodist University. A friend and supporter as well as a student of Rudolf Bultmann, he projected his own theological program in *Christ without Myth: A Study Based on the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (1961). He has also selected, edited and translated two volumes of Bultmann’s writings: *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann* (1960) and *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings* (1984). His continuing critical appropriation of Bultmann’s work is evident in all of his subsequent books, including, more recently, *Doing Theology Today* (1996) and *The Understanding of Christian Faith* (2010), which is to be published in German translation in 2014.

Preface

The articles in this issue are based on papers presented at a special Westar seminar on the legacy of the renowned German New Testament scholar and theologian Rudolf Bultmann on November 16, 2012 in connection with the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Chicago. One of the many remarkable features of Bultmann's career is the fact that he envisioned a comprehensive research agenda for the radical updating of Christian theology early in his career and systematically pursued this agenda through his monographs, articles, entries, and reviews for over sixty years. His groundbreaking research on Christian origins formulated most of the major issues that scholars have been addressing for the past generation. When asked how one might become engaged in the academic study of the New Testament, I usually reply that one could either enroll in a good introductory course on the subject or read through Bultmann's collected works.

The legacy of Rudolf Bultmann includes the work of the Jesus Seminar. Robert Funk and many of the Fellows can be characterized as “Bultmannians.” The historical critical method and criteria for distinguishing authentic units of Jesus tradition employed by the Jesus Seminar can be traced to Bultmann and his teachers. I was asked by Funk to respond to the criticism that the Jesus Seminar should have started with the deeds of Jesus, not his words, at a session of the Jesus Seminars on the Road in New Orleans on November 23, 1996 in connection with the SBL annual meeting. I started my paper, entitled “Why Start with the Sayings?”, by quipping: “The quick answer as to why the Jesus Seminar started with the sayings is, because Bultmann did. The outline of his History of the Synoptic Tradition provided the ten-year agenda of the Jesus Seminar: I. The Tradition of the Sayings of Jesus ; II. The Tradition of the Narrative Material.”1 Recent efforts to discredit Bultmann's critical conclusions about the Jesus tradition are thus also aimed at the work of the Jesus Seminar. My hope is that the 2012 Westar seminar on Bultmann's legacy will be followed with future sessions on the basic elements of his historical critical approach, for example, his form critical approach to analyzing the transmission of independent units of tradition during the oral period between Jesus and the Gospels.

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The lead entry in this volume is by Schubert M. Ogden, the preeminent American interpreter of Bultmann’s theological program. Ogden engaged in extensive correspondence with Bultmann and published an assessment of Bultmann’s theology, *Christ without Myth*, already in 1961. Ogden is the University Distinguished Professor of Theology Emeritus at Southern Methodist University, where he taught from 1956–1969 and 1972–1993. Between 1969–1972 he was the University Professor of Theology at his alma mater, the University of Chicago. Ogden was a Fulbright Scholar and a Guggenheim Fellow in Marburg, Germany and is a past president of the American Academy of Religion. He has been an active member since 1984 of the International Buddhist-Christian Theological Encounter Group. In 1985 he was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Ogden reports that Bultmann told Ogden that he and Van Harvey were the two American theologians who best understood Bultmann’s work. Ogden agreed to present his paper on “the ideal of a fully critical theology” both to describe Bultmann’s program and to sum up his own understanding of systematic theology—in this sense Ogden’s article defines his own legacy as it contributes to Bultmann’s.

A second reason for the Bultmann seminar in Chicago was to celebrate the release on November 12, 2012 of Konrad Hammann’s *Rudolf Bultmann: A Biography*, translated into English by Philip E. Devenish and published by Polebridge Press. This comprehensive intellectual biography introduces a new generation to Bultmann’s influence on Christian theology, and Devenish’s article elaborates on the implications of Bultmann’s program for Christology. Devenish frames his article with a note of irony: Bultmann argued that an interest in the person of Jesus or Paul—or Bultmann himself—borders on idolatry, since all three were focused on their work or cause. Both the author of the Bultmann biography (Hamman) and the translator (Devenish) are systematic theologians and thus are fully competent to address Bultmann’s intellectual formation and work. In addition, Devenish was a doctoral student of Schubert Ogden’s and co-editor of a *Festschrift* in his honor, *Witness and Existence*, in 1986.

The article by William O. Walker is an updated version of an earlier one published in *Religion in Life* in 1965–1966 that assesses Ogden’s critique of Bultmann’s demythologizing program. It offers a clear and concise summary of the debate that flourished in the 1950s and 60s after Bultmann’s writings became more widely accessible in English translation, and thus is also helpful in describing Bultmann’s intellectual legacy. Walker is the Jennie Farris Railey King Professor Emeritus of Religion at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. He was a member of the Westar Acts Seminar and contributed to *Acts and Christian Beginnings: The Acts Seminar Report* (2013). Walker is also a specialist on the letters of Paul.

Gerd Lüdemann is Professor Emeritus of the History and Literature of Early Christianity and founder of the archive of the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule at the University of Göttingen in Germany. He has also served as a vis-
iting scholar at the Vanderbilt Divinity School. He is a prolific author and is prominently featured in the recent documentary film on the apostle Paul (“A Polite Bribe”) directed by Robert Orlando. Lüdemann was trained in the same Enlightenment liberal Protestant tradition as Bultmann, and so applauds elements of Bultmann’s work, while raising critical objections to others.

The final article by Jon F. Dechow is a detailed study of a key term in early Christianity, εὐαγγέλιον, usually rendered in English as “gospel” or “good news.” Dechow traces the debate over the meaning of this key word from Bultmann’s view that it is a technical Christian term to John Dominic Crossan’s argument that it is a common Greek word that contrasts the message about Jesus as the Christ to that of Caesar. Dechow employs the usage of Melito of Sardis to settle this debate. He is a patristics scholar who earned his PhD from the University of Pennsylvania in 1975.

—Lane C. McGaughy
The Legacy of Rudolf Bultmann and the Ideal of a Fully Critical Theology

Schubert M. Ogden

I

By any measure, the legacy of Rudolf Bultmann to those of us who have come after him is immense. Whatever criteria one uses to assess it—quantitative or qualitative, with reference to specific topics of inquiry, or to the fields of Christian theology and religious studies in general—his contribution remains unchallengeably among the most significant of the twentieth century. His special competence, of course, was as a New Testament scholar and more broadly a student of the religious and cultural traditions presupposed by early Christianity and contemporary with it; and it is entirely possible that he remains the preeminent student of these matters in our time. But it is not only or even primarily as a historian that he is significant for theology and religious studies today. In his own self-understanding, certainly, he was first and last a Christian theologian, who did all of his work, including his historical work, in service of the church and its witness. And as the years have passed, it is in this capacity that he is also widely regarded as one of the three or four Protestant theologians of the twentieth century whose impact on Christian witness and theology promises to be permanent. So, if our discussion in this seminar¹ is to do anything like justice to his legacy, we cannot fail to take account of his contribution as a Christian systematic theologian.

Furthermore, posthumous publication of some of his literary remains—notably, the several series of lectures on the introduction to theological study collected and edited under the title “theological encyclopedia”²—has confirmed the full scope and depth of his attention over the years to what I call “theology of theology,” by which I mean the critical systematic, and therefore normative, reflection by Christian theology on its own tasks and methods, on what it has to do and how it ought to be done. Actually, the stipulated responsibilities of the chair that Bultmann held in Marburg from 1921 to 1951 called for lectures in “introduction to theological study” as well as lectures and seminars in New

¹. This paper was presented at the Fall 2012 Westar Seminar on Bultmann.
². Bultmann, Theologische Enzyklopädie.
Testament theology and exegesis. But to read the lectures in theological encyclopedia he actually wrote and rewrote, along with other writings closely related to them, such as the 1941 essay I translated as “Theology as Science,” is to realize how far they are from perfunctorily discharging a merely formal teaching obligation. It is, in fact, to encounter Bultmann as the Christian systematic theologian he understood himself to be, keenly mindful of the full obligations of that office and gifted with an extraordinary aptitude for meeting them. If our discussion here, then, is to deal with a fundamental part of his legacy as a Christian systematic theologian, we can hardly ignore or neglect the gift and the challenge his work in the “theology of theology” presents to us today. In any case, this is the first reason why I decided to write the paper I am contributing to our seminar.

A second reason, obviously, is my own long-standing and still continuing interest in so understanding and practicing Christian theology that it may more fully perform the critical service it exists to perform for the Christian community in bearing its witness. Beyond any question, my interest in this specific topic of theological inquiry was awakened early, antedating my graduate-professional education in theology when I took my first formal courses in “theological method,” as this topic was then characteristically (if somewhat one-sidedly) designated at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. But it is just as certain that, as in the case of most of my other theological interests, it was my reading of Rudolf Bultmann, which started shortly after I had begun my theological studies, that fixed this interest in the essential form it has had ever since. Whatever the other differences with his theological position that gradually appeared the more I read him, the one point at which I always felt our theological intentions to be completely convergent was our shared interest in the normative, which is to say systematic, understanding of doing Christian theology—and our common concern to work out critically and constructively just such an understanding in our respective historical situations. Moreover, the longer I worked at this task, the more sensible I became that it was really Bultmann’s contribution to it that above all had become formative for my own attempts at it—again, notwithstanding my very real difficulties with other points in his theological position.

There is also a third, and in its way more important, reason why I decided to write this paper. Despite certain challenges issued to it over the last quarter of a century by Christian theologians working out of different traditions and in different cultural and ecclesial contexts, what I call “the traditional understanding and practice of theology” continues to dominate all across the theological spectrum. What I refer to by this phrase will emerge more clearly as my ar-

gument develops, so I need to say here only that it is an understanding and practice of Christian theology, specifically Christian systematic theology, whose ideal is very different from “the ideal of a fully critical theology” spoken of in my title. Please note, however, that when I say “understanding and practice,” I do not mean two things: an understanding, and then a practice that somehow fails to agree with it. That any of our practices usually falls short of our ideal for it is simply part of our human condition, along with our remaining largely ignorant and being often wrong. No, what I mean is, rather, one thing with two aspects: a practice of theology entirely in keeping with the ideal held up by a certain understanding of it. The issue that primarily concerns me, in other words, is not between an ideal on the one hand and a practice that somehow falls short of it on the other, but between two contrary ideals, one of which is viewed as profoundly inadequate when judged by the other. I could also say that the issue is between two contrary normative or systematic understandings of what theology is supposed to do, or, to use my term, between two contrary “theologies of theology.”

In any case, one of the most serious defects of the traditional understanding and practice, when it is judged by the contrary understanding of theology as ideally fully critical, is that it typically leaves some of the most basic problems now facing Christian theology entirely unsolved, if even so much as seriously addressed. It is possible, naturally, that this is the best that Christian theology can do without ceasing to be what it is called to be. But I am deeply persuaded that before Christian theologians today acquiesce in doing business as usual, an alternative understanding and practice of theology, derived to a considerable extent in my own case from attempts to critically appropriate Bultmann’s legacy, deserves to be given a hearing and rejected only for sound reasons. This then is the reason, if you will, why the rest of my paper will be concerned with unpacking what I mean by “the ideal of a fully critical theology,” over against the contrary ideal put forth by the traditional and still dominant understanding and practice of Christian theology.5

In thus offering what I shall be arguing for as one way of entering into Bultmann’s legacy as a Christian systematic theologian, I very much have in mind his own understanding of what it is to do this. “True fidelity to tradition,” he insists, “is not going back but going on”—or in words elsewhere that could well stand as an epigraph for my paper: “True fidelity is never archaising ‘repetition’ but always and only critical appropriation, which makes the legitimate motives of the tradition one’s own and brings them to expression in a new form.”6 This means among other things that I have no interest in claiming

5. I put it this way because I always remember something my esteemed colleague, Brian Gerrish, once said while examining a student, “Okay, you’ve given me three reasons, but what I want to know is the reason!”
that Bultmann would agree with everything I understand to belong to the ideal by which Christian systematic theology should be guided and judged. I claim only that he would certainly recognize the genuine continuity between one of his own profoundest questions and concerns and mine today—and would welcome, just as he always welcomed in all of my discussions with him, the (to him) new forms in which certain of his own theological motives were in process of being critically appropriated.

II

I turn now to explaining, and in that way arguing for, what I mean by “the ideal of a fully critical theology.” To simplify my explanation, I ask that, whenever I henceforth use either the term “theology” and its cognates or the closely related term “witness” and its cognates, you allow me to mean, absent any indication to the contrary, specifically Christian theology or witness respectively. I also ask that whenever I use the term “theology,” you take me to mean “systematic theology,” unless I give you reason to think otherwise, and that whether I speak of “critical reflection” or “critical appropriation,” you understand me to mean essentially the same process.

There is widespread agreement that although the term “theology” may be used broadly enough to mean any thought and/or speech about God, it is also properly used in a stricter sense in which it means not all thought and/or speech about God, but only some of it—namely, whatever is required in order to reflect more or less critically on all the rest of it. My term for this rest is not “theology,” but “witness.” And so my working definition of “theology” (understood as “doing theology”) is more or less critically reflecting on “witness” (understood as “bearing witness”). As such, theology has two essential responsibilities: more or less critically interpreting the meaning of witness, and more or less critically validating the claims to validity that witness necessarily makes or implies just as and because it is witness.

On my analysis, there are mainly two or three such validity claims, depending on how closely one analyzes them. There is first the claim that the witness in question is adequate to its content, to the meaning it intends to express; and there is second the claim that it is fitting to its situation, to the particular life-world of the hearers and/or readers to whom it is borne. Considered more closely, the first claim to adequacy proves to consist in two further claims: the claim that the witness in question is appropriate to Jesus Christ as Christians specifically experience and understand him, and the claim that it is credible to human existence as human beings generically experience and understand it. So as I think of it, the one field of theological reflection quite naturally divides itself into three theological disciplines: historical theology, understood as more or less critical reflection on the meaning of witness; systematic theology, understood as more or less critical validation of the one claim of witness to be adequate to its content,
and therefore both appropriate to Jesus Christ and credible to human existence; and *practical* theology, understood as more or less critical validation of the other claim of witness to be fitting to its situation.

You will have inferred by now, I am sure, that the qualifying phrase “more or less critical” is important to my argument. This is because theological reflection in particular, like human reflection in general, may always be done not just on one level of understanding, but on two: the two levels already tacitly acknowledged when I distinguished at the outset between broad and strict senses of the term “theology.” I usually refer to these two levels as the primary level of self-understanding and life-praxis and the secondary level of critical reflection and proper theory—the first being the level on which we make or imply claims to validity by our several speech-acts, the different things that we think, say, and do, and the second, the level on which we more critically interpret the meaning of these things and more critically validate their claims to be valid in the different ways in which they claim to be so. Although understanding and, therefore, reflection occur on both levels, the criteria employed in the judgments in which reflection ordinarily issues are different in being less critical on the primary level, more critical on the secondary. But crucial as it is, this difference in criteria is not the only respect in which an instance of theological reflection may more or less closely approximate what I mean by “the ideal of a fully critical theology.” There are in fact two other respects in which theologies may differ in the extent to which they realize this ideal. I want to say a few words about them before returning to the crucial difference of criteria.

One respect in which a theology, so-called, may differ from another is whether it is not just more or less critical interpretation of the meaning of witness, but also more or less critical validation of the claims to validity that witness makes or implies. However much critical reflection a theology may involve, it minimally involves more or less critically interpreting what witness means—whence the familiar characterization of theology as a special case of hermeneutical reflection. But it is simply a fact that many “theologies” in the traditional understanding of the term are little, if anything, more than “hermeneutical” in that they are mainly, if not entirely, interpretive. If they also involve more or less critically validating the claims of witness at all, they are limited to validating at most *some* of them: its claim to be appropriate to Jesus Christ, say, or perhaps merely its claim to be fitting to its situation.

And this, of course, is the other respect in which one theology may differ from another in the extent to which it realizes the ideal of a fully critical theology. Unless it is not just more or less critical validation of the claims of witness as well as more or less critical interpretation of witness’s meaning, but also more or less critical validation of *all* the claims to validity that witness makes or implies—including, by no means least, its claim to be credible to human existence and in that sense true—it falls short of the ideal of being fully critical. But again it is simply a fact that, on the traditional understanding and practice of
theology, something may be put forward and accepted as “theology” in the full and proper sense, even though—or possibly just because!—it omits to validate more or less critically the claim of witness to be worthy of belief by any human being simply as such.

But even if theologies may also differ in both of these respects relative to the ideal of a fully critical theology, the crucial respect in which they may differ, as I have said, is in respect of their criteria. One theology is crucially different from another in approximating the ideal because the criteria of judgment essential to its critical reflection on witness are more or less critical. How so?

In the case of theology, just as more generally, critical reflection as, first, critical interpretation of meaning and then, second, critical validation of claims to validity, may always be done more or less critically, depending on the level on which it is done and therefore on the criteria employed in doing it. To reflect critically on witness on either level is somehow to employ criteria in order to make judgments. But if it is done on the first relatively less critical level, the only criteria employed are the consuetudinary criteria that have come to be generally accepted over time in the relevant context of self-understanding and life-praxis. In the theological context, these include such criteria of validation as the canon of scripture and in one way or another what has traditionally been distinguished from “scripture” as “tradition.” If, however, theological reflection on witness is done on the second relatively more critical level, the sole criteria employed finally, both in interpreting the meaning of witness and in validating its claims to validity, are the ultimate—or if you prefer, primal—criteria of human experience and reason as they require to be differentiated to fit the relevant context and the particular case. Here we must remember that experience as well as reason based on experience is not just one thing, but many things, and that the appeal solely to it that is of the essence of any relatively more critical way of reflecting on witness, as on any other life-praxis, requires to be made in suitably different ways, corresponding to the different claims that witness itself makes or implies to be valid.

Thus, in critically validating the claim of witness to be appropriate to Jesus Christ, a relatively more critical theology appeals finally not merely to “scripture” or to “scripture and tradition,” on some understanding or other, but solely to specifically Christian experience of Jesus as of decisive significance for human existence. Uniquely authoritative in retrieving and critically appropriating this Christian experience is what I distinguish as “formally normative Christian witness,” by which I mean the first and foundational, the original and originating, witness of the apostles—those whom Kierkegaard designated aptly as “disciples at first hand.” But even their witness derives such unique authority as it has solely from its explicit primal source, which in its ontic aspect is the man Jesus of Nazareth as authorizing a certain self-understanding as alone authentic and, in its noetic aspect, their own first-hand experience of him as authorizing it. In this sense, it is specifically Christian experience alone by which the appro-
priateness of any witness is to be finally validated if the theology in question is to be more rather than less critical relative to the ideal of a fully critical theology. Things are different, however, if a relatively more critical theology is to validate the other claim of witness to be credible to human existence. Here the only logically relevant appeal is not to some specific experience, Christian or otherwise, but only to our common experience simply as human beings and to reasoning based thereon. Of course, just what this common human experience is can be determined only through critically appropriating all the different cultures and religions. So here, too, there is a unique authority for retrieving and critically appropriating this experience—namely, what Bultmann speaks of as “the ‘right’ philosophy,” meaning thereby any philosophy insofar as it rightly explicates the understanding of existence given with existence itself. Alternatively, one may speak of what Alfred North Whitehead calls, in a strikingly similar formulation, “a correctly verbalized philosophy,” meaning by that any philosophy that “mobilizes [the] basic experience which all premises presuppose.” And yet, because the unique authority of any such philosophy is derived entirely from what each and every one of us actually experiences simply as a human being, we may say that it is to our common human experience alone that any theology has to appeal finally, if its validation of a witness as credible is to be more, rather than less, critical. This means among other things that it will never do for any theology that would be fully critical to appeal simply to this, that, or the other particular philosophy in determining the credibility of witness, any more than it may ever appeal simply to scripture, or to scripture and tradition, to determine the appropriateness of witness. That Whitehead or Heidegger says it can no more make it credible than Matthew’s or Paul’s saying it can make it appropriate.

One theology is crucially more critical than another, then, insofar as it involves critically validating literally more of witness, which ideally of course is all of it, by the ultimate or primal criteria of relevant experience and reason. Whereas a relatively less critical theology, judging by merely customary criteria, has to exempt these criteria themselves from critical validation, a relatively more critical theology, judging finally solely by the relevant ultimate or primal criteria, is free to validate even all such customary criteria critically. This means, of course, that the distinction between witness on the one hand and theology in the strict sense as critical reflection on witness on the other is a clear and sharp distinction only insofar as theology is relatively more critical. Any relatively less critical theology is insofar only inadequately distinguishable from witness and is therefore properly treated as precisely that by any relatively more critical theology.

But what about more, rather than less, critical interpretation? How can interpretation of witness, as much as validation of its claims to validity, be subject finally only to the ultimate or primal criteria of experience and reason? To answer these questions adequately would take us well beyond the limits of this paper into the whole basic problem of hermeneutics. It must suffice to say only that an interpretation of witness is relatively more critical, more justified by relevant experience and reason, to the extent that its only criteria for judging what witness means are wholly immanent in the interpretandum itself, in what witness itself says and means, as distinct from being in some way transcendent of it—as they are, for example, in all allegorical interpretation and in any other interpretation that in whatever way is likewise prejudiced in already implying its results.

I hope that with this much explanation, what I mean by “the ideal of a fully critical theology” is becoming reasonably clear. In any case, I will summarize my explanation so far by saying that a theology is relatively more critical and insofar realizes the ideal to the extent to which it satisfies three main conditions:

First, it must carry out both responsibilities essential to theology by not just interpreting the meaning of witness more critically but also more critically validating the claims to validity that witness itself makes or implies.

Second, it must more critically validate not just some of the claims of witness but all of them—its claim to be credible to human existence no less than its claim to be appropriate to Jesus Christ.

Third, and most important, it must employ finally in all of its judgments not just the customary criteria that have come to be employed in the theological context but solely the ultimate or primal criteria of relevant experience and reason: of specifically Christian experience and reason in determining the appropriateness of witness to Jesus Christ, and of generically human experience and reason in determining the credibility of witness to human existence.

It may be helpful to add to this summary that to do theology in accordance with the ideal I am explaining is neither simply to repeat the formulations of the past nor—as is sometimes assumed to be the only other way to maintain the continuity essential to theological reflection—simply to “develop,” as is said, certain previous formulations. It is, instead, as Karl Barth once put it, to begin in every new theological situation ab ovo—from the egg, by which I can understand only relevant experience and reason, in order then to reformulate them in formulations that in that particular historical situation are adequate to their content because they are at once appropriate to Jesus Christ and credible to human existence. Or, to exchange Barth’s metaphor for Frederick Denison Maurice’s, to be a theologian in accordance with the ideal for which I am arguing is to be nothing but a “digger”—one whose “sole vocation,” as he says, “is metaphysical and theological grubbing,” digging down beneath all putative

authorities to the primal sources of all authority in specifically Christian experience of Jesus on the one hand and in common human experience of our existence on the other. This is to say, then, that the continuity proper to theology, given the ideal I am explaining, lies neither in its formulations nor in further developing them, but in meeting its responsibilities—again and again anew in each new situation by returning once more to its origins in relevant experience, both specifically Christian and generically human, and then reformulating such experience as adequately, and therefore as appropriately and credibly, as its new situation requires and makes possible.

III

In this last part of my paper, I want to explain the ideal of a fully critical theology a bit further by returning to something I said earlier, but did not elaborate or defend, about the traditional understanding and practice of theology against which I am arguing. On that understanding, I remarked, a theology typically fails to solve or even seriously address some of the most basic problems now facing it. One of these problems, I hold, is set by the criteriological question: what is to serve, both in principle and in fact, as in my term “formally normative Christian witness,” or if you prefer “the Christian canon”? The traditional answers to this question in their classical forms are well-known by means of the conflicting Reformation-Counter Reformation watchwords “scripture alone” or “scripture and tradition,” understood in one or the other of the different senses of “tradition.” And underlying all of these classical answers in one way or another is what I call “the apostolic principle,” according to which the sole primary authority in the Christian church is “the apostles,” the first and foundational witnesses, whom Protestants have traditionally held to be represented by the apostolic canon of scripture alone, or whom Orthodox and Roman Catholics have taken to be represented in different combinations by apostolic creed and apostolic ministry as well. In modern Christian history, however, certain revisionary answers to the question have emerged that typically reject all the classical answers because they abandon the apostolic principle in favor of another. Their appeal is to the very different principle of “the historical Jesus,” understood as Jesus himself prior to any witness to him by others, whether the apostles or others who came after them.

It is arguable, however, and I myself have actually argued since the mid-1970s, that all of these traditional answers, whether classical or revisionary, have long since been rendered untenable simply by the ongoing process of historical-critical study of Christian tradition, both the early traditions represented by the writings of the New Testament and the later traditions represented by

post-New Testament writings. In the course of this study, it has been demonstrated beyond serious question that none of the New Testament writings is “apostolic” in the strict, formal sense presupposed by the process of its canonization. Why not? Well, because, as source-critical, form-critical, and tradition-critical study have in turn confirmed, every New Testament author makes use of sources of witness, oral and/or written, earlier than her or his own writing. The immediate inference then is obvious: no New Testament writing as such can be “apostolic” in the strict formal sense of being first and foundational, original and originating witness to Jesus as of decisive significance for human existence. In other words, the New Testament writings as we actually have them have been exposed, one and all, as themselves already precisely “tradition,” as distinct from “scripture,” in the senses in which these terms have been traditionally understood.

But if historical-critical study of the New Testament has thereby undermined all of the traditional classical answers to the question of formally normative witness, it has also subverted all of the traditional revisionary answers by demonstrating that there are simply no primary sources for determining the historical Jesus and his significance. To be sure, one may distinguish theoretically between what Jesus himself thought, said, and did prior to any witness to him by others and what those others then thought, said, and did in witnessing to him. But there is no way of making this distinction also operationally, because all the available sources are at best secondary, any available evidence being therefore the same for both Jesus himself and the apostles’ witness to him, and into the bargain, they are all sources that are instances of witness, not historical reportage.

I cannot elaborate on the dilemma now faced with respect to this one basic theological problem by all forms of the traditional understanding and practice of theology that also profess to accept the findings of historical-critical study of the New Testament. But I trust it is clear enough why, if they continue their profession and expect it to be taken at all seriously, either they must admit to simply having no reasoned answer to the criteriological question of formally normative witness or else they can continue to employ what they take to be the criterion only in some different sense from that in which it has traditionally been understood and employed—whether by loosening up the strict meaning of “apostolic,” as classicists tend to do, or by taking “the historical Jesus” to be simply the Jesus attested by the only sources we have, in the move that revisionists are inclined to make.

If this is clear, however, it should be just as clear why my argument for the ideal of a fully critical theology should be considered very carefully indeed before simply assuming that the traditional understanding and practice of theology, whether in its classical forms or in some revisionary one, is the only way in which theology is to be done. The plain truth of the matter is that there is another way of doing it, and it is the way for which I have been arguing by explaining the ideal of a fully critical theology over against all forms of traditional
understanding and practice and by insisting on its significance for theology now and in the future.

Allow me to say again, however: I in no way want to give the impression, much less ever to claim, that Rudolf Bultmann would have no criticisms to make of the ideal of a fully critical theology as I have explained it. Anyone familiar either with what I have had to say elsewhere about his theology or with what he had to say about mine, will know that we had our differences and that we both judged at least some of them to be real and important. Fully recognizing this, however, I have every confidence, as I said before, that Bultmann would greet my argument as one attempt, whatever its limitations, to appropriate critically a fundamental part of his own legacy as a Christian systematic theologian.

We all have our reasons for wanting to participate in this seminar—among them, presumably, to join in celebrating the appearance in English translation of Konrad Hammann’s fine biography11 and in expressing our gratitude and congratulations to those who have made it possible: to Philip Devenish as its translator and to Polebridge Press as its publisher. Anyhow, I have my own reason for very much wanting to be here: if there is anything that to my mind would be likely to brighten the prospects of more theologians eventually accepting the ideal of a fully critical theology for which I have argued, it is that more and more of them would become ever better acquainted with the life and work of the extraordinary human being that this book illumines so well. His ideal of a fully critical theology is not exactly mine, but it can certainly be for others the gift and the challenge that it has ever been for me.


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Reflections on Konrad Hammann’s Biography of Rudolf Bultmann—with Implications for Christology

Philip Devenish

Having translated Konrad Hammann’s biography of Rudolf Bultmann into English, I reckon that in its ferreting out and mining of the sources it is almost—if not quite—beyond praise. And yet, a biography of Rudolf Bultmann . . . what an odd idea, if also upon reflection what an instructive one, and for christology in particular! Consider:

In 1926, introducing his Jesus in the series Die Unsterblichen (“The Immortals”), Bultmann wrote:

Even if there might be good reasons for being interested in the personality of significant historical figures, be it Plato or Jesus, Dante or Luther, Napoleon or Goethe, it is still the case that this interest does not touch what mattered to these persons. For their interest was not in their personality, but rather in their work. And in fact not even in their work, insofar as that is “understandable” as an expression of their personality, or insofar as in the work the personality “took shape,” but rather insofar as their work is a cause (Sache) to which they committed themselves.1

True, Bultmann does not say that there are not “good reasons for being interested in the personality of significant historical figures,” even if this were not what mattered to them. All the same, Hammann does give numerous and, I find, convincing reasons for holding not only that Bultmann was not interested in revealing his own “personality,” but even that he had an aversion to such an interest. Thus, not only did he not respond to both personal and public entreaties from Karl Jaspers to do so, as well as persistently to decline to make a public confession of his own faith, but—and in this like his father—he also even explicitly refused to permit a sermon at his own funeral, seemingly sensing that eulogizing was, like sin, “lurking at the door” (Gen 4:6). Thus, it would seem that not only did an interest in his own personality not matter to Bultmann, but also that it did matter to him that this not matter to others. And this is quite a different thing, as I hope to show.

Consider the way Bultmann contrasts the sort of interest that we might have in “the personality of important historical figures” with that which we should

not have in it. We might be interested in their personality as something that “took shape” in their work and that can be made “understandable” in this way, and we might also be interested in their work, as this makes “understandable” their personality. But from a specifically historical point of view, at least according to Bultmann, we should not be interested in either of these things. There is a twofold reason for this, having to do on the one hand with the character of our experience, and on the other hand with that of what we experience. As analysis of our experience reveals (and as Heidegger’s Daseinsanalyse in particular elucidated for Bultmann), we are inherently temporal beings, also in the emphatic sense of being specifically historical beings. Moreover, as Bultmann also realized, if perhaps with less than equal consistency, what we experience is itself also temporal. Since therefore history in both senses is something temporal, a properly historical interest consists not in an “enriching of timeless knowledge,” but rather in a “dialogue” with a “temporal series of events” (ein zeitlicher Vorgang).² For this reason, while there is nothing wrong with “enriching timeless knowledge,” there is something wrong with thinking that this is properly historical. There are, in other words, both “phenomenological,” specifically, “existentialist,” and also “ontological” or “metaphysical” grounds for Bultmann’s specifically historiographical reason for judging that an interest in the personality of historical figures is not a properly historical one. It treats things that are intrinsically temporal and historical as if they were not. This is just what Bultmann thought that most of his teachers, except for Wilhelm Herrmann, had done. And in so doing, in supposing that they were treating their topic in its concreteness, he judged they were mistaken. In contrast, Bultmann sought an approach that would credit its subject-matter “in the concrete situation of a person living in time,” in the manner of an “encounter” (Begegnung).³ By implication, therefore, this would also be what a biography ought to do, at least to the extent that it means to be properly “historical.”

It is worth noting two other points in the “Introduction” to Jesus. On Bultmann’s view, “what mattered” to the historically significant figures he mentions (including Jesus) was, so far as we can tell from their “work,” their work itself, and this precisely “insofar as their work is a cause (Sache) to which they committed themselves.”⁴ Here we have two inferences: first, that what mattered to these people was their work, an inference from their work to their intentions, and second, that this work mattered to them after the fashion of a cause: an inference from their work to its character.

Thus, Bultmann here infers (perhaps correctly, perhaps incorrectly) both what mattered to people from what they did and also what this was (namely, commitment to a cause). Now, in their being indirect, such inferences are dif-

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². Bultmann, Jesus, 15.
Reflections on Konrad Hammann’s Biography

Different from encounter, which is direct. Even the sort of descriptive analysis that Heidegger was doing in his work for *Sein und Zeit* involves a moment of reflection that distinguishes it from encounter. Nonetheless, what Heidegger meant to be analyzing was direct historical encounter, which he presented as having an “existential” (*existentiell*) character. Such a presentation might, Bultmann thought, be able to avoid both the error of objectification and the indirectness of inference—if it “got it right.” In short, “timeless truths” miss the point in one way, and “inferences” miss the point in another. “Timeless truths” that are also “inferences” miss it twice. The so-called liberal theology had it wrong on both counts. How much work in departments of “religious studies” these days is little more than an extension of this? Bultmann’s *Jesus* is his attempt to get the point, to avoid both of these errors, and so to “get it right” in presenting Jesus the proclaimer.

How did the proclaimer become the proclaimed? 5 According to Hammann, Bultmann had first used the term *kerygma* in 1919 during the run-up to his own massive work, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, in reviews of Martin Dibelius’ *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* and Karl Ludwig Schmidt’s *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu* “to characterize the genuinely Christian proclamation that originated within earliest Hellenistic Christianity and through the Christ-myth made explicit the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus.” 6 Moreover, and providing the broader context for these works, Bultmann, as Hammann puts it, “agreed with the new picture of history developed by Wilhelm Heitmüller and Wilhelm Bousset, according to which the earliest Hellenistic community put a decisive stamp on the Christian religion between the time of the earliest Palestinian community and that of Paul.” 7 It is this understanding of the term *kerygma* that prevails both in the first edition of Bultmann’s *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* and also ten years later in the second edition, in which the term figures more prominently. As Hammann puts it,

not only from the point of view of the history of religion,” [Bultmann] “had now begun to regard the specific content of “the Christian kerygma” as a theological criterion for the emergence of the synoptic gospels. As intrinsic elements of the kerygma of the Hellenistic community, these proclaim not the historical Jesus, but rather “the Christ of faith and cult.” 8

In other words, it is for exegetical, which in this case is to say for specifically form-critical reasons, that Bultmann did speak of the linguistic activity of the earliest so-called Hellenistic community as *kerygma*, and also that he did not speak of the earliest linguistic activity of Jesus in this way. In his *Jesus*, it is all

a matter of *Botschaft* ("message") and of such *Botschaft* as *Predigt* ("preaching"), *Ruf* ("call"), and especially in the manner of *Verkündigung* ("proclamation").

Now, at least so far as I can see, this is also odd. Bultmann's point in *Jesus* is to make clear that the linguistic activity in which Jesus was engaged was and also is for the sake of effecting direct existential encounter. If this is what the earliest Christian community was also engaged in and if this is also the reason for calling it *kerygma*, why is not the linguistic activity of both Jesus and also the earliest specifically "Palestinian" Christians not also precisely *kerygma*? Is it perhaps that, while they do share the same function, they differ in content, and that specifically with respect to cross and resurrection?

The linguistic activity of what Bultmann refers to as the earliest Hellenistic communities certainly does differ conceptually from that of other so-called Palestinian communities that passed on what they either saw or heard or were told Jesus to have said and done: it explicates the significance of Jesus via the Christ-myth, whereas their linguistic activity, as Bultmann thought and as we now also think, does not. If the two share the same "kerygmatic" function of eliciting existential encounter, however, do they differ in content? Does the message of death (through crucifixion or on a cross, or on "the" cross) and resurrection differ from that of other early communities that do not seem to speak in this way? What did Bultmann think about this?

Bultmann argues that to the extent that they saw themselves as "the eschatological congregation," these communities did "implicitly understand [Jesus] as the eschatological occurrence in Paul's sense."9 Thus, whatever battles Paul felt he had to wage against their particular explications of the significance of Jesus, including their misguided apologetics and their erroneous objectifications, their eschatological self-understanding indicates that the content of their faith was that which Paul also shared. Indeed, the whole idea of the "demythologizing" program Bultmann eventually laid out in his Alpirsbach lecture of 1941 is that, so far as the content of Paul's explicitly existential interpretation of "the Christian kerygma" is concerned, its *Sache* (or "point") is identical to that implied by that of the earliest communities. It is, in two words, "eschatological existence." And this is precisely the same thing as the "radical obedience" that, according to Bultmann, characterizes the call that Jesus made and makes upon his hearers—the "Jesus" who, as Bultmann puts "the historical phenomenon with which we are concerned" in inverted commas, is to be inferred from the synoptic gospels in particular.10 In other words, in function and in content, if not in concepts or terminology, the point of the preaching of "Jesus," of the various communities before and aside from Paul, and that of Paul himself is the same: all are kerygma. All understand human existence as grounded in a divine indicative, and all, "existentially interpreted" in the way in which they must be

in order to make their point at all, make the same point. For all the variability of formulation, the christological point that each asserts is constant. Likewise, the “anthropological intentions” of Nachfolge (“discipleship”) and Nachahmung (“imitation”) are shared.

Now, all of this calls to mind Bultmann’s concluding words in the “Introduction” to his Jesus book. He writes: “Finally, I want to remark that we are concerned here not with especially complicated and difficult matters, but rather with ones that are as simple as they can be—so far as theoretical understanding is concerned.” And then he goes on to remark that it is really a “being too much burdened with presuppositions,” one that “is in fact characteristic of our own contemporary situation” that has made matters seem more complicated and difficult than they really are.

This is perhaps the place to say a word about Karl Barth. The year 1919, in December of which Bultmann completed his own Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition, also marked the appearance of the first edition of Barth’s Der Römerbrief, the second edition of which Bultmann includes in the list of the six books that he took to have a decisive significance for his work as a theologian and interpreter of the New Testament. One of the multitude of sub-plots in Hammann’s biography of Bultmann is the tale of Bultmann’s and Barth’s “attempts to understand each other.”

As we have seen, it is exegetical and, specifically, form-critical considerations that lead Bultmann to identify the early church’s explication through the Christ-myth of cross and resurrection as “the Christian kerygma.” In contrast, as early as 1920 he could only see in the first edition of Barth’s Römerbrief “an arbitrary propping up of Paul’s Christ-myth.” And this was to remain Bultmann’s assessment. Behind Barth’s presentation of Romans in the second edition of 1922 he sees a “modern dogma of inspiration,” and when he takes up Barth’s commentary on 1 Corinthians in 1926, he finds that Barth’s replacement of Paul’s cosmological eschatology of chapter 15 with a futurum aeternum is vague and imposed upon the text.

Indeed, the most basic issue between Bultmann and Barth is, in Bultmann’s own words, “not especially complicated and difficult . . . so far as theoretical understanding is concerned.” Bultmann wanted to find out what biblical texts meant and mean. Barth already knew. Whereas Bultmann looked to the presupposition of eschatological existence that “the earliest Christian kerygma”

15. Hammann, Rudolf Bultmann, 139.
17. Bultmann, Jesus, 18.
implies, Barth looked to the concepts in which this same kerygma is formulated. In other words, Bultmann is like Paul, struggling to sort out and to assess the various points of the heterogeneous elements mediated to him, whereas Barth is like the synoptic redactors other than Mark, amalgamating these heterogeneous elements—in his case into a revision of the dogmatics of Reformed and Lutheran Orthodoxy, as indeed he himself more or less admits in his highly autobiographical “Introduction” to Heinrich Heppe’s *Reformed Dogmatics*. In this case, to extend the comparison, not a few “Barthians” would then in contrast to their mentor be more like Bultmann’s “ecclesiastical redactor” of the Gospel of John. Perhaps this is inaccurate or unfair; if so, I can only await instruction on either count.

Up to this point I have said very little about what I have referred to as the earliest Palestinian communities, “so-called.” Indeed, I suppose that a perhaps seemingly simplistic use of the “Hellenistic-Palestinian” contrast itself will not have gone unnoticed. To try to say very much more about the issues implied here would I think take us well beyond Bultmann—and yet still, I would hope through rather than around him. But I do want to say just a bit and to bring what I do say to bear directly on the complex of issues concerning the relation between “the preaching of Jesus” and “the earliest Christian kerygma” with which Bultmann’s name and work are rightly so closely associated, and usually under the rubric of the “‘new’ quest of the historical Jesus,” again so-called.

There are, of course, various and important distinctions of principle to be made between Jesus and his earliest followers, those whom tradition calls “the apostles.” After all, they proclaimed him. As Bultmann recognized, however, due to the character of the sources at our disposal for reconstructing the two, there is not, because there cannot, be any valid way to separate him from them (or them from him) in fact.

Bultmann’s use of inverted commas to refer to “Jesus,” “the historical phenomenon with which we are concerned” in his *Jesus*, signifies, I take it, the crucial distinction between what we can validly, if always tentatively reconstruct, by means of the genuine or operational controls provided by primary sources for what his followers proclaimed, even proclaimed that he proclaimed, and our inability so to reconstruct what Jesus himself proclaimed due to the fact that all our sources are of a secondary character and thus cannot offer the same kind of controls. What we have is secondary sources that are themselves proclamation. Thus, any attempt to identify a Jesus behind “Jesus,” such as many of those within the Jesus Seminar put forward, assumes a criterion for its claims that it cannot redeem. This, it seems to me, is so clear that there must be something else at work in the widespread inability to see it. Perhaps we can see what this might be in a moment.

What then of the linguistic activity of those earliest followers of Jesus who spoke not in the terms of the “Christ-myth,” but in other equally but also different mythological terms and for the reconstruction of which we do have primary sources to use as operational controls—what of the “earliest apostolic witness”? As I think Willi Marxsen in particular has shown, in proclaiming him who had proclaimed to them, even as they also now brought him to mind in proclaiming him to others, they too engaged precisely in “kerygma,” albeit what Marxsen calls “Jesus-kerygma.” And in so doing, they proclaimed the Jesus whom they had encountered as one whom their own apocalyptic worldview led them to interpret “as the decisive act by which the coming new age of God has already begun,” confronting both his and their hearers with “the decision between continuing to live simply in the old age and daring to live already in God’s new age even though still remaining in the old one.” Thus, what Marxsen describes in his own inimitable way as the “turning inside out” (Umkremplung) to which Jesus’ followers call others through their Jesus-kerygma is again the same business (Sache) as the “radical obedience” Bultmann describes as that to which these people attested their encounter with Jesus to have called them. The christology, which is to say the witness to the decisive significance of Jesus implicit in such “Jesus-kerygma,” is in fact that originative form of “the Christian kerygma,” the meaning or point of which is what Schubert Ogden terms the “criterion of appropriateness” for Christian theology. Furthermore, as more nearly fully critical reflection has revealed, this earliest “Jesus-kerygma” can also validly claim to be that “canon before,” as distinct from “within” the canon which so far as the pre-circulated material indicates, does not even receive mention in the discussions of this or tomorrow morning. Moreover, while this insight into the character and role of the “Jesus-kerygma” does not in the least solve the numerous factual puzzles concerning either the identities or the historical relations among the earliest Palestinian and Hellenistic communities, so-called—which, by the way, Bultmann called “the one chief problem of primitive Christianity”—neither does the recognition of its importance in these respects depend on solving this problem. It does, however, appear to dissolve not only the problems just mentioned, but also, as we shall see, a variety of additional conundrums these relations have seemed to raise. All of this seems to me an implication and a legacy of Bultmann’s.

It is all but universal practice to discuss christology in terms of “person and work.” On Bultmann’s view, as on that of the “Jesus-kerygma,” this could only be a mistake. For both, the Jesus who is relevant to Christian theology simply is his work. Moreover, it is not only that (due to our inability in principle to identify sources that are primary) the quest for a Jesus “in himself” (in se) in any

and every sense is historically impossible or even that (due to their kerygmatic character) such a quest is theologically unnecessary, but that ultimately (due to what our sources are about [their Sache]), such a quest is religiously mistaken, because it is in fact idolatrous.

As Bultmann observed, “the tradition of the earliest church did not even unconsciously preserve a picture of [Jesus’] personality.”\(^{22}\) For those who first proclaimed him, the word “Jesus” signified precisely and only what they claim to have encountered, namely, Jesus in his eschatological, which is to say “existentially,” decisive meaning for themselves and, thence, for others. To them, so far as we can see, this and this alone is the Jesus who did matter, and this is how he mattered. It is not that there was not, for indeed there must have been, a “person” or “personality” that in Jesus’ case as in all others does find expression in or as word and deed, but rather that this is not in fact what the Jesus-kerygma proclaims. In other words, Jesus’ being in itself, were it accessible to them—or even to him—simply was not their point. In this absolutely basic respect, namely, by missing the point, the whole of both the classical and revisionary christological project with its “enriching of timeless knowledge” regarding “especially complicated and difficult matters” pertaining to the being of Jesus in himself proves to be not really relevantly Christian at all. It is all a mistake.

I can now come full circle and try to clarify what I find odd about a biography of Rudolf Bultmann. So far as the fulsome evidence permits us to infer, Bultmann seems not only to have had no interest in his own “person,” but also to have had a marked aversion to others having such an interest. Of course, we can only hope to understand Bultmann as we can only hope to understand, say, “Jesus,” or the apostles, or Paul, by understanding the “empirical-historical” “Sitz im Leben” of each. We do need “biography” in this sense. Thus, for instance, as Hammann makes admirably clear, failing to understand the political and also ecclesiological context of Bultmann’s 1941 lecture on “demythologizing” and “existentialist interpretation” did and still does lead to widespread confusion over it. Bultmann and his friend Hans von Soden entitled his collected essays Glauben und Verstehen: Faith and Understanding. The purpose for which we need such understanding is not the faith of Rudolf Bultmann, however, but rather that faith to which Bultmann’s attempts to understand are meant to open up for others.

As Hammann reports, when Bultmann received the Festschrift of Zeit und Geschichte on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, in thanking “all whose names were recorded on the Tabula Gratulatoria for the support they had shown him through their good wishes, [he added]:

But I am ashamed, and I can only conclude my thanks by bringing to mind the biblical words with which I once also concluded my lecture on the occasion of my departure from my teaching position: Gen 32:10 and 1 Cor 4:7: “[Lord], I am

\(^{22}\) Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, 1.35.
Hammann then goes on to remark on Bultmann’s “inveterate personal modesty,” thereby going beyond Karl Jaspers’ more prosaic, “He’s an Oldenburger, immovable as a granite block, only superficially demonstrative—one never knows what’s going on inside him.” And yet, inferences of this sort, whether valid or not, express an “interest” that in Bultmann’s case seems to miss the point. Indeed, such an interest can only strike one as at least potentially, even lurkingly, inimical in principle. For if it is not merely idle, curiosity about Rudolf Bultmann in himself seems, as Paul puts it, \textit{kata sarka} (“according to the flesh”; 2 Cor 5:16), and this in the sense of “setting one’s mind on the things of the flesh” (Rom 8:5).

Paul could “play the fool” and “boast a little,” even to the point of it being “all about him,” about his being in itself, even to the extent of things so intimate “that no mortal is permitted to repeat” (2 Corinthians 11–12). But I suppose that Paul knew what he was doing in writing this, as also when he writes (here not intending such irony): “we do not proclaim ourselves,” except “as your slaves for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor 4:5). For any “ambassador for Christ,” as he says, it can be strictly and only a matter of “God making his appeal through us . . .” “to each and every conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor 5:20; 4:2b). To look for something else or something more, whether in one whose function is that of an apostle, such as Paul, or in one such as Rudolf Bultmann, whose office was that of a preacher-teacher or even a theologian, much less to look for something in “the person of Jesus Christ,” is oddly enough in one way or another to miss the point—whether simply mistakenly by looking for what is not there, or by confusing what is “seen” for what is “unseen,” or even by falsely hankering for something that there ought to be no desire to find. Perhaps, then, what is odd about a biography of Rudolf Bultmann is just something about Bultmann himself, namely, that through his practice of “the open statement of the truth,” he turns out to have been rather unusual, certainly as a theologian and perhaps also even as a person (2 Cor 4:2). But as to the latter, as Paul says: “I do not know; God knows!” (2 Cor 12:3).


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Demythologizing and Christology

William O. Walker, Jr.

Bultmann’s Proposal for Demythologizing the New Testament

The German scholar Rudolf Bultmann’s (1884–1976) controversial proposal for “demythologizing” and “existentialist” interpretation of the New Testament became well known in American theological circles in the 1950s and 1960s and, for that matter, among many people who would hardly claim for themselves the title of “theologian” or “New Testament scholar.” Although the controversy has long since subsided, the term “demythologizing” remains a part of the current theological lexicon, even for those who know little about its history. Bultmann argued that both the language and the conceptual framework of the New Testament are essentially “mythological”—that is, they reflect a worldview that characteristically attributes the origin and goal of the cosmos as well as certain unusual or astonishing happenings within the cosmos to the activity of non-natural or supernatural causes, forces, or personages. These supernatural causes, forces, or personages are objectified and represented in terms of space, time, causality, and substance, and thus are treated as but another part of the physical world. They are, therefore, at least in principle subject to the same empirical methods of knowledge as any other objects.

For Bultmann, such a mythology was problematic for at least two reasons: (1) Most modern people no longer accept a mythological worldview; rather, they hold a scientific worldview that refuses to reckon with the possibility of any intervention in this world by transcendent or supernatural powers. Thus, for such people, most of the New Testament has become unintelligible, unbelievable, and irrelevant. (2) What is even more important is that the mythological...
statements of the New Testament are inappropriate to Christian faith itself, for they do violence to the true meaning of God’s transcendence by objectifying and purporting to provide empirical information regarding God and divine activity and thus reducing God’s hiddenness to a this-worldly immanence that can be observed and evaluated objectively.

According to Bultmann, the true intent of New Testament mythology, like that of mythology in general, is not to provide information regarding a supreme being and divine activity but rather to present a particular possibility for understanding human existence. Thus, the message of the New Testament must be released from its traditional mythological framework and reformulated in terms that are not only intelligible, believable, and relevant for modern people but also express the true intent of the Christian kerygma, which is to confront people with the radical possibility and challenge of a new self-understanding. The pressing question in seeking to interpret the message of the New Testament is this: What does this message say to me about my own existence? For Bultmann, the most appropriate categories for reformulating the New Testament mythology—ones that would show how the mythological concepts of the Bible actually correspond to the realities in the life of modern people—were those provided by existentialist philosophy, particularly as articulated by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), with his phenomenological analysis of the formal structure of human existence. When the Christian proclamation is demythologized and reformulated in existentialist (existential) terms, its understanding of human existence becomes clear and can challenge people to genuine existential (existentiell) decision regarding their own self-understanding.

The question that immediately arises, however, is whether such a “demythologizing” and “existentialist” interpretation can be carried out consistently and thoroughly without distorting or perverting the essential thrust of the New Testament message. Is the mythological element in the Christian faith really dispensable? Bultmann insisted that it was, because the understanding of human existence set forth in the New Testament can be restated in strictly existentialist (i.e., philosophical) terms. He himself summarized this understanding as one of radical freedom from the past and openness to the future. In other words, authentic existence, which is the concern of the New Testament, is the abandonment of all human or worldly security, and the readiness to find security

3. The Greek word kerygma means “proclamation,” and it refers here to the content of the Christian proclamation, i.e., the good news that God has acted finally and decisively in Christ for the salvation of humankind.

4. Bultmann drew a distinction between existential (translated as “existentialist”) and existentiell (translated as “existential”). The former refers to the ontological (i.e., theoretical) categories of human existence per se as articulated philosophically, while the latter refers to the ontic (i.e., actual) situation of an individual human being confronted by the demand to choose the direction of his or her own existence and the specific character of that person’s individual experience as formed by this decision.
Where none can be discerned, namely, in the unseen and unknown possibilities of every future moment. According to Bultmann, authentic existence means understanding oneself no longer in terms of one’s past but solely in terms of one’s future, which continually presents itself in the form of a gift.

Assuming that Bultmann was right, that the New Testament message can and must be demythologized and reformulated in existentialist terms, another crucial question is posed: What place does Jesus or the Christ-event occupy in this proposed reconstruction? Or, to put it differently, is it possible to speak meaningfully of the significance of Christ in non-mythological, existentialist terms? If the New Testament understanding of existence can be articulated without reference to Christ, as Bultmann appeared to maintain, would it not also be possible, indeed necessary, to have a “Christianity without Christ,” because Christian faith is nothing more and nothing less than an authentic understanding of one’s own being as a person? Bultmann’s answer was that, although the nature of authentic existence can be discovered and articulated apart from Christ, it cannot be realized apart from Christ. The issue is the proper understanding of humankind as “fallen.” The New Testament insists that humans in and of themselves are totally incapable of releasing themselves from their “fallenness,” their inauthentic existence. Every attempt to do so represents an act of self-assertion of the old person to establish his or her own security. It can only result in plunging people further into their “fallen” state. Authentic existence, the abandonment of all attempts to establish one’s own security and the commitment of one’s self to the unknown future, can be realized only as response to a proclamation, to a word of deliverance from beyond humankind. Unless this word is rooted in actual history, however, it remains only a piece of wishful thinking and thus a subtle form of self-assertion. The New Testament therefore speaks of an act of God, the event of Christ, and asserts that it is only through response to the proclamation of this event that people become capable of authentic existence. They become able to understand themselves as crucified and dead to their own past and alive to the unknown future. Such response cannot take place once-for-all, but can only occur from time to time when the proclamation is actually heard as a word of deliverance. Thus, faith can never be a permanent possession.

Christian faith, then, is humankind’s original possibility of authentic existence. It is a possibility in principle (i.e., an ontological possibility) for all people everywhere and at all times, but it is a possibility in fact (i.e., an ontic possibility) only in consequence of a particular historical event, the event of Jesus the Christ, God’s act of redemption. If this event is mythological, however, then demythologizing and existentialist interpretation must halt at this crucial point.

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5. “The Christ-event,” when spoken of by Bultmann (and others), refers to the historical event, Jesus of Nazareth, understood not simply as an event among other events in human history but rather as the event in human history in and through which God has acted finally and decisively for the salvation of humankind.
Clearly the New Testament portrayal of Jesus is essentially mythological. Statements about his pre-existence, divine sonship, virginal conception, contacts with angelic and demonic forces, supernatural powers, sacrificial death, resurrection, ascension, second coming, and the like are appropriate to the first-century mythological worldviews of Jewish apocalypticism and Hellenistic Gnosticism but not to a contemporary scientific worldview. Can the Christ event then be spoken of meaningfully in non-mythological, existentialist terms, or is the mythology essential to New Testament christology? Bultmann pointed out that the person about whom this mythological language revolves is an actual historical figure, but that various details in the portrayal of this figure are often mutually contradictory. This suggests that the real intention of the myths cannot lie in their objective content or in any factual information that they appear to impart. The purpose of the New Testament’s christological mythology is to express the existential significance of the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth as God’s act of salvation, to point to this event as the salvation occurrence that alone makes possible an authentic self-understanding. The event is not mythological because it is not miraculous or supernatural; it does not represent an invasion of this world from beyond. The event is historical, wrought out in space and time, fully explicable and intelligible within the context of world history. Nevertheless, when the event is proclaimed by the church, it confronts the hearer with the possibility of authentic existence. Thus it is, paradoxically, understood by faith alone as God’s act of salvation. According to Bultmann, it is possible to speak of God’s redemptive activity, of his unique eschatological act in Jesus the Christ in strictly existentialist terms and to avoid the objectifying view of mythology.

**Left-Wing Critiques of Bultmann’s Proposal**

Not surprisingly, Bultmann’s proposal was vigorously assailed by many as an implicit denial of the essentials of Christian faith, as a reduction of the gospel to an existentialist philosophy. By others, most of whom had only a casual acquaintance with Bultmann’s writings, it was ridiculed as a passing fad or the purely academic concern of an “ivory-tower” university professor. More surprisingly, Bultmann came under attack by so-called “liberal” or “left-wing” theologians for what they saw as his unwillingness to carry his program of de-mythologizing and existentialist interpretation consistently and thoroughly to its logical conclusion, namely a complete non-mythological reformulation of the New Testament message. It is at the point of Bultmann’s christology that most of these criticisms were directed.

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6. “Eschatological” refers to that which is last, final, or ultimate. Here it means that in Jesus the Christ God’s plan for the salvation of humankind is fulfilled, brought to fruition; there is nothing further that God needs to do.
American theologian Schubert M. Ogden (1928– ), for example, objected to what he called the structural inconsistency in Bultmann’s argument, which he asserted can be reduced to two mutually incompatible propositions:

1. Christian faith is to be interpreted exhaustively and without remainder as man’s7 original possibility of authentic historical (geschichtlich) existence as this is more or less adequately clarified and conceptualized by an appropriate philosophical analysis.

2. Christian faith is actually realizable, or is a “possibility in fact,” only because of the particular historical (historisch) event Jesus of Nazareth, which is the originative event of the church and its distinctive word and sacraments.8

According to Ogden, the two propositions are self-contradictory: If, as the first proposition affirms, Christian faith is to be interpreted solely in existential terms as man’s original possibility of authentic self-understanding, then it demonstrably follows that it must be independent of any particular historical occurrence. On the other hand, if the second proposition is true and Christian faith has a necessary connection with a particular historical event, then clearly it may not be interpreted without remainder as man’s original possibility of authentic historicity.

In short, what is involved when these two propositions are affirmed conjointly is the self-contradictory assertion that Christian existence is a historical (geschichtlich) possibility open to man as such and yet first becomes possible for him because of a particular historical (historisch) event.9

In an attempt to overcome this alleged structural inconsistency, Ogden proposed two theses of his own:

1. Christian faith is to be interpreted exhaustively and without remainder as man’s original possibility of authentic existence as this is clarified and conceptualized by an appropriate philosophical analysis.

2. Christian faith is always a “possibility in fact” because of the unconditioned gift and demand of God’s love, which is the ever-present ground and end of all created things; the decisive manifestation of this divine love, however, is the event Jesus of Nazareth, which fulfills and corrects all other manifestations and is the originative event of the church and its distinctive word and sacraments.10

Bultmann responded to Ogden’s criticisms by asserting that what the latter called a structural inconsistency is not necessarily inconsistent at all, for there

7. In quotations, I have retained the non-inconclusive language that was still prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s.
10. Ogden, Christ Without Myth, 146, 153. For the entire argument, see 146–64.
is a legitimate distinction between a possibility in principle and a possibility in fact, or, as Bultmann preferred to put it, between an ontological possibility and an ontic possibility. Because authentic existence is not actually realized in a philosophical understanding of human existence but only as an event of human decision in a concrete historical situation, it always stands before people as a future event, not as a permanent possession or quality. What is always an ontological possibility in principle, therefore, can become an ontic possibility in fact only in the moment of genuine existential decision. Furthermore, authentic existence, understood as existence in freedom and responsibility, cannot be achieved by people in and of themselves, for they are always determined by their own past, and thus every attempt to become free is doomed to relative failure. Radical freedom, or freedom from one’s past, is possible only as a gift, and Christian faith contends that this is the gift of God’s grace, not as an idea but as an act of God, as a historical event, the event of Jesus the Christ. Bultmann admitted that “this assertion cannot be proved by philosophy; indeed, it is a stumbling block, a scandal for rational thinking,” and he asked whether the inconsistency that Ogden saw “is not rather the legitimate and necessary character of what the New Testament calls the stumbling block.”

In my opinion, Bultmann was correct in insisting that there is a legitimate distinction between a possibility in principle (i.e., an ontological possibility) and a possibility in fact (i.e., an ontic possibility) and that authentic existence can occur only as existential response in an actual historical situation. Bultmann appeared to miss the real thrust of Ogden’s objection, however, which was his contention that to make the actual possibility of authenticity contingent on the prior occurrence of one particular historical event is not only to deny a person’s essential freedom and responsibility but also to involve oneself in the very mythology that Bultmann wanted to escape. The claim that an existential decision in favor of authenticity is possible only as response to the proclamation of this one event implies that this event is somehow objectively different in principle as well as in fact from all other events and thus constitutes an invasion into the normal course of history; thus, it is to view this event mythologically rather than existentially. As Ogden put it, “so far as [Bultmann’s] argument goes, all that is required is some event in which God’s grace becomes a concrete occurrence and is received by a decision of faith.”

Thus, the real difference between Ogden and Bultmann was not that Ogden saw authentic existence as a general possibility that one can at any time or under any circumstances grasp simply because one is human or because God is God, while Bultmann insisted that authentic existence occurs only as existential response to the event of God’s grace. The real difference was that Bultmann

12. Ogden, Christ Without Myth, 123.
tied God’s grace inseparably to the event of Jesus, or rather to the event of the proclamation of Jesus as the Christ, whereas Ogden refused to limit the event of God’s grace to any one particular historical occurrence.

Thus, Ogden asserted that authentic existence, which is what the Christian faith is all about, can be achieved apart from faith in Jesus or faith in the specific proclamation of the church. For the word spoken in Jesus is nothing else than what is spoken everywhere in the actual events of nature and history, and particularly in the Old Testament scriptures. Ogden went on to insist, however, that the word spoken in Jesus is the *normative* expression that makes all other expressions relatively fragmentary, or even false. The event of Jesus is *par excellence* the event that, when proclaimed in its significance, confronts a person with the possibility of a new and authentic existential self-understanding, for in this event the final truth about human existence ceases to be an idea and becomes a living reality. In this way Ogden claimed to have overcome Bultmann’s structural inconsistency and to have arrived at a valid interpretation of Christ without myth. The event of Jesus is not *necessary* for authentic existence, but it is the *decisive* and *normative* expression of such existence.

Much of Ogden’s argument makes a lot of sense. If Christian faith is to be presented in non-mythological, existentialist terms, it cannot be regarded as necessarily dependent on any one particular historical event. Bultmann himself, however, pointed out an inconsistency in Ogden’s position, and, ironically enough, it is essentially the same inconsistency that Ogden attributed to Bultmann:

> I fail to understand how he can say, on the one hand, that the “possibility of Christian existence is an original possibility of man before God” . . . and, on the other hand, that “the deepest conviction of Christian faith is that God’s saving action has been decisively disclosed in the event Jesus of Nazareth.” . . . How is it possible to characterize the Christ-event as decisive and ultimate and yet deny that authentic existence becomes reality only as a result of the particular historical occurrence?\(^\text{13}\)

By way of summary, one might say that while Ogden correctly called attention to a structural inconsistency in the proposals of Bultmann, his own positive formulations constituted no real improvement, for they shared essentially the same inconsistency. Neither Bultmann nor Ogden was able to reconcile the original demand for a demythologizing and existentialist interpretation with the insistence upon the centrality of Jesus to Christian faith. The one seems necessarily to cancel out the other.

Before the appearance of any of Ogden’s writing, a more consistent though much more radical position had been proposed by the Swiss theologian Fritz

\[^{13}\text{Bultmann, review of Christ Without Myth, 226.}\]
Buri (1907–1995), who, like Ogden, saw a basic inconsistency in Bultmann's argument. According to Buri, Bultmann demanded a thorough demythologizing and existentialist interpretation of the New Testament, but limited this demand by appealing to a unique historical event that he regarded as God's saving act, the significance of which cannot be expressed in exclusively existentialist terms. In Buri's view, such an appeal constituted a falling back into mythology. The reason for this inconsistency, Buri thought, was that Bultmann was motivated by two mutually incompatible concerns: (1) He wanted to make the Christian message intelligible and relevant to modern people by freeing it from its mythological framework and interpreting it existentialistically. (2) He wanted to retain, rather than eliminate, the unique character of the Christian proclamation as kerygma, that is, as the announcement of the good news that God has acted for humankind's salvation in Christ.

Buri agreed with Bultmann that the Christian message must be demythologized and interpreted in existentialist terms, or else it will be incompatible with modern people's understanding of themselves and their world. He argued, however, that such a demythologizing and existentialist interpretation cannot be combined with the retention of the kerygma as kerygma, that is, as the proclamation of a unique act of God. The claim that authentic existence is possible only in consequence of God's act in Jesus the Christ is sheer arrogance, Buri insisted, as is the assertion that God's grace is decisively tied to this particular event. Buri maintained that grace is a possibility, though not a permanent quality or possession of human existence; it is the promise of authentic existence that is given to inauthentic humankind everywhere and at all times. Grace is the experience of one's own life as a gift, and it is not contingent on any one particular historical event. Thus, Buri concluded, an adequate and relevant interpretation of the New Testament today requires not only demythologizing but also “dekerygmatizing,” a term that he acknowledged was a “fighting word” and perhaps misleading. He wanted the kerygma—the proclamation of the Christ event—itself to be demythologized in order to allow its existential significance to become clear. Demythologizing must not be arbitrarily halted, leaving a mythological remainder at the heart of Christian faith. As the Scottish theologian John Macquarrie (1919–2007) summarized Buri's position:

The New Testament teaching will be set free from its mythical and kerygmatic setting so that we can recognize it as simply the expression of a concept of authentic existence which is not restricted to either the New Testament or the Church, but is to be found elsewhere as well. Salvation has nothing to do with

14. Fritz Buri's most important work on this subject is “Entmythologisierung oder Entkerygmatisierung der Theologie.”
a once-for-all event, and the value of the New Testament does not lie in the fact that it speaks of such an event, but in the fact that it gives expression in mythical terms to authentic existence.\(^{15}\)

In the New Testament, Jesus is proclaimed as God’s unique eschatological act of salvation. But the fact that the expected second coming (parousia) of Jesus never occurred should make it clear that such a claim is untenable today, and Jesus must now be regarded by modern people as a symbol of possible authentic existence, not as the historical basis of such existence.

Buri did believe, however, that the mythological form of the New Testament has value as a symbol of authenticity, a symbol that can move people to a new self-understanding far more powerfully than any abstract philosophical statement about the nature of existence. For Buri, the distinctiveness of Christian faith lay in its treasury of myth and symbol, and the task of theology was to explicate these Christian symbols, to make clear their existential significance, and to show how they point to authentic existence. The myths are not, of course, to be understood as giving information about a higher world or a saving history, but rather as symbolic expressions of ancient people’s awareness of being confronted by transcendence, expressions that have significance for people today insofar as they offer the possibility of a similar encounter in the present, calling into question people’s self-understanding and challenging them to see themselves in a new light. According to Buri, the Christian symbols, as opposed to other sets of symbols, are most appropriate for Western people, because people cannot separate themselves from their tradition. They are who they are because of their history, and a significant part of Western people’s history is the Christian tradition. Theology is an interpretation of the tradition in which one stands. In Buri’s view, it is the Christian faith from which Western people derive their most meaningful symbols of authenticity, recognizing all the while that other people whose roots are in other traditions draw their symbols from other sources.\(^{16}\)

The problem can now be summarized. Bultmann called for the demythologizing of the New Testament and its reinterpretation in existentialist terms. Demythologizing to him meant the rejection of all statements that speak of God and divine activity in objectifying terms, that is, apart from their exis-

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16. As Robert H. Miller has noted (e-mail correspondence to me dated April 10, 2013), Buri erroneously suggested that “the Western people are uniformly from a Christian tradition,” thus implying that Jews, for example, are not Western people; moreover, Buri’s claim that “it is the Christian faith from which Western people derive their most meaningful symbols of authenticity,” while it may have been more-or-less true when Buri wrote more than half a century ago, ignores the “profound secularization” that Western culture has undergone since then and “is (at least) doubtful today.”
tential significance for human existence. This, however, does not include the elimination of references to God’s unique eschatological act of salvation in the historical event of Jesus the Christ, which alone, according to Bultmann, makes authentic existence an actual possibility. Ogden, going further, argued that such demythologizing necessarily involves the rejection of any one particular historical event as a prerequisite for authentic existence, but he also asserted that Christian faith can legitimately regard the event of Jesus as the decisive manifestation of authenticity and the proclamation of this event as the decisive or normative call to authenticity. Buri insisted that the kerygma itself must be demythologized and interpreted as neither necessary nor necessarily decisive for authentic existence, but rather as a symbol of the possibility of such existence. He considered this the logical implication of Bultmann’s original demand for a demythologizing and existentialist interpretation, and any less radical conclusion, even though it be drawn by Bultmann himself, a failure to carry the program through consistently.

A Way Forward

As was pointed out earlier, Ogden reduced Bultmann’s proposals to two fundamental propositions, accepted the first, but, recognizing that it is inconsistent with the second, reformulated the second. The inconsistency was still not eliminated, however, and in my judgment a consistent statement must proceed along the lines suggested by Buri.

A meaningful and relevant interpretation of the New Testament today, then, will presuppose two theses. The first is that suggested by Ogden in his summary of Bultmann’s position and followed in his own positive reformulation. It involves the recognition that any theological statement that cannot be interpreted as a statement about humans and their possibilities is meaningless. Only insofar as Christian faith deals with the actualities of human existence as modern people are aware of them can it have any contemporary relevance and meaning. Christian faith does not point to a “real” world somewhere beyond this world in which we live; it speaks of life in the here and now. The New Testament message, therefore, must be demythologized and interpreted in terms of its existential significance for the life of humankind.

Not only does this kind of interpretation make sense to people today, it also discloses more adequately than any other the real intention of the New Testament writers. Christian faith in essence means receiving one’s life from moment to moment as a gift, as grace; it means giving up every attempt to base the security of one’s life on any kind of tangible or objective reality; it means living by faith and not by sight. This alone is authentic existence. To first-century people, with their mythological worldview, this could most meaningfully be articulated in mythological terms. For most modern people, other forms of expression must be found—forms that are appropriate to their understanding of
themselves and their world. And the church, if it is not to become completely irrelevant, must continually seek such forms of expression.

Furthermore, this first thesis also involves the recognition that an essentially “Christian” understanding of existence can and often has been articulated by persons outside the church and without recourse to what would normally be called theological, Christian, or even religious terminology. When such an understanding is found in other religious traditions, philosophy, psychology, psychiatry, sociology, literature, or elsewhere, the church must accept it as a valid statement of the nature and possibility of authentic existence, whether it makes use of the church’s vocabulary and thought forms or chooses its own.

The second thesis is suggested by Ogden’s second thesis, but represents an attempt to overcome the inconsistency in his position: Authentic existence is always a possibility not just in principle but in fact, because every event and every encounter of people’s lives confront them with the opportunity and, indeed, the demand for an existential decision regarding their own self-understanding—whether they will understand themselves in terms of their past and thus be bound to the past or whether they will understand themselves in terms of their future and thus be open to the future, receiving the concrete situation as a gift, as an opportunity for authentic response to its promise and claim.

The Christian gospel is the proclamation that such faith, such genuine response, is called for and is indeed a possibility precisely amid the conditions of human existence as we know them. The proclamation of this possibility is therefore continually the originative event of the church—the community of faith—and its word and sacraments. The Christian gospel, in other words, is the proclamation to people that they must and can live their lives, if at all, in the here-and-now of their own historical situation. They cannot shift the responsibility for their lives to another person, not even to God, nor to another time and place, not even to heaven. The responsibility is theirs—here and now, and this responsibility is also a promise. The primary significance of the incarnation as proclaimed by the church is that it points not to some other world of transcendent being, but to the actualities of human life and experience as the arena where God encounters people, where judgment and grace are at work, that is, where people are confronted by the absolute claims and promises that alone make authentic existence possible. God is to be found, if at all, not somewhere else but here. Authentic existence is not a permanent possession; it can only occur as an event, as a genuine response to the givenness of a specific moment. And this means that authentic existence is not an achievement of which a person can boast, a “work” in Pauline terms. Authenticity is never the prior reality but always the response to the gift of the moment, the response to the grace that the situation at hand offers. What constitutes the Christian message as “gospel” (“good news”), then, is precisely its insistence that the authentic existence of which it speaks is always and everywhere an actual possibility, because every given moment offers the possibility of a positive response. It is, therefore, the
mission of the church to call people into an awareness of the possibility of living authentically.

Postscript

Bultmann’s initial proposal to demythologize the message of the New Testament was written and circulated in 1941 in wartime Germany. Only after the close of World War II did it become generally known throughout Germany, more widely in Western Europe, and eventually in the English-speaking world. It provoked a storm of controversy, particularly during the late 1940s, the 1950s, and the early 1960s.¹⁷ Indeed, the original version of this article, “Demythologizing and Christology,” was written at the height of the debate in 1965.

Today it is difficult to recall the heat of the demythologizing debate, because already in the 1950s New Testament scholars were increasingly focusing their attention on other issues.¹⁸ Within a few years “demythologizing” had for most New Testament scholars become simply a chapter in the past history of the discipline. Nevertheless, it is my own judgment that Bultmann’s demythologizing proposal made some important and lasting contributions both to New Testament scholarship and to the faith and life of the Christian church. I regard four of these contributions as particularly significant, and each of the four stems from a major influence in Bultmann’s thinking and scholarship:¹⁹

1. As a child of the Enlightenment (also known as rationalism or the age of reason), and in agreement with much of the “liberal” scholarship of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Bultmann recognized that ideas and beliefs grounded in tradition and faith must be subjected to the scrutiny of the scientific method and human reason. This meant that thinking people simply could no longer accept the supernatural features or, as he preferred to call them, the mythological features of the New Testament, because these features had become unintelligible, unbelievable, and/or irrelevant. On this point I think Bultmann was absolutely correct: For the church to insist upon a literal acceptance of the mythological elements of the New Testament results in either (a) a wholesale rejection of the Christian faith, (b) a kind of “schizophrenia” or “bifurcation” whereby people base part of their lives upon a scientific worldview and part upon a mythological worldview, and/or (c) outright hypocrisy in which people claim to accept the mythology but actually at the deepest level of their consciousness realize that it is not credible.

¹⁷. The most important source for tracing the development of the debate is Hans-Werner Bartsch, ed., Kerygma und Mythos. Some of the selections from these volumes are available in English in Hans-Werner Bartsch, ed., Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate.

¹⁸. In Germany, the first of these was “The New Quest for the Historical Jesus,” which was initiated by one of Bultmann’s own students; see Küsemann, “The Problem of the Historical Jesus.”

¹⁹. For much of what follows, I am indebted to Konrad Hammann, Rudolf Bultmann.
2. As a product of the history-of-religions school, and in distinction from at least some “liberal” scholarship, Bultmann recognized that the New Testament could not be understood except within the context of its wider Jewish and Hellenistic religious-philosophical milieu. This involved a recognition that both the language and the conceptual framework of the New Testament are so inextricably bound up with a mythological worldview that a thoroughgoing elimination of the mythology would mean a total rejection of the New Testament message. Thus Bultmann insisted that the mythology of the New Testament should be interpreted rather than simply eliminated, as many of the “liberal” theologians had done. Here too I think Bultmann was correct: Both the New Testament scholar and the Christian church must somehow come to terms with the entire New Testament, including its mythological features, not just with those portions of it that are easily incorporated into their own worldviews.

3. As a Christian theologian, Bultmann was concerned with the task of articulating the New Testament message in terms that would be intelligible, credible, and relevant for people holding a scientific worldview. Moreover, he was convinced that this task could be successfully carried out. For him, such articulation meant translating the mythological categories of the New Testament into the existentialist categories set forth by Martin Heidegger. This, however, was only a tactical move for Bultmann. His strategy was the larger endeavor to translate the New Testament into whatever categories would be most effective in communicating its essential message of “good news.” This, I submit, remains the essential task of Christian theologians, and it depends upon the contributions of New Testament scholars—particularly those who in some sense or other see their work as being in the service of the church.

4. As one of the founders of New Testament form criticism, Bultmann had concluded two decades before his proposal for demythologizing the New Testament appeared that the New Testament gospels represent the end-product of a period of oral tradition in which the various passages (pericopes) underwent significant alteration, and in some cases were created de novo, for use in the preaching, teaching, worship, discipline, and other activities of the early church. This meant that the nature of the available source materials made any “quest for the historical Jesus” simply impossible. This conclusion was completely consistent, however, both with Bultmann’s demythologizing and with his

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20. The history-of-religions school was a movement in nineteenth-century Germany that sought to study religion systematically as a socio-political-economic-cultural phenomenon—that is to say, as both influenced by and influencing the particular culture in which it lives. It also involved an examination of similarities and differences among various religions and thus the possible influence of one upon another.

21. Form criticism of the New Testament gospels, as practiced by Bultmann and others, classified individual passages (pericopes) by their literary form (parable, miracle story, wisdom saying, etc.), attempted to locate each form in the life and work of the early church (preaching, teaching, debate, etc.), and sought to show how the pericopes were expanded, otherwise adapted, and at times created for such use by the church.
existentialist interpretation of the New Testament. The former signaled the end of a literal interpretation of much of the material in the gospels, thus reinforcing the idea that the “quest” was historically impossible; the latter insisted that the “quest” was theologically illegitimate because it sought to provide a secure basis for Christian faith in the historical events involving Jesus of Nazareth. For Bultmann, the desire for such security negated the very essence of faith, which was an openness to each moment as an opportunity for authentic response and thus for authentic existence and a willingness to live with radical uncertainty and insecurity. My own judgment is that Bultmann was essentially correct on both points: The quest for the historical Jesus is impossible if it expects to reconstruct anything remotely resembling a “life of Jesus,” and it is theologically illegitimate to the extent that it promises to provide a secure basis for Christian faith. This, I think, is another of the lasting contributions of Bultmann’s proposal for a demythologizing and existentialist interpretation of the New Testament.

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Kērygma and History in the Thought of Rudolf Bultmann

Gerd Lüdemann

First, a Note on Terminology

*Kerygma* is a noun stemming from the Greek verb “to proclaim” (*kēryssō*). As used in Christianity, it referred to the proclamation that the prophesied age of fulfillment had arrived and had reached its peak in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The noun “kerygma” before long adopted a twofold meaning, because it could refer to either the content or the act of proclamation. The latter meaning is now the more common one, but since the word denotes not so much a doctrine or dogma as a call to new life, it is open to continual reinterpretation.²

Like the English word “history,” the German *Historie* and *Geschichte* can both refer to a factual account that is available to the public and verifiable according to generally accepted standards among scholars. Yet both *Geschichte* and “history” may also refer to the significance of historical facts and thus to that which cannot be certified by public consent or verified by scholarly canons. *Historie*, however, does not; it refers only to what can be verified according to empirical standards.³

“Word,” as I shall use the term in this paper, expresses the view that God can encounter human beings in an unexpected occurrence, an event that has little to do with imparting a philosophical truth.

A Personal Retrospect⁴

I want to begin by taking up ideas that have interested me since my student days at the University of Göttingen. As a freshman I was exposed to historical criticism. I learned that the biblical account of the history of Israel has little to do with actual events. Indeed, biblical and historical Israel must be separated

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much as the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith must be distinguished. In the latter case, for example, only a few sayings and actions of the Galilean teacher remain. The space of a postcard would be sufficient, our teachers told us with a sly look, to list the authentic words and deeds of the historical Jesus. But early Christians, most of them known only by aliases, fabricated large portions of the gospel narratives and the book of Acts. Seeing themselves as spokespersons of the risen Christ, they did this to answer burning problems that arose in their congregations as well as to defend the church against non-believing Jews and the officials of the Roman Empire.

Historical criticism of this sort provided a great liberation from the burden of tradition. Proceeding empirically, critically, and with great enthusiasm, I followed the history of Israel and the rise of the Christian church without recourse to the fictions of an authoritarian faith that resorted to miracles instead of offering natural explanations.

I am especially grateful to my teachers for enabling me to recognize that in the final analysis the central doctrine of Christianity, Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, was an interpretation of Jesus’ death. For thus it was that I overcame any lingering anxieties about eternal punishments: the mythological worldview that included resurrection, Second Coming, and final judgment collapsed once and for all. Perhaps the key advantage of a critical view of the Bible is that one can easily communicate its meaning to almost any reasonable person, whereas an interpretive scheme that relies on revelation can for the most part be mediated only to people who have already adopted a supernatural view of reality.

To my considerable surprise, the same teachers who opened my eyes to the real origins of Christianity considered theology to be chiefly an exercise in interpretation of scripture, and saw their own work as service devoted to the church.

Consider, for example, Georg Strecker’s statement in the preface to his Hermeneia commentary, *The Johannine Letters*: “It is true of this commentary on the Johannine Letters, . . . that its proper goal is not scholarly discussion, but the unity of theory and praxis in service of the church’s preaching.”

Accordingly, Bultmann’s pupils found it necessary to place restrictions on the historical approach. In the final analysis, they argued, it is illegitimate to deal with the history behind the New Testament as an independent topic, “for any reconstruction of the situations and events behind the texts is legitimate only insofar as it remains subordinate to and supportive of the New Testament proclamation.” In short, a New Testament theologian must face unflinchingly the theological claim of the various texts and thereby avoid the mistake of liberal exegetes who supposedly have sold out theology to the lesser claims of history.

5. See Conzelmann, *Theologie als Schriftauslegung*. In English the title of this book—a collection of previously published essays—is “Theology as Interpretation of Scripture.”
Rudolf Bultmann—Liberal Theologian

Instead of further documenting the above recollections, I shall turn to the great model among my New Testament teachers, Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), who dealt at great length with the issues at hand and whose historical and theological approach to scripture continues to be in considerable vogue.

Bultmann represents the best tradition of Enlightenment liberal scholarship on the New Testament. One need mention only his book *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, which even today presents a brilliant source-critical and form-critical analysis of the earliest Jesus traditions. And it is unnecessary to remind scholars today that Bultmann wrote this book as a student of the scholars of the history-of-religions school, including its fathers and grandfathers, such as Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) and David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874).

Bultmann also shared the ethos of liberal theology. He wrote:

We who have come out of liberal theology could not have remained theologians had we not been encountered by the seriousness of the radical integrity of liberal theology. We perceived the work of all shades of orthodox theology in the universities as an effort at compromise on which we could have been inwardly broken. Gustav Krüger is always to be thanked because he saw, in that oft-named essay on “unchurchly theology,” theology’s mission in the following: to endanger the souls, to lead into doubt, to shatter naive credulity. Here—so we perceived—was the atmosphere of truthfulness, in which alone we were able to breathe.8

Let me add to this a quotation from Gustav Krüger that is rooted in his overall assessment of New Testament studies:

The existence of a New Testament science (Wissenschaft) or a science of the New Testament as a special theological historical discipline is a major hindrance, first, to a fruitful investigation of earliest Christianity and indeed the New Testament itself, which leads to assured and generally recognized results, and second, to a healthy theological and academic education.9

Yet after adopting the dialectical theology of Karl Barth, Bultmann distanced himself sharply from the “theology” of his liberal teachers, including Gustav Krüger.

God as the Center of Theology10

In an article from 1924, “Liberal Theology and the Latest Theological Movement,” Bultmann accounts for his departure from liberal theology. He asserts that

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8. Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen*, 2–3: The English translation is from Harvey, *Historian*, 7–8, which I have slightly edited. The article that Bultmann refers to in the quote is Krüger, “Die unkirchliche Theologie.”
although the center of theology is God, liberal theology “has dealt not with God but with man.”\textsuperscript{11} He mentions two chief deficiencies of liberal theology:

1. Hoping to liberate the picture of Jesus from the burden of dogmatics and to gain an accurate historical picture of Jesus on which to base faith, liberal theologians have overlooked the fact that any historical result has only a relative validity. Indeed, according to Bultmann these scholars have misjudged the truth that “the world which faith wills to grasp is absolutely unattainable by means of scientific research,”\textsuperscript{12} but is rooted in revelation.

2. The historical results of liberal theology “are only relative entities, entities which exist only within an immense inter-related complex. Nothing which stands within this inter-relationship can claim absolute value.”\textsuperscript{13} Besides, “Christianity is understood as a phenomenon of this world, subject to the laws of social psychology. It is equally clear that such a conception runs exactly counter to the Christian view”\textsuperscript{14} that the word of God meets human beings unexpectedly.

**Impartial versus Obedient Exegesis\textsuperscript{15}**

Bultmann’s article from 1925, “The Problem of a Theological Exegesis of the New Testament,” sheds light on another aspect of his protest against liberal theology. According to Bultmann, the decisive question in exegesis is whether to address the text “neutrally” so as to discover its historical content or whether, in pursuit of truth, we decide to let the subject matter contained in the text speak to us. The first option, the demand of impartial exegesis, Bultmann considers naive; the second he sees as the proper Christian attitude. For this latter viewpoint, he insists, reflects “recognition of the uncertainty of our existence . . . an attitude toward history which acknowledges it as authoritative and thus sees it not with the detachment of the spectator but in the light of present decision.”\textsuperscript{16} In short, he argues that Christian exegesis disavows the validity of a neutral perspective.

**Interpretation versus Reconstruction**

Bultmann’s work on the New Testament is guided by his fundamental interest in interpretation, a goal he clearly distinguishes from the reconstruction of past history:

Since the New Testament is a document of history, specifically of the history of religion, the interpretation of it requires the labor of historical investigation.

\textsuperscript{11} Bultmann, “Liberal Theology,” 29.
\textsuperscript{12} Bultmann, “Liberal Theology,” 31.
\textsuperscript{13} Bultmann, “Liberal Theology,” 31.
\textsuperscript{14} Bultmann, “Liberal Theology,” 32.
\textsuperscript{15} For the following, cf. Lüdemann, *Intolerance*, 14–15.
\textsuperscript{16} Bultmann, “Theological Exegesis,” 249.
The method of this kind of inquiry has been worked out from the time of the Enlightenment onward and has been made fruitful for the investigation of primitive Christianity and the interpretation of the New Testament. Now such labor may be guided by either one of two interests, that of reconstruction or that of interpretation – that is, reconstruction of past history or interpretation of the New Testament writings. Neither exists, of course, without the other, and they stand constantly in a reciprocal relation to each other. But the question is: which of the two stands in the service of the other? Either the writings of the New Testament can be interrogated as the “sources” which the historian interprets in order to reconstruct a picture of primitive Christianity as a phenomenon of the historical past, or the reconstruction stands in the service of the interpretation of the New Testament writings under the presupposition that they have something to say to the present.¹⁷

In his work Bultmann decides to employ historical investigation in the service of New Testament interpretation. The most important topics are Paul, Judaism, and Gnosticism.

**Paul**

Together with several colleagues, Rudolf Bultmann argued from the viewpoint of dialectical theology that the proper object of Christian faith is the Christ of the proclamation, not the Jesus extracted from the text and reconstructed by historical scholars.¹⁸

Thus basing his argument in large part on the apostle Paul, for whom faith is the result of preaching,¹⁹ Bultmann understands Jesus’ death and resurrection as a “salvation occurrence.” Yet this is a one-sided use of Paul, since contrary to Paul, Bultmann presupposes the non-historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, and while criticizing Paul’s argument in 1 Cor 15:3–8, stresses that one cannot come to faith on the basis of the “fact” of the resurrection. Bultmann writes:

> The resurrection cannot . . . be demonstrated or made plausible as an objectively ascertainable fact on the basis of which one could believe. But insofar as it or the risen Christ is present in the proclaiming word, it can be believed – and only so can it be believed. . . . The word which makes this proclamation is itself a part of the event; and this word, in contrast to all other historical tradition, accosts the hearer as personal challenge. If he heeds it as the word spoken to him, adjudicating to him death and thereby life, then he believes in the risen Christ.

Bultmann continues:

> Any counter-questioning as to the proclamation’s right to its claim means that it is already rejected. Such questioning must be transformed into the question


¹⁸. Cf. the most recent renewal of Bultmann’s position in Strecker, *Theology*, 270–75. See Strecker’s comment, “Rudolf Bultmann coined the statement, ‘Jesus rose into the kerygma.’ This means that we can learn who Jesus really is not by historical investigation but from the Easter kerygma alone,” 275.

which the questioner has to ask himself—whether he is willing to acknowledge the Lord-ship of Christ which is putting this decision-question to his self-understanding.20

Bultmann’s reflections deserve support in several regards. First, full agreement must be accorded to his plain statement that, historically speaking, Jesus did not rise from the dead. Second, he correctly emphasizes that the statement “Christ rose” does not belong to the same category as any statement about the influence or impact of any other historical person, as for example, “George Washington rose.” For in the latter case, it would be an historical judgment, whereas in Jesus’ case, an eschatological event is asserted, something that transcends history. Third, it follows clearly that for Bultmann any questioning of this “event” is already a rejection of it.

The last two points invite intensive criticism, for they reflect the dogmatic basis of Bultmann’s statement. For one thing, we may legitimately ask why he takes such pains to demythologize the message of the New Testament if in the end he is going to employ a strategy of immunization against criticism. The other question that arises is why Bultmann invites—or even promotes—misunderstanding by using the parallel construction “death and resurrection of Jesus” as if the two were parallel occurrences? The two expressions suggest a similarity that simply does not exist, and indeed in Bultmann’s analysis the resurrection did not take place, but is only a faith-inspired interpretation of the cross. Having abandoned the traditional basis of Christian faith, can he claim to be a Christian theologian? According to Bultmann, modern Christians ought to participate in the faith that motivated the early Christians—the kerygma that embodied their interpretation—in spite of the fact that those first believers claimed a faith rooted in the risen Christ, a faith that included both fact and interpretation.

In an article from 1920, “Ethical and Mystical Religion in Primitive Christianity,” Bultmann could still write (with a nod to his teachers in the history of religions stream)21 that Paul’s conversion “is the ecstatic experience of a Hellenistic Jew, which drew him under the sway of the Kyrios-cult of the Hellenistic congregation.”22 But in later days, having shifted his allegiance to dialectical theology, Bultmann relegated to the background all neutral or objective statements about Paul’s conversion. From this point on Bultmann was extracting new, spiritual content from Paul’s conversion, with an implied message for the interpreter at the same time. He writes: “For just this is what his conversion meant: In it he surrendered his previous understanding of himself;

it was obedient submission to the judgment of God, made known in the
cross of Christ, upon all human accomplishment and boasting. It is as such that
his conversion is reflected in his theology.”

We must ask, however, whether a theological interpretation of Paul’s conver-
sion does not constitute an impediment to historical reconstruction and any
concomitant understanding of the apostle. That is, the strictly historical ques-
tions—regarding Paul’s origin, his conversion-experience (whether it was a vi-
sion paralleled by later sightings), and the relation between the insight gained
at this time and later statements in his letters—are not indifferent matters when
it comes to the meaning of the conversion. Bultmann’s statements, which give
the impression that the entire later Pauline theology is contained in the conver-
sion, must surely be subjected to scrutiny.

**Judaism**

Similar objections must be raised to his treatment of Judaism. These concern
the question of whether in his theological exegesis Bultmann factually distorts
the historical objects he is examining. Note that despite his turn to theological
interpretation, the historical reconstruction that Bultmann claims continued to
play an important role in theological exegesis and was supposedly based on the
critical consensus of scholarship.

Let me use Bultmann’s book *Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting*
as a test case. At the beginning Bultmann assures the reader that he does “not
seek to prove that Christianity is true, nor even that it is the climax of the re-
ligious evolution of antiquity.” Besides, he does not “intend to explain the
reasons why Christianity finally triumphed over its competitors, thus assuming
its superiority over them.” That is not what Bultmann as historian has in mind.
Indeed, such motives are alien to him. The reasons are simple:

> The truth of Christianity, like that of any other religion or philosophy, is always
> a matter of personal decision, and the historian has no right to deprive any man
> of that responsibility. Nor, as is often asserted, is it his business to end up by
> assessing the value of what he has been describing. He can certainly clarify the
> issues involved in the decision. For it is his task to interpret the movements of
> history as possible ways of understanding human existence, thus demonstrating
> their relevance today. By bringing the past to life again, he should drive home
> the fact that here *tua res agitur*: this is your business.

The aim then of Bultmann’s book on *Primitive Christianity* is this:

> It is not an original piece of historical research. It does not claim to offer any
> new material for the study of comparative religion or fresh combinations of

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23. Bultmann, *Theology*, 1.188.
facts already known. It takes such research for granted. Its purpose is rather
that of interpretation. We shall ask what understanding of human existence is
enshrined in primitive Christianity, what new philosophy of life. Or, to put it
more cautiously, is there such an understanding, and if so, how far does it go?²⁷

Yet, despite Bultmann’s stated intention to abstain from value judgments, his
description of Judaism amounts to a caricature written from a Christian per-
spective, not an historical one. The very hermeneutics of tua res agitur seem to
lead Bultmann to false historical judgments.

In the aforementioned book Primitive Christianity, Bultmann in the section
on “Judaism I. Synagogue and Law” underscores the “strong sense of history
and election”²⁸ among the Jews of the second temple. Yet, as he asserts, the idea
of election contains a “curious inner contradiction” that provides the clue in
order to explain the phenomenon of Israel. “Loyalty to the past became loyalty
to a book which was all about the past. God was no longer really the God of
history. . . . He was no longer a vital factor in the present.”²⁹ Bultmann con-
tinues: “History was likewise brought to a standstill. . . . The redemption [Israel]
hoped for in the future was not a real historical event, but a fantastic affair in
which all history had been brought to an end for good and all.”³⁰ Thus

life was alienated from history, which is the natural sphere to which it belongs.
The Law inculcated not only morality, but ritualism. Ritual became the more im-
portant of the two, with the result that men lost sight of their social and cultural
responsibilities. The ‘chosen people’ were not called to fulfil a special mission in
history, but to be the ‘holy nation’, above all worldly interests and ideals” (62).
Bultmann hastens to add that “sanctity was an entirely negative affair, since
most of the regulations are negative and prohibitive in character. . . . To take
them seriously meant making life an intolerable burden. (66)

Consequently Bultmann describes Jewish piety as based on formal obedi-
ence;³¹ he attributes to Jesus’ contemporaries an uncertainty about salvation³²
and claims that Judaism thinks of God’s relationship to his people only in legal-
listic terms. Indeed, Bultmann opines,

Jesus must have had good reasons for saying what he did about straining at the
gnat and swallowing the camel (Matt. 23.24). The ritual commandments having
lost their original meaning, man’s relation to God was inevitably conceived in
legalistic terms.³³

²⁷. Bultmann, Primitive Christianity, 12.
²⁸. Bultmann, Primitive Christianity, 60.
²⁹. Bultmann, Primitive Christianity, 60.
³¹. See Bultmann, Primitive Christianity, 68: “Radical obedience would have involved a
personal assent to the divine command, whereas in Judaism so many of the precepts were
trivial or unintelligible that the kind of obedience produced was formal rather than radical.”
³². Bultmann, Primitive Christianity, 70: “A further consequence of the legalistic concep-
tion of obedience was that the prospect of salvation became highly uncertain.”
These and other statements derive from a Christian dogmatic perspective, however, which, purposely if unconsciously blind to its own existence, has the sole aim of glorifying the doctrine of Christian salvation against the dark foil of Judaism.34

In other discourses on Judaism, Bultmann emphasizes that the negative remarks of the apostle Paul have a theological aim. For example, when Paul assails the Jews because, “being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God’s righteousness. Christ is the end of the law”35—or when hedeclaims that “the law brings wrath”36—he is not making factual or empirical judgments but theological statements based on faith. Indeed, “Paul regards man’s existence prior to faith in the transparency it has gained to the eye of faith”37—that is, Paul looks back to human existence prior to faith through the new eyes he has gained by accepting the gospel.

As the foregoing examples demonstrate, Bultmann obviously regarded Paul’s theological approach as theologically normative. This does not, however, persuade me to accept assertions that historical research has been once and for all refuted.

I therefore remain skeptical of approaches that rely on hermeneutics to rescue the historical validity of Paul’s statements about the law. This dissent includes the stand of such contemporary exegetes as the Zurich New Testament professor Hans Weder, a theological disciple of Bultmann, who takes a view similar to that of his teacher.

In an article titled “Law and Sin: Reflections on a Qualitative Leap in Paul’s Thought,” Weder writes: “The question of whether the historical Paul has accurately construed historical Judaism and its understanding of the law is of secondary importance. . . . Arguments based on the law—whether Jewish or Christian law—necessarily lead us to conclude that Paul has misunderstood the law.”38 The reason is that “Paul’s criticism of the law reveals a situation that cannot on the basis of the law—Jewish or Christian—be made plausible.”39

The situation alluded to is the leap of faith, carelessly referred to as revelation, by which Paul—and Weder, and indeed Bultmann—come to see the death of Jesus as a source of atoning grace that frees humans from the petty strictures of an outmoded legal code. The trouble is, of course, that a priori claims like grace and divinely arranged salvation belong to a realm of discourse quite apart from legal codes and logical demonstration. However grand it may seem to

34. See Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism, 42–48.
37. Bultmann, Theology, 1.270.
trump mere rational plausibility by playing the revelation card, such a maneu-
ver cannot pass muster in the forum of scholarly demonstration.

Gnosticism
For the New Testament scholar, the term “Gnosticism” derives largely from the
work of Rudolf Bultmann and his pupils. Building on the results of the history-
of-religions school,\(^{40}\) Bultmann interpreted the early Christian proclamation
against the background of Gnosticism,\(^{41}\) which he regarded as

\[
\text{a religious movement of pre-Christian origin, invading the West from the Orient}
\]
as a competitor of Christianity. Since it appropriated all sorts of mythological
and philosophical traditions for its expression, we may call it a syncretistic
phenomenon. . . . a redemptive religion based on dualism. This is what gives
it an affinity to Christianity, an affinity of which even its adherents were aware.
Consequently, Gnosticism and Christianity have affected each other in a number
of different directions from the earliest days of the Christian movement.\(^{42}\)

Bultmann described the related \textit{Gnostic myth} as follows. It
depicts the cosmic drama by which the imprisonment of the sparks of light
came about, a drama whose end is already beginning now and will be complete
when they are released. The drama’s beginning, the tragic event of primeval
time, is variously told in several variants of the myth. . . . The demonic powers
get into their clutches a person who originates in the light-world either because
he is led astray by his own foolishness or because he is overcome in battle. . . .
\textit{Redemption} comes from the heavenly world. Once more a light-person sent by
the highest god, indeed the son and the “image” of the most high, comes down
from the light-world bringing \textit{Gnosis}. He “wakes” the sparks of light who have
sunk into sleep or drunkenness and “reminds” them of their heavenly home.\(^{43}\)

It is in this sense that I will use the term “Gnosticism.” It is the designation of
a specific myth and supposedly provides us with the name of a movement that
was a rival of the early Christian groups.

In his \textit{Theology of the New Testament} mentioned above, under the heading
“Gnostic Motifs,” Rudolf Bultmann develops “connectedly the extent to which
the understanding of the Christian message in Hellenistic Christianity was un-
folded by means of Gnostic terminology.”\(^{44}\) The reason for such an approach is
evident: “For Christian missions, the \textit{Gnostic movement} was a competitor of the
most serious and dangerous sort because of the far-reaching relatedness be-
tween them.”\(^{45}\) Where did Gnosticism originate? Bultmann is certain that “the

\(^{40}\) Cf. Lüdemann, “The Relationship of Biblical Studies to the History of Religions
School.”
\(^{41}\) Bultmann, \textit{Theology}, Vols.1–2, passim.
\(^{42}\) Bultmann, \textit{Primitive Christianity}, 162 (my italics).
\(^{44}\) Bultmann, \textit{Theology}, 1.164.
\(^{45}\) Bultmann, \textit{Theology}, 1.165.
Gnostic movement did take a concrete form in various baptizing sects in the region of the Jordan; these also drew certain Jewish groups into their orbit.\textsuperscript{46} As far as the transmission of Gnostic ideas is concerned, Bultmann remarks: “Naturally Gnosticism, just like Christianity, is also spread by wandering teachers.”\textsuperscript{47}

Bultmann’s pupil Walter Schmithals took great pains to analyze the penetration of Gnostic teachers into the Pauline churches, and thereby put historical flesh on the bones of his teacher’s general hypothesis of Gnosticism as a rival movement of early Christianity.\textsuperscript{48} Against Ferdinand Christian Baur’s thesis of a Jewish Christian anti-Pauline mission,\textsuperscript{49} Schmithals denies any significant influence of Jewish Christianity in the Pauline communities, and actually replaces Jewish Christianity by Gnosticism. Supposedly, Paul himself constantly attacked these Gnostic rival missionaries and at the same time quite ironically had a good deal in common with them. According to Schmithals, the Christ-party in Corinth (cf. 1 Cor 1:12), which for Baur was the focal point of Jewish Christian opposition to Paul, constituted the center of Gnosticism in Corinth. Its characteristics, to mention the most important ones, were an ascetic detachment from the world (1 Cor 7:1), a spiritualized eschatology (cf. 1 Cor 15:12), and a docetic christology (cf. 1 Cor 2:8; 12:3).

In general, Schmithals’ bold reconstructions have found little assent in scholarship. In order to be able to defend a unified Gnostic opposition to Paul, Schmithals has to argue against the view that 1 Thessalonians (or its parts) is the oldest extant letter of Paul. Instead he places it after 1 Corinthians during the so-called third missionary journey (= Acts 18:23–21:15).\textsuperscript{50} But the traditional view on the early place of 1 Thessalonians in Paul’s career has solid support, as it is based on the apostle’s remarks in the letter itself. In 1:5 and 2:1 (cf. 3:1) Paul refers to the initial preaching in Thessalonica, which cannot have taken place long before, and the combination of this with Acts 17 leads to the generally accepted view that 1 Thessalonians was written during the so-called second missionary journey (Acts 15:36–18:22).\textsuperscript{51}

Let me hasten to add that not a single text in 1 Thessalonians itself gives rise to the suspicion that there were Gnostics in Thessalonica. At no point is there even a trace of disappointment over the relationship between the congregation and the apostle. How could Paul have said that he had no need to write to them regarding brotherly love (1 Thess 4:9) if incidents similar to those in Corinth (cf. 1 Cor 5:1–5; 2 Cor 1:23; 13:2) had occurred in their congregation?

\textsuperscript{46} Bultmann, \textit{Theology}, 1.167.
\textsuperscript{47} Bultmann, \textit{Theology}, 1.171.
\textsuperscript{48} Walter Schmithals’ two relevant books are \textit{Gnosticism in Corinth} and \textit{Paul and the Gnostics}.
\textsuperscript{49} On Baur, see Lüdemann, \textit{Opposition to Paul}, 1–9.
\textsuperscript{50} See the discussion in Lüdemann, \textit{Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles}, 206–9.
\textsuperscript{51} I leave aside the question of the absolute date of 1 Thessalonians, because only the chronological sequence of Paul’s letters matters here.
I argue thus despite Wolfgang Harnisch’s attempt to establish the view that the same Gnostic group is involved in 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4, for Harnisch fails to account for the different responses to the allegedly identical situation. In 1 Corinthians Paul strongly emphasizes the future resurrection of Christians: if one denies this resurrection, then Christ has not been raised (1 Cor 15:16). Yet in 1 Thess 4:13–18 we find the argument that Christians who have died suffer no disadvantage when compared with the living, for the dead too will be caught up to participate in everlasting fellowship with Christ. This means, however, that in contrast to 1 Corinthians 15, 1 Thess 4:13–18 does not make the resurrection of Christians a major point of discussion. It is adduced only as an auxiliary thought, to ensure the future union of the minority of deceased Christians. For this reason, Harnisch’s assumption that the resurrection of the Christians had become a controversial point in Thessalonica is open to serious question. Hence a Gnostic point of view as the target of Paul’s statements remains unlikely.

To formulate a preliminary conclusion: the thesis of a Gnostic movement that systematically invaded the Pauline communities finds little or no support in the earliest extant letter of Paul, 1 Thessalonians. Studies of the other Pauline communities (Corinth, Philippi, Galatia) do not yield any different result. Scholarship must in all likelihood abandon the hypothesis that a cohesive Gnostic movement is reflected in Paul’s letters. “The plain truth is that you could not have found anyone in Corinth to direct you to a Gnostic church: the overwhelming probability is that there was no such thing.”

In summary, Bultmann’s presentation of Gnosticism as a movement parallel to Christianity is perhaps one of the worst historical misjudgments of New Testament scholarship in the past century and clearly the most influential. It is a Christian interpretation interested only in hermeneutical results, the tua res agitur, although it does not reveal itself as such. Bultmann presents Gnosticism only in order to prove it inferior to Christianity.

For instance, Bultmann asserted that Christianity and Gnosticism shared the same view about the conditio humana in the world; according to them an occurrence from outside oneself would bring salvation. “They differed, however, in what each conceived to be the root cause of the problem. For Gnosticism, it was fate; for Christianity, sin.” They also had dissimilar concepts of salvation, and here Bultmann saw Gnosticism to be especially faulty, since Gnosticism—for Bultmann—erroneously proposed a naturalistic model of salvation that alleg-

52. Thus Harnisch, Eschatologische Existenz, passim.
53. See Lüdemann, Opposition to Paul, 64–115.
54. Nock, Essays, 2.957.
55. For what follows, cf. King, What Is Gnosticism?, 100–107. I have benefited from her overall exposition of “Gnosticism.”
edly emptied our life as individuals. For Bultmann the Christian preaching of the cross will always open the way to a new and nobler life of love that springs from faith. Gnosticism, on the other hand, supposedly devalued and ultimately denied life’s meaning. Thus it was to be judged insufficient on account of its world-denying moral code.

Bultmann considered his inferences as “canonical” for theology and church. Yet the unconcealed deployment of theological norms is rather doubtful, especially since it justifies a suppression of historical facts in the name of the tua res agitur principle of “higher history.”

The Intolerance of the Kerygma and the Two Notions of History

Bultmann’s statements about the relationship between reconstruction and interpretation are based on his conviction that the biblical text is both a call for decision and ultimately a valid historical record. For that reason he does not pay enough attention to the history that a properly critical theology should try to reconstruct. In those cases where interpretation and reconstruction conflict, Bultmann, too, often turns to a reconstruction that is amenable to a theologically determined interpretation. Indeed, he employs two different notions of history: factual history and meaningful history of the tua res agitur type. He writes: “But the decisive question is whether we confront history in such a way that we acknowledge its claim upon us, its claim to say something new to us. When we give up a neutral attitude toward the text, the question of truth can dominate the exegesis.”

Thus Bultmann thinks it hopeless “to justify theology as science before the forum of an unbelieving culture.” Indeed, he judges any attempt in that direction as a “self-surrender of theology,” for the “object of theology is visible only to faith, and this faith itself belongs to its object—in fact, it is its object in the sense that in faith itself God’s act, the eschatological occurrence, takes place in itself.” In other words, theology becomes an intellectual rationalization of a religious certitude of faith. As such it can be an academic discipline only on the condition that a specific revelation in the form of the kerygma constitutes the decisive event of grace. Such a claim, however, is clearly unscientific. For one thing, its basis is an irrational call for faith; for another, it subordinates factual

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61. For the following, cf. Lüdemann, Intolerance, 17–19.
62. See on this aspect of Bultmann’s thought, Funk, Language.
63. Bultmann, “Theological Exegesis,” 239.
history to existential or meaningful history. According to Bultmann, then, theology properly understood “cannot dispense with the categories of right teaching and heresy,” for a dogmatism of the old style remains its basis.

It is therefore not surprising that Bultmann the exegete not only finds the gospel intolerant, but also considers his real theological task to attest to the intolerance of the revelation. In connection with his exegesis of the good shepherd speech in the Gospel of John, he writes:

There are not various possible answers to man’s quest for salvation, but only one. A decision must be made. This is the basis of the intolerance of the revelation.

Tolerance, i.e. the recognition of every honest intention as of equal right, is demanded in that sphere of man’s activity where the goal is left to man’s intention and ability. . . . Thus outside the revelation man is always a seeker, so that it is pointless for man to pass judgment on others; what is required is tolerance. . . .

Yet man’s search ends when he is confronted with the revelation which opens up to every man the true understanding of himself. Here absolute recognition is demanded. Here there can be no tolerance. But of course it is the revelation which is intolerant; men can only be tolerant of each other. . . .

Yet the believer does not commit himself to the revelation in order to champion its cause, but only in order to listen to it, to recognise its victory. His intolerance is not a denial of the sincerity and seriousness of the non-believer’s commitment. . . .

His intolerance consists in refusing to make concessions in gaining a hearing for the revelation, for the claim of that power which has made all human commitment obsolete and illusory. It consists in upholding the “truth” that all human commitment and endeavour, through which man seeks to find his true being, is bound to fail; that the revelation demands that man abandon his attempt to find himself by giving himself up to this or that cause, because God in his revelation has already given up himself for men; that Jesus has come to give life and fulness.

Yet Bultmann obviously plays Old Harry with history. From the texts of the New Testament, he filters the absolute claim of truth—the intolerance of the gospel in the form of the *kerygma*—and keeps the demand of intolerance. But this seems to involve a contradiction, for the truth claim was part of a worldview that included imminent expectation of the end-time—a notion that came to grief because Christians kept dying and Jesus did not return. This is to say nothing of the gospel proclamation’s absolute reliance on the ancient view of a three-tiered universe—another myth that collapsed a long while ago.

70. For the following, c.f., Lüdemann, Im Würgegriff der Kirche, 34.
Although fully aware of the failure of the imminent expectation, Bultmann sought to validate the truth claims of the essential biblical texts. Yet it is completely unjustified to ascribe to those texts absolute authority over the truth claims of other religions. Indeed, absolute truth claims are part of most religions. Whether we look at Jesus, his disciples, Paul, Muhammad, Joseph Smith, or more recent prophets, we see that each has laid claim to absolute truth derived from revelation and on that basis demanded total obedience. In short, history itself has put into question any and all claims to absolute truth.

One gets nowhere by arguing that only through obedience can one understand the truth claim of the Christian revelation. That is precisely the game that other religions play, and the truth claim of any religion is vitiated by the conflicting truth claims of the many religions. Besides, as a free human being I must reject the arbitrary and presumptuous proposal that I am obliged to assent to a religion’s truth claims before I can understand them.

It is at best incongruous that Bultmann the great demythologizer should have joined the dogmatists. Yet it is clear that in his system the ancient dogma of inspiration remains implicitly valid. For according to his formulations, something is held to be true not because it is true but because it is part of the kerygma, the preaching of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ that demands obedience from its hearers.

Worse yet, it is ingenuous—and strangely so in such a learned and profound thinker as Bultmann—to suppose that having shattered one mythological system, the best way to fill the resulting void is to create another myth with an equal or greater degree of inscrutability. The world of today and tomorrow seems to cry out for fewer metaphysical doctrines and a greater emphasis on Jesus’ call for a this-worldly concern for our neighbor’s well being.

**Works Cited**


A mini-trajectory of change is what I trace here, highlighting a shift from Rudolf Bultmann’s doubts about the (extent of) cultural relativity between “gospel (Greek εὐαγγέλιον [singular]; ‘good news’ or ‘good tidings’)” as used in the New Testament and related writings and “gospel (εὐαγγέλια/εὐανγέλια1 [usually plural])” as used in Greco-Roman culture, to an emphasis on the conflict between the two in the writings of John Dominic Crossan.

To clarify terminology, “gospel (εὐαγγέλιον)” (uncapitalized) refers here to a message of good news (usually), “Gospel” (capitalized) to the title of a book, that is, Gospel of Mark, Gospel of Matthew, Gospel of Thomas, etc. My main interest is not in pointing to nuances of “gospel” meaning between, say, Paul the apostle and (the Gospel of) Mark in the New Testament, part of the infrastructure of Jesus movement/early Christian understandings of gospel, but in underscoring the probable awareness of early Christian storytellers and writers, with Mark as a typical case, about “gospel” in their contexts and “gospel” in the wider Greco-Roman culture. Along the way, the idea of “gospel” as expressed in the Sayings Gospel Q, foundational to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, will be referenced with its prophetic Old Testament (Isaiah) relationships.

1. Εὐανγελίων (genitive plural neuter, from nominative εὐανγέλια) is the word in the Priene inscription (Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 366, referring to his photograph of the white marble stone and to Dittenberger, *Inscriptiones*, no. 458). Other spellings by scholars are adjustments to the text. Εὐαγγελίας (genitive singular feminine, from nominative εὐαγγελία) is also found (4 Kgdms 7:9).

2. Except, of course, in the title of this article, secondary-source quotations, and similar expressions.

3. Except, e.g., when the message of good news arguably means only “news,” as in the message to King David about a resident alien’s (Amalekite’s) mercy killing of the wounded King Saul, requested by Saul lest the Philistines finish him off. This (good?) news is supposed to please David, but he turns on the Amalekite, who has brought him the message, and orders him killed (2 Kgdms 4:10; cf. Koester, who thinks it means here “reward for good news” [*Ancient Christian Gospels*, 2 n. 3]).

4. Whether Paul or Mark matters to specialist scholars, but little to popular audience, i.e., most of the Christian world. As in much scholarship on the earliest “Jesus movements,” we use the word “Christian” to apply sometimes anachronistically also to these so-called movements; where necessary, further clarification is provided.
For the larger picture beyond the first century CE, continuing evidence of the contrasting Christian and imperial usages, a late-second-century author will be mentioned, providing a “smoking gun” beyond the circumstantial cultural inferences in vogue in recent scholarship.

Koester, Bultmann, and Priene

Helmut Koester, in his magisterial *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (1990), analyzes in exhaustive detail and with citation of scholarship old and new “1.1 The Origin of the Term ‘Gospel’” (pp. 1–4); “1.2 The Use of the Term ‘Gospel’ in the Pauline Tradition” (4–9); “1.3 The Term ‘Gospel’ in the Gospels of the New Testament” (9–14); “1.4 ‘Gospel’ in the Apostolic Fathers” (14–20); and “1.5 The Term ‘Gospel’ in Gospels from the Nag Hammadi Library” (20–23). Discussed under “Origin,” the aspect that concerns us here is the use of the term in the imperial inscriptions, for example, typically, Priene, Turkey (9 BCE Asia Minor, 21 miles south of Kusadasi, 33 south of Ephesus), raising the question of the influence of the Roman emperor cult on the earliest usage by Jesus’ followers. Koester writes:

Most of these inscriptions are related to the introduction of the Julian calendar, that is, the calendar of Julius Caesar [100–44 BCE; ruled 49–44 BCE], which was generally introduced in the Roman world during the time of Augustus [63 BCE–14 CE; ruled 27 BCE–14 CE]. The inscription from Priene (9 BCE) is probably the most famous among these calendar inscriptions. It celebrates the benefactions which have come into the world through Augustus, whom divine providence has sent as a savior (σωτήρ) and who has brought the wars to an end and established an order of peace:

. . . and since the Caesar through his appearances (ἐπιφανείν) has exceeded the hopes of all former good messages (εὐαγγέλια), surpassing the benefactors who came before him, but also leaving no hope that anyone in the future would surpass him, and since for the world the birthday of the god was the beginning of his good messages (. . . εὐαγγελίων . . .) [may it therefore be decided that . . .].

All these inscriptions result from the religio-political propaganda of Augustus in which the rule of peace, initiated by Augustus’s victories and benefactions, is celebrated and proclaimed as the beginning of a new age. The usage of the term εὐαγγελίον is new in the Greco-Roman world. It elevates this term and equips it with a particular dignity. Since the Christian usage of the term for its saving message begins only a few decades after the time of Augustus, it is most likely that

5. A Koester article leading into this book is “From Kerygma-Gospel to Written Gospels.” For the extensive archaeological background of Koester’s research, see Schowalter, “Koester’s Archaeological Path.”

6. For other translations of part of the inscription including “for the world the birthday of the god, . . .” see pages 70 (Deissmann), 73 (Crossan), and 75–76 (Evans, with comparison to Mark 1:1) below.
the early Christian missionaries were influenced by the imperial propaganda in their employment of the word.7

As a footnote at the end of this quotation, Koester adds:

Most scholars are very hesitant to see a connection of the early-Christian use and the employment of the term in the imperial propaganda; e.g., Rudolf Bultmann, _Theology of the New Testament_ (2 vols.; New York: Scribner’s, 1951–1955) 1.87.

In the next footnote Koester comments:

It is very difficult to establish evidence for a pre-Pauline Christian usage of these terms, pace Stuhlmacher (Das paulinische Evangelium, 209–44)[,] who discusses Rev 10:7, 14:6; Matt 11:5 (= Luke 7:22); Luke 4:18; Mark 1:14; and Matt 4:23; 9:35; 24:14; 16:13 as possible evidence for the use of εὐαγγέλιον and εὐαγγελίζεσϑαι by the Palestinian church, possibly by Jesus himself.8 It is more probable that the Pauline use of the terms derives from the early Hellenistic church from which Paul derives such kerygmatic formulations, called ‘gospel,’ as 1 Thess 1:9–10 and 1 Cor 15:3–5; cf. Bultmann, _Theology_, 87–89.

When we turn to Bultmann’s _Theology_ itself, we find the surprising comments, helping to clarify what he means by “absolute” (also showing why reading him may still be useful as a point of departure):

The substantive “evangel” (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) soon appears in Hellenistic Christianity as the technical term for the Christian proclamation, and for the act of proclaiming the verb εὐαγγελίζεσϑαι was used. . . .

“Evangel” (or its verb) is strictly a technical term only when it is absolute—that is, used without any object of content to designate the Christian message, but simply implying its clearly defined content. This usage of Paul, which in his footsteps became widely current, has no analogy either in the Old Testament and Judaism or in Gentile Hellenism, and the wide-spread view that “evangel” is a sacral term of the emperor-cult cannot be maintained [italics added]. This absolute use of the word seems to have developed in Hellenistic Christianity gradually, but relatively quickly. In many cases “evangel” is limited by an objective genitive (e.g. “of the Kingdom,” Mt. 4:23, 9:35 or “of Christ,” Rom. 15:19, I Cor. 9:12, etc.) or the verb is supplemented by an object of content (e.g. the “Reign of God,” Lk. 4:43, “Jesus” or an equivalent expression, Acts 5:42, 8:35, Gal. 1:15, etc.; or “faith,” Gal. 1:23, etc.).

Whether the absolute use is earlier than Paul cannot be said with certainty. Evidently it does not go back as far as the earliest Church [italics added]; for the substantive εὐαγγέλιον, lacking entirely in Q, is found in Mark only in secondary formations (in Matthew partly following Mark, partly in phrases peculiar to Matthew). It is absent from Luke but occurs twice in Acts. Among these occurrences it is used technically, i.e., absolutely, in these cases: Mk. 1:15, 8:35, 10:29, 13:10, 14:9, 14:9;


8. Especially Matt 11:5/Luke 7:22 (= Q 7:22) will be discussed below, in the subsection, “The earliest form(s) of the gospel.” Stuhlmacher’s views continue to be part of the scholarly conversation; see also his _Gospel and Gospels_.


8. Especially Matt 11:5/Luke 7:22 (= Q 7:22) will be discussed below, in the subsection, “The earliest form(s) of the gospel.” Stuhlmacher’s views continue to be part of the scholarly conversation; see also his _Gospel and Gospels_.

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Mt. 26:13, Acts 15:7. The verb, in the passive voice, is used once in Q (Mt. 11:5 = Lk. 7:22) quoting Is. 61:1, is lacking in Mark and Matthew, but frequent in Luke and Acts, though technical only in the following cases: Lk. 9:6 (20:1), Acts 8:25, 40; 14:7, 21; 16:10. In the New Testament, outside of the synoptics, Acts, and Paul, the noun occurs in the technical use only in the deuteropauline writings (II Thess., Col., Eph., Past.); the verb occurs technically I Pet. 1:12, 4:6, Heb. 4:2, 6. Not infrequently (especially in Paul) “of God” as a subjective genitive or genitive of the author is added. Not only from Luke but also from the following the noun is completely absent: Jn., I–III Jn., Heb., Jas., Jd., II Pet., Rev. (here the word occurs only in a different sense, 14:6). The verb is absent from Mark and Matthew and the following: Jn., I–III Jn., Past., Jas., Jd., II Pet., Rev. . . .

The technical use of κήρυγμα, “the message,” and κηρύσσειν, “to herald,” developed quite analogously.9

The details of all these passages need not concern us here,10 except as they demonstrate that Bultmann makes a distinction between the “absolute” or “technical” noun εὐαγγέλιον and the verb εὐαγγελίζεσϑαι, and allows that the verb too may be used in a technical sense. He seems to be giving the absolute εὐαγγέλιον a privileged status and is perhaps influenced in that direction by his understanding of the importance of preaching, that is, clearly articulating the Pauline gospel message, as well as by Martin Luther’s interpretation of Paul. But Bultmann has ignored, or not sufficiently heeded, the significance of the imperial inscription at Priene and other widespread images of Roman imperial theology. Problems with Bultmann’s view also become apparent when the absence or meager use of the noun εὐαγγέλιον or the verb εὐαγγελίζεσϑαι in an absolute sense seems to have little or no relation to the existence or vitality of some New Testament and other early Christian or Jewish Christian communities (i.e., communities without a specifically Pauline kerygmatic formulation). The question may be raised whether Bultmann has overloaded the technical noun in distinction from the verb, tending to negate other dynamic gospel meanings that may stem from Jesus and/or his earliest followers.

There must have been a form of the gospel from Jesus himself that did not include his suffering, death, and the experiences of his resurrection as in the “absolute” Pauline kerygma. How could Jesus’ original gospel include his death and resurrection if he was not dead yet? From Jesus’ many parables, we know that his original gospel was the gospel of the kingdom of God (βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ). What he was talking about was the rule of God versus the rule of Caesar. Yet the variations that soon developed among his followers, after his death and

9. British edition 1952, 87–88. Koester proceeds on the basis of Bultmann’s meaning of “absolute” when he notes that, of 48 occurrences of εὐαγγέλιον in the genuine Pauline letters, 26 are “absolute, without a following genitive; fourteen times the genitive ‘of God’ (τοῦ Θεοῦ) or ‘of Christ’ (τοῦ Χριστοῦ) follows” (Ancient Christian Gospels, 4–5 n. 4).

10. For Q (Matt 11:5/Luke 7:22, εὐαγγελίζονται [Isa 61:1 LXX, εὐαγγελίσασϑαι]), again, and other references, see the subsections below, “The Earliest Form(s) of the Gospel” and “Singular εὐαγγέλιον and Plural εὐαγγέλια.”
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perhaps even before, comprise the infrastructure of the earliest Christian movements.

So with the impetus of research on Q, it seems appropriate to recognize that other gospels stemming from Jesus and his earliest followers were considered gospel, and that the pre-Pauline gentile form, the Pauline form, and the Jewish Christian or Christian Jewish forms were all part of the pluralistic infrastructure stemming from Jesus and his earliest followers. And this same infrastructure, with roots in the prophetic tradition of Israel, provides a basic contrast to Greco-Roman culture. We can proceed then to the wider picture of early Christianity vis-à-vis Greco-Roman culture that was painted by Adolf Deissmann in 1922 (earlier, too, from 1905), grounded in his research on both the Septuagint and Greco-Roman culture, underscored by Gerhard Friedrich in 1964, and emphasized in the last several decades by an increasing number of scholars, especially Crossan.

Priene, Deissmann, and Crossan

That Bultmann ignored, or did not heed, the Priene and other inscriptions as influencing the New Testament formulations should not be surprising, since “until recently,” according to Graham Stanton, such inquiries “were considered by many to be blind alleys.” And worse, “New Testament scholars who have taken the figure of the Roman emperor seriously have often found themselves the object of ridicule, and their interest regarded as, at best, somewhat eccentric.” The most important of the inscriptions, Stanton goes on, is still the so-called Priene inscription, the first fragments of which were published in 1899. Adolf Deissmann’s discussion of this inscription in his Licht vom Osten (1908) led to a flurry of interest in the imperial cult. This book was quickly translated into English as Light from the Ancient East . . . (1910). It remains a classic, in spite of more recent discoveries and discussions.

Much has happened since Deissmann’s day, though little has filtered through to the standard New Testament lexicons and handbooks. Many more fragments

11. Deissmann, Light from the Ancient East (in preparation, 1905; 1st ed., 1908; 4th ed., 1922); Friedrich, “εὐαγγέλιον,” 725. For development after Friedrich, see various articles by Strecker, culminating in his “εὐαγγέλιον,” cited in Stuhlmacher, “Pauline Gospel,” who calls Strecker “the chief representative” (151 n. 11) of those who “insist . . . that the missionary expression εὐαγγέλιον, which is not in the Septuagint, must be explained (in distinction from the verb [εὐαγγελίζεσθαι], especially from Greek linguistic tradition and indeed above all from that pertaining to the imperial cult” (151).
13. Stanton, Jesus and Gospel, 30 n. 60, summarizing Meggitt, “New Testament and Roman Emperor,” 143–69; Koester (Ancient Christian Gospels, 4 n. 2) confirms contrary opinion: “Most scholars are very hesitant to see a connection of the early-Christian use and the employment of the term in the imperial propaganda,” citing Bultmann (Theology, 1.87) among others.
of this inscription have been discovered; we now have thirteen in all, from five cities in Asia Minor: Priene, Apamea, Maeonia, Eumenia, and Dorylaeum. This inscription was displayed prominently in Greek and in Latin in many more than these five places, not only in the larger cities, but also in less populated areas. Only the well-known *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, the emperor’s [Augustus’s] own catalogue of his achievements for the whole Roman Empire, had an even greater impact in the first century AD. Copies of the *Res Gestae* in Latin (and often with a Greek translation or paraphrase) were erected on stone blocks in the cities and towns of Asia Minor, and probably also in Galatia at the instigation of the provincial Assembly or *koinon* c. AD 19.15

The usual title, ‘Priene inscription’, is something of a misnomer. Priene, which is about halfway between Ephesus and Miletus, happened to be the place where the first discovery was made; the fragments found in the other four cities were less substantial, but that is sheer chance. When the Ephesian elders travelled to meet with Paul at Miletus (Acts 20.15–17), they may well have broken their journey at Priene.16

Deissmann argued strongly that the language lexicographers used to distinguish New Testament Greek and the common (*koinē*) Greek of the culture was a false dichotomy. New Testament Greek is the ordinary language of the culture, and thus you cannot privilege New Testament words and expressions as if they are conveying a unique and separate meaning. True, combinations of the words may result in discrete meanings, but the language has an identical cultural base. It seems obvious, but needs to be reasserted: that’s why it’s called *koinē*. Deissmann writes:

A generation ago [189817], when it began to be asserted with some confidence that the isolation of “New Testament” Greek as a separate entity was impossible from the scientific point of view, since it was practically identical with the popular international Greek of the period, theologians and philologists received the statement with more or less active dissent. . . . Since then, however, the specialists have changed their minds on this not unimportant point. New Testament philology has been revolutionised; and probably all the workers concerned in it both on the Continent and in English-speaking countries are by this time agreed that the starting-point for the philological investigation of the New Testament must be the language of the non-literary papyri, ostraca, and inscriptions. . . . In many details due emphasis was given to [the] relation [of New Testament

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17. Since Deissmann was probably revising his fourth edition, published 1922, and footnotes from his 1898 publication.
language] with the contemporary international Greek, but on the whole it was isolated by the science of language, and raised to the rank of a separate linguistic entity under the title of “New Testament” Greek. . . . From the point of view of religion and theology the isolation of the New Testament was encouraged by the doctrine of mechanical inspiration, combining with a very lively conception of the canon of the New Testament as a hard-and-fast boundary.\textsuperscript{18}

Deissmann later proceeds, citing extensive research including his own, to offer “a selection of characteristic parallelisms” to either imperial law or the imperial cult, the latter of which “was in fact a portion of” Roman constitutional law,\textsuperscript{19} including the words “God (\textepsilon\textomicr{o}s),”\textsuperscript{20} “god of god,”\textsuperscript{21} and “son of God (\textepsilon\textomicr{o}u \textupsilon\textomicr{o}ς).”\textsuperscript{22} A marble pedestal at Pergamum honors Emperor Augustus while he is still alive: “[The Emperor[,] Caesar[,] son of [a] god[,] [the] god Augustus[,] of every land and sea the overseer” (brackets added). A votive inscription in St. Paul’s time on a marble slab at Magnesia on the Maeander River calls Emperor Nero, between his adoption 50 CE by Claudius (emperor 41–54 CE) and his accession to the throne (54 CE), “Son of the greatest of the gods, Tiberius Claudius.” “Divine (\textepsilon\textomicr{o}ις)” is a frequent adjective used of Augustus, as in the calendar inscription of Priene (9 BCE), which speaks of the birthday of “the most divine Caesar.”\textsuperscript{23} “Divine” and “divinity” even persist into the sixth century CE, applying to Christian emperors the old language of religious observance. The title “theologian (\textepsilon\textomicr{o}λο\textomicr{γ}"ος),” the usual Inscriptio at the beginning of the book of Revelation in the majority of manuscripts, is “likely to have been borrowed from the Imperial cult. The \textit{theologi} . . . were quite well-known dignitaries in the Imperial cult of Asia Minor, against which the Apocalypse protests so strongly. . . . These ‘theologians’ seem occasionally to have borne the name of \textit{sebastologi} [σεβαστολόγοι; Caesar-logians, JD], as being the official special preachers in connexion with the Imperial cult in Asia Minor.”\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{18} Deissmann, \textit{Light from the Ancient East}, 62–63, 67 (62–145 is on language).
\textsuperscript{19} Deissmann, \textit{Light from the Ancient East}, 343.
\textsuperscript{20} Deissmann, \textit{Light from the Ancient East}, 343–46. My current reprint copy of Deissmann’s book has Greek words in Greek letters but only partial diacritics, so I may occasionally cite with partial diacritics or in English transliteration the Greek words he uses. The inscriptions, of course, had minimal diacritics, if any.
\textsuperscript{21} Deissmann, \textit{Light from the Ancient East}, 344–45. This appellation applies to Augustus the ancient title of the Egyptian divine Horus, child of divine Isis and divine Osiris (see also Crossan and Reed, \textit{In Search of Paul}, 144). It is a reminder, too, of late-first-century Johannine theology, suggesting that the reading “only-begotten God” (John 1:18), referring to Jesus and understood accordingly by both the second-century Valentinian Ptolemy (Irenaeus, \textit{Against Heresies} 1.8.5) and Origen (\textit{Commentary on John} 2.29; \textit{Against Celsus} 2.71; 8.17) has anti-imperial implications. Origen provides the rebuttal: “‘All the gods of the heathens’ (Ps 95:5 LXX) are glutinous daemons” (\textit{Against Celsus} 3.37).
\textsuperscript{22} Deissmann, \textit{Light from the Ancient East}, 346–47.
\textsuperscript{23} Deissmann, \textit{Light from the Ancient East}, 347–48.
\textsuperscript{24} Deissmann, \textit{Light from the Ancient East}, 348–49.
Deissmann emphasizes “the early establishment of a polemical parallelism between the cult of Christ and the cult of Caesar” in the application of the terms “lord (κυρίος),” 25 “Lord and God (κυρίος καὶ θεός),” 26 “King (βασιλεύς),” 27 “Saviour (σωτήρ),” 28 and “Saviour of the world.” 29 For our purposes, the most important example concerns Priene, proving to Deissmann that the word εὐαγγελιον[sic], “gospel, good tidings,” which was in use in pre-Christian times in the profane sense of good news, and which then became a Primitive Christian cult-word of the first order, was also employed in the Imperial cult. The oldest example is that calendar inscription of Priene, about 9 B.C., . . . which is now in the Berlin Museum. Discovered by German archaeologists on two stones of different kind in the north hall of the market-place at Priene, and published for the first time by Theodor Mommsen and Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff . . ., this inscription, designed to introduce the Asian calendar, has already been appreciated by Adolf Harnack and Paul Wendland as of great importance in the history of the sacred language of Asia Minor . . . Here we find this remarkable sentence referring to the birthday of the Emperor Augustus: . . . “But the birthday of the god was for the world the beginning of tidings of joy (εὐανγελίον) on his account.”30

The neuter plural εὐαγγελία (εὐανγέλια: genitive εὐανγελίων) seems to be the most frequent form used, but Deissmann also found the singular, though more than two centuries later (after 235 ce), referring to the gospel or “tidings of joy (εὐανγελίον) concerning the proclaiming as Emperor of Gaius Julius Verus Maximus Augustus [Maximinus Thrax, c. 173–238; ruled 235–238], the son of our lord (κυρίου), most dear to the gods, the Emperor Caesar Gaius Julius Verus Maximinus, pious, happy, and Augustus.”31

Despite Bultmann’s reluctance, Gerhard Friedrich, building on the work of his teacher Julius Schniewind (who had reservations about Bultmann’s demythologizing), did not hesitate to articulate the contrasting worldviews toward peace elucidated by Deissmann, preaching a little in the process:

The Imperial cult and the Bible share the view that accession to the throne, which introduces a new era and brings peace to the world, is a gospel for men [sic]. We can explain this only by supposing a common source. This is generally oriental. To the many messages, however, the NT opposes the one Gospel, to the many accessions the one proclamation of the βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ [kingdom of God]. The NT speaks the language of its day. It is a popular and realistic procla-

25. Deissmann, Light from the Ancient East, 349, 350–60; see also Crossan and Reed, In Search of Paul, 166.
27. Deissmann, Light from the Ancient East, 362–63.
30. Deissmann, Light from the Ancient East, 366.
31. Deissmann, Light from the Ancient East, 367.
mation. It knows human waiting for and hope of the εὐαγγέλια, and it replies with the εὐαγγέλιον, but with an evangel of which some might be ashamed, since it is a σκάνδαλον [stumbling block] (Mt. 11:5f; R. 1:16; 1 C. 1:17, 23; 2 Tm. 1:8; Mk. 8:35). The Gospel means for men [sic] σωτηρία [salvation], but σωτηρία through μετάνοια and judgment. For many this Gospel may be ironical when they hear it (cf. Ac. 17:32). But it is real joy; for penitence brings joy, and judgment grace and salvation. Caesar and Christ, the emperor on the throne and the despised rabbi on the cross, confront one another. Both are evangel to men [sic]. They have much in common. But they belong to different worlds.32

It is not difficult to see Deissmann’s influence on, even inspiration of, Crossan. We do not need to review his writings for members of the Jesus Seminar, the Society of Biblical Literature, or increasingly, the wider public. But it is hard to think of anyone who has done more to bring contemporary archaeology, anthropology, and other sciences to bear on the study of early Judaism and Christianity, and to combine high scholarship and literary grace in so doing.33 It is also remarkable that, although on some specifics there has been, and likely will continue to be, disagreement, most would agree that the message of Jesus is one of justice and peace, and in that respect unifying and ecumenical. Crossan’s and archaeologist Jonathan Reed’s debt to Deissmann is clear from the beginning of their book In Search of Paul (2004), where they praise Deissmann for the “light” they are about to reflect. Both Crossan and Reed had been “to every place we discuss, and both of us . . . several times to certain places,” and they “invite” readers “to imagine yourselves in those locations” (ix). A key section contrasting “The Gospel of Caesar Augustus as Lord” (236–69) and “The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Lord” (270–91) gets to the point:

You drive today along the coastal road from ancient Miletus . . . to ancient Priene . . . In Acts 20:15 Luke has Paul sailing into Miletus. He would have serious trouble sailing there today. But even with . . . changes of terrain, the mountains still stand to northwest and southeast overlooking that great valley, and the Aegean is still there, even if much farther to the west.

. . . [T]oday the classical sites of Turkey can be graded by how many tour buses are there at any one time. Ephesus has a minimum of twenty-five tour buses at a time. Aphrodisias has a maximum of five. And Priene has no buses most of the time. You come there on a sunny late September day in 2002 by taxi from Kusadasi and have the ruins almost all to yourself.

The towering Masada-like acropolis north of Priene makes the Acrocorinth or even the Acrophilippi look insignificant in comparison. It is warm that afternoon, but even at the site’s entrance you are high enough for a good breeze, and it strengthens as you climb higher among the ruins to the Temple of Athena. You ponder insincerely and dismiss eventually any idea of climbing that towering

32. Friedrich, εὐαγγέλιον, 725.
33. For purposes of this study, the most important are Crossan and Reed, Excavating Jesus and In Search of Paul; Crossan, God and Empire and Power of Parable.
acropolis. The view out over the Meander Valley is already spectacular enough, the site already difficult enough, and your purpose already specific enough.

Your focus is on the site where a by then fragmentary inscription from 9 B.C.E. was discovered by German archaeologists at the end of the nineteenth century. Its two parts are now stored in Berlin’s Pergamon Museum, and Gustav Adolf Deissmann’s book shows their earliest pictures. Its orginal site is to the immediate north of the agora, or public square. A covered portico, or sacred stoa, long as a football field, once offered some shade from the relentless southern arch of the Mediterranean sun. At its eastern end was the prytaneion, the sacred hearth or eternal flame of the city’s destiny, and to its immediate west was the bouleuterion, the meeting chamber and dinning room of the city’s council. We are, in other words, in the religio-political heart of the city....

Continuing westward at Priene, the rest of the stoa opened into fifteen small but clearly distinguishable rooms whose walls are still halfway intact. You know that the inscription was originally in the ninth room from the west, the seventh from the east, and that the room has a wider entrance than those around it as well as a seat around the inside walls. It is easy enough to find that room once sacred to Augustus—it now has a rather large tree growing against the middle of its right side wall. The absent inscription is the fullest example of two documents known also from several other provincial cities of the Roman province of Asia. They contain the earliest and most striking instances of the term “gospel” or “good tidings” (euaggelia) used for Augustus in Roman imperial theology. And they contain in detail why exactly their content is good news for all creation. The texts given below are composite scholarly reconstructions integrating the Priene version with fragments discovered in four other Asian cities, for example, Apamea, where it was dug out of a garden in the mid-1920s.

The first part records how Paulus Fabius Maximus, Roman governor of Asia, proposed to the Asian League of cities that they change their calendar so that Augustus’s birthday would be henceforth New Year’s Day. Here are some key lines from his letter:

[It is a question whether] the birthday of the most divine Caesar is more pleasant or more advantageous, the day which we might justly set on a par with the beginning of everything, in practical terms at least, in that he restored order when everything was disintegrating and falling into chaos and gave a new look to the whole world, a world which would have met destruction with the utmost pleasure if Caesar had not been born as a common blessing to all. For that reason one might justly take this to be the beginning of life and living, the end of regret at one’s birth. . . . It is my view that all the communities should have one and the same New Year’s Day, the birthday of the most divine Caesar, and that on that day, 23rd September, all should enter their term of office.

The second part records the enthusiastic response and official decree establishing that calendrical change for everyone, but especially for the start of all civic magistracies. You can easily imagine the competitive public celebration that all those simultaneous inceptions necessitated. Here again are some key lines:
Since the providence that has divinely ordered our existence has applied her energy and zeal and has brought to life the most perfect good in Augustus, whom she filled with virtues for the benefit of mankind, bestowing him upon us and our descendants as a savior—he who put an end to war and will order peace, Caesar, who by his epiphany exceeded the hopes of those who prophesied good tidings (euaggelia), not only outdoing benefactors of the past, but also allowing no hope of greater benefactions in the future; and since the birthday of the god first brought to the world the good tidings (euaggelia) residing in him . . . . For that reason, with good fortune and safety, the Greeks of Asia have decided that the New Year in all the cities should begin on 23rd September, the birthday of Augustus . . . and that the letter of the proconsul and the decree of Asia should be inscribed on a pillar of white marble, which is to be placed in the sacred precinct of Rome and Augustus.34

Apparently as early as 29 B.C.E., that is, immediately after Augustus’s victory at the battle of Actium, a golden crown had been decreed in the Roman province of Asia for whoever best honored Augustus, “our god,” and, twenty years later, that diadem was given to the governor Paulus Fabius Maximus, who had “discovered a way to honor Augustus that was hitherto unknown among the Greeks, namely, to reckon time from the date of his nativity.”

In the Roman province of Asia, to take just those two Priene inscriptions, the divine Augustus was not just lord of empire and earth, but also of calendar and time. Lord of history, therefore, since there never was before nor ever would be again good news or gospel (plural euaggelia) surpassing that which announced his birth. In every city of rich Roman Asia there was decreed, for all time past, present, and future, but one overwhelming gospel, the good news of Augustus’s advent, epiphany, and presence, the good news of a global Lord, divine Son, and cosmic Savior.

A footnote. Just to the northwest of that sacred room are the ruins of what was once the oldest, largest, most magnificent, and most important of the city’s several temples. It stood on an east-west axis atop high terraced support walls along a rocky spur and was visible from anywhere on the plains below. The architrave beam above its entrance now sits broken on the ground. But still proclaims in Greek capitals that “The people [dedicated it] to Athena Polias and to the World-Conqueror Caesar, the Son of God, the God Augustus.”35

Even with this description, it is possible to minimize Crossan’s and Reed’s main thrust. So we underscore their affirmation: “We do insist,” they say, that the term “emperor cult” is much too narrow. That was, certainly, the core of Roman imperial theology. . . . It was that, of course, but only as the center of an entire world of meaning. What we stress throughout this book is not the

34. Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum, no. 490; trans. Braund, Sourcebook, 122. See also Crossan, God and Empire, 147–48, for the two integrated Priene quotations.
35. Thanks to Crossan and Reed for this lengthy and moving quotation, found on pp. 237–42.
isolated peculiarity of emperor worship, but the integrated universality of imperial theology.  

How exactly did the peace of Rome differ from the peace of God? How exactly did the peace of the Lord Caesar Augustus, divine and Son of God, differ from the peace of the Lord Jesus Christ, also divine and also Son of God? This entire book is about the clash between those alternative visions of world peace. One is Augustus’s vision, following civilization’s normalcy, of peace through victory. The other is Paul’s vision, following Jesus’s radicality, of peace through justice.

Neither Deissmann, Crossan, nor Reed, however, would argue that the imperial influence is the only one shaping the Christian expression. Rather, as Deissmann explains the broader linguistic scope, the polemical parallelism between the cult of the emperor and the cult of Christ . . . makes itself felt where ancient words derived by Christianity from the treasury of the Septuagint and the Gospels happen to coincide with solemn concepts of the Imperial cult which sounded the same or similar. In many cases this polemical parallelism . . . may be established by very ancient witness. In other cases the word which corresponds with the Primitive Christian term of worship may turn up only in later texts relating to the cult of the emperor. It could hardly be otherwise considering the fragmentary nature of the tradition.

The Fragmentary Nature of the Tradition

It seems clear enough that a shift has occurred from an emphasis on Bultmann’s "absolute" euaggelion to a better understanding via Crossan of the conflict between the main cultural forms of Christian and Roman identity, whether singular euaggelion or plural euaggelia. But the devil is often in the details, and we can address several matters that may make “the fragmentary nature of the tradition” more coherent.

The Earliest Form(s) of the Gospel

Concerning the relation of the Priene inscriptions to the earliest form(s) of the gospel among Jesus’ followers, the beginning of the Gospel of Mark seems more suggestive than the writings of Paul and/or his Hellenistic predecessors. The lat-

36. Crossan and Reed, In Search of Paul, 188. See also Crossan, God and Empire, a book devoted to the application of a nonviolent gospel to contemporary American and world culture. None of the violent propensities of religious traditions or their empires, according to Crossan, are let off the hook by the authentic message of Jesus and Paul: “‘If you live by the sword you will die by it’ no longer applies minimally to Israel or maximally to Rome, but minimally to the world and maximally to the earth” (241).

37. Crossan and Reed, In Search of Paul, 74.

38. Deissmann, Light from the Ancient East, 342; quoted also by Crossan and Reed, In Search of Paul, 11.
ter do not treat the tradition of the story of Jesus, but mainly present the gospel as a proclamation.

Thus Craig Evans’s analysis of “Mark’s Incipit and the Priene Calendar Inscription,” though our evidence is still fragmentary, adds additional support to Crossan’s and Reed’s approach. Evans’s analysis was published, with extensive bibliography, even referring to the gospel research of Julius Schniewind, Gerhard Friedrich’s teacher and predecessor, four years before Crossan’s and Reed’s book, although they do not cite it in their bibliography. It comes from a scholar with textual and archaeological expertise, contributing thereby to a broad and growing consensus (bulleted for clarity):

Comparison of Mark’s incipit [meaning opening words here, not added superscript title] with this part of the inscription [ἦρξεν δὲ τῷ κόσμῳ τῶν δι’ αὐτὸν εὐαγγελίων ἡ γενέθλιος τοῦ θεοῦ] seems fully warranted.

• First, there is reference to good news, or “gospel.” In Mark the word appears in the singular (εὐαγγέλιον), while in the inscription it appears in the more conventional plural (εὐαγγέλια).

• Second, there is reference to the beginning of this good news. In Mark the nominal form is employed (ἀρχή), while in the inscription the verbal form is employed (ἀρχεῖν).

• Third, this good news is brought about by a divine agent. In Mark this agent is “Jesus the Anointed,” νιός (either in the incipit, or as declared elsewhere in the Markan Gospel), while in the inscription the agent is “Augustus,” the “savior” and “benefactor,” θεός. In many other inscriptions and papyri Augustus is referred to as νιός θεοῦ, or divi filius. . .

• The use of the word “appearance” (ἐπιφανεῖν), moreover, only enhances the divine element.

• Mark appears deliberately to highlight parallels between Jesus’ behavior and his treatment at the hands of the Romans, on the one hand, and Roman tradition and practices concerning the Ruler Cult, on the other.


[I]t seems clear that the evangelist has deliberately echoed an important theme of the Roman Imperial Cult. However, the appeal to Isa 40:3 (“A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord . . .’”) in Mark 1:3 also suggests that the “good news of Second Isaiah is also in view. Occurrences of “good news” or “gospel,” which in Hebrew is bsr, are found in the second half.

39. Evans, Jesus and His World.
40. Evans, “Mark’s Incipit and Priene,” 69.
41. Evans, “Mark’s Incipit and Priene,” 69–76.
of Isaiah. There are five passages in all (Isa 40:1–11; 41:21–29; 52:7–12; 60:1–7; 61:1–11). Three of them (Isa 40:1–11; 52:7; 61:1–2) were very important in the development of Jesus’ theology and that of the early church.

The vision of Second Isaiah approximates the Roman Imperial cult’s promise of the new world order. Talk of “good news,” which envisions law and order, health and prosperity, and justice and mercy, would ring a familiar cord in the ears of both Jews and Gentiles. In mimicking the language of the Imperial cult and in quoting Isa 40:3 Mark appears to have welded together two disparate, potentially antagonistic theologies. On the one hand, he proclaims to the Jewish people the fulfillment of their fondest hopes—the good news of the prophet Isaiah, while on the other hand he has boldly announced to the Roman world that the good news for the world began not with Julius Caesar and his descendants, but with Jesus Christ, the true son of God.

From this I think we can infer that one very important aspect of the Markan evangelist’s portrait of Jesus is comparison to the Roman emperor and the emperor cult. . . . The good news of Isaiah, fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, had now become the good news for the entire world. As the true son of God, Jesus offers the world genuine good news, which no Roman emperor could ever hope to offer or bring to pass. It is in this context that the Markan evangelist boldly set forth his apologetic. Despite rejection at the hands of his own people (and the most important people, as importance would have been measured at that time) and a shameful death at the hands of the most powerful people, Jesus was indeed the son of God, humanity’s true Savior and Lord. Mark’s purpose is to narrate the story of Jesus in such a way that such a confession will appear compelling and plausible to Jews and Romans alike.

Singular εὐαγγέλιον and Plural εὐαγγέλια
Evans does not seem bothered by the difference between the singular and plural forms of the “good news,” simply asserting that the plural form is “the more conventional plural.” Stanton concurs on the dual Jewish and Roman background, but is inconclusive on the distinction, arguing that

early Christian addiction to the noun in the singular cannot readily be explained either as a development of Scriptural usage or as influenced by Jesus traditions, and even with the verb there is only limited continuity. Wholesale borrowing from the imperial cult is equally implausible, for, as we have seen, Christian use of the noun ‘gospel’ in the singular is almost without contemporary precedent.

Stanton links the Christian usage to Gal 4:4–5, God sending forth his son as a “once for all’ disclosure of ‘the one glad tiding.’” He does “not think we can be certain about the origin of Christian use of the ‘gospel’ word group.”

But what is clear is that there were rival ‘gospels’. What would have been ringing in the ears of those to whom Paul first proclaimed God’s good news, and

42. Evans, “Mark’s Incipit and Priene,” 76–80.
43. Evans, “Mark’s Incipit and Priene,” 69.
44. But see Deissmann’s early-third-century CE example of the singular, 70 above.
those who listened to his letters read aloud? Not the ‘non-religious’ usage of the noun in the Greek Bible (and perhaps not even the rich theological use of the verb in Deutero-Isaiah and related passages), but the ‘religious’ usage of the word group in the imperial cult which pervaded the cities in which Christianity first flourished. As always, Gospel and culture are intertwined, and often somewhat at odds with one another.

‘Gospel’ may have been adapted from its usage in the plural in the imperial cult. Or it may have been adapted from its secular use, in which it meant simply ‘good news’ without any religious connotations. But either way it was modified radically, partly in the light of the Biblical usage of the verb, and more particularly on the basis of early Christian convictions concerning God’s salvific act through the death and resurrection of Christ.45

Crossan offers a fuller interpretation, but without taking up the issue of pluralism in the earliest expression of gospel forms:

My first point concerns that word “good news” for Caesar and for Christ. In English we say that the “news is good or bad,” so although the noun is plural, it is always used as singular in construction. In Greek both the singular and plural forms, euaggelion and euaggelia, are used. How best to retain that distinction in English? Maybe, by distinguishing between “Good News” or the “Gospel” (uppercase and singular) and “good news” or “gospels” (lowercase and plural)? Why is that distinction—so clear in the Greek original, but now lost in our English translations—so important?

We talk easily of “the four gospels” or of “the gospels of the New Testament,” as if that were not a problem. But the earliest followers of Jesus thought that there was only one single Gospel. Paul said so emphatically and rather sharply to the Galatians: “I am astonished that you are . . . turning to a different Gospel—not that there is another Gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the Gospel of Christ. . . . (1:6–9)

Apart from the simple, unqualified, and emphatic term, “the Gospel,” Paul mentions “the Gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1), “the Gospel of his Son” (Rom. 1:9), “the Gospel of Christ” (Phil. 1:27), and climactically, “the Gospel [of] the glory of Christ who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). But it is always and ever, in the singular. It is “the Gospel,” as if to say, there is only one Good News for the whole world. And it is not “the gospels of Caesar,” but “the Gospel” of Christ. . . .

. . . “Good News” or “the Gospel” [Mark 1:14–15] is the Greek singular case (euaggelion). . . . [T]he kingdom of God is already present. . . . [T]hat advent itself is the Gospel, the Good News—in the singular (euaggelion)—once and for all forever. It is opposed to the gospels, the good news—in the plural (euaggelia)—of the advent of a new emperor. It is even or especially opposed to that inscription from Priene that announced the cosmic good news (euaggelia) of Augustus’s

45. Stanton, Jesus and Gospel, 34–35. The contrast between the Markan and imperial gospels does not necessarily support a Rome origin for the Gospel of Mark, as Winn attempts to prove (Purpose of Mark’s Gospel). For a survey of possible origins, see J. Dewey, “Galilean Provenance?”
birth as renewed creation, as re-starting the world all over again in peace and order.  

Crossan’s interpretation of Paul seems basically accurate as far as the Paul is concerned whom we have come to know in mainstream Christian tradition. Crossan’s assessment is one way to structure the larger question of the contrast between the overarching motif of the kingdom of God in Pauline/Markan views of the gospel vis-à-vis the gospels of the Roman Empire. But it does not detail various gospel nuances among Jesus’ earliest and early followers, nor encompass the extent of the problem of other gospels Paul faced within early “Christian” (if you will) circles, especially as espoused by those who opposed him, not only in Galatia (Gal 1:8–9), but also in Corinth—the “super-apostles” (2 Cor 11:4–5; 12:11) against whom he must justify his status as an apostle of Jesus the anointed.  

How far back one can track the second-century Jewish-Christian reference in Syria to Paul himself as a “deceiver” with a “false gospel” who did not profess the “true gospel” awaits more widespread scholarly distillation. A “polemical rivalry” is in any case behind Paul’s strong assertions in Galatians, so much so that he anathematizes his opponents and wishes they would castrate themselves (Gal 5:12). Could not then the singular “gospel” in both Paul and Mark be in part an intramural demarcation vis-à-vis other “Christian” and “pre-Christian” gospels? It needs to be singular to contrast with those gospels too.

Q 7:22: the “good news” for “the poor” and “the decisive transformation of human life”

Asking questions about the earliest form(s) of the gospel and whether one should describe it as singular or plural has led to a more basic discovery: finding the good news of Jesus as the keynote for the Sayings Gospel Q by means of the Greek verb εὐαγγελίζω (“bring or announce good news”) in Q 7:22 (= Matt 11:5/Luke 7:22) and as the culmination of the normative Q section, chapters 3–7. The verb is thus embedded in the earliest information we have about Jesus and is firmly rooted in the prophetic tradition of Israel, the book of Isaiah. We should not be surprised to find such good news in the Sayings Gospel Q, along with the Gospel of Mark the two major sources of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. As a gospel of Jesus’ sayings, it has many differences with the Gospel

47. See Luedemann, Opposition to Paul, 79–103.
of Mark, but one feature in common, connection with Isaiah, so much so that a recent commentary titles the start of its Markan text, “Beginning of the Gospel ‘according to Isaiah’: Mark 1:1–3.”

As for Q 7:22, it borrows and develops a number of scriptural passages from Isaiah, to the benefit of “the blind” (Isa 61:1; 35:5), “the lame” (Isa 35:5–6), “lep- ers” (Isa 35:5), “the dead” (Isa 26:19), and “the poor” (Isa 61:1), who are “good-news-ed” (εὐαγγελίζονται).

The blind regain their sight and the lame walk around, the skin-diseased are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised, and the poor are evangelized.

The passage also has striking similarities to the use of Isa 61:1 in 4Q521 from the Qumran community, which is dated c. 150–100 BCE, has an explicit reference like Sayings Gospel Q 7:22 to the resurrection of the dead, and has been conjectured to have a literary relationship to the use of Isa 61:1 in Q 7:22.

The study of Q in the last two generations has changed our understanding of the gospel and broadened our perspective relative to both the traditions of Israel and the larger context of the Roman Empire, as well as the violent empires of today. And the gospel of Jesus remains. As John Kloppenborg put it:

It is now common to call Q “the Sayings Gospel Q” or “The Synoptic Sayings Gospel.” This is not because we know the title of Q. In ancient documents titles were normally found either at the beginning or end of the document. If Q had a title, it was no doubt eliminated when it was incorporated by Matthew and Luke. It is in fact very unlikely that Q called itself a “gospel” (εὐαγγελίον), for the simple reason that in the first century, this term was not yet the designation of a literary genre. Rather, an εὐαγγελίον was a message of the decisive transformation of human life. This is the very term that was used in an inscription from the Asian city of Priene, dated 9 BCE, describing the message of a golden age that the emperor Augustus was believed to have inaugurated. By this standard, Q, with its announcement of the advent of the reign of God, is every bit as much a gospel as the canonical Gospels and the message that Paul describes as his εὐαγγελίον. Moreover, Q refers to Jesus’ proclamation to the poor with the verbal form εὐαγγελίζεσθαι, “to proclaim good news” (Q 7:22). So to refer to Q as the Sayings Gospel Q is to claim that it, no less than the more familiar Gospels of the New Testament, represents a message of definitive transformation of human affairs, effected by God, and connected with the person of Jesus.

... [W]e now know that there were multiple “gospels” among the Jesus movements: not only Paul’s gospel, and the gospel messages preserved in the

51. Focant, Gospel according to Mark, v.
54. Joseph, Jesus, Q, and DSS, 168–86.
Synoptic Gospels and John, but other documents that explicitly called themselves “gospels”: the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Truth, and so on. So when we call Q a “gospel,” it is to make the point that Q deserves to be considered as a decisive proclamation of a new state of affairs for humans, not simply relegated to the status of a “source” of Matthew and Luke.\footnote{55}

The Smoking Gun: Melito of Sardis (writing 165–175 CE; died c. 180 CE)

At the start of research, it seemed clear that the contrast Crossan and others had been making between Christianity and Greco-Roman culture in the first century was legitimate, but the evidence was primarily circumstantial. Not that “circumstantial” is necessarily inappropriate. Rather, such evidence is based on inference, which is what historians and scholars are involved with as a matter of course. But what would enhance contemporary inference? What could be the smoking gun that, beyond the circumstantial, would provide evidence of contrast or clash between Roman empire and Christian faith? That the savior Augustus and the savior Jesus are really a vivid comparison in the minds of people closer to their time? Is there an ancient pagan, Jewish, or Christian author who, embedded in the Roman situation, clearly realizes the contrast and sees the emperor cult as a “gospel” too, suggesting that the association in its ancient setting is more than a construction of modern scholarship? The answer is yes, Melito, bishop of Sardis. But first some background.

We have clear New Testament evidence of the attitude of many early Christians toward the imperial government, without an extensive mythological framework. Rom 13:1–7 may be a later insertion to this letter of Paul (e.g., 13:1: “Every person should voluntarily submit to those who have the authority to govern. For there is no legitimate authority except that authorized by God, and those authorities that exist have been established by God”).\footnote{56} But it seems to fit the time and tone of 1 Pet 2:13–17, which urges Christians in Asia Minor—“the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1 Pet 1:1 NRSV)—to follow the alleged submissiveness of “Christ” in his suffering (1 Pet 2:18–25), rise above an alien world, and non-violently submit. 1 Peter may have been written in the last decade of the first century,\footnote{57} channeling the historical Peter, when the Roman emperors were Domitian (81–96 CE), Nerva (96–96), and Trajan (98–117). Suetonius (69–122 CE) says Domitian was so arrogant that he issued a circular letter by way of his aides commanding, “‘Our Lord (dominus) and our God (deus) bids that this be done.’ And so the custom arose of henceforth addressing him in no other way even in writing or in conversation.”\footnote{58}

\footnote{55. Kloppenborg, \textit{Q the Earliest Gospel}, 60–61.}
\footnote{56. Dewey et al., \textit{Authentic Paul (SV)}, 253.}
\footnote{57. Boring, “First Peter,” 2126.}
\footnote{58. Suetonius, \textit{The Lives of the Twelve Caesars} 8.13.2.}
But the following words show little if any overt concern about an imperial gospel. They seem to reflect the political powerlessness of people who attempt to rise above their cultural surroundings, thinking they are in the mode of God’s chosen Israel as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people . . . aliens and exiles” (1 Pet 2:9, 11). “Resident aliens” is how these people considered themselves, “not at home in society,” possessing “a social standing below citizens but above strangers, freed slaves, and slaves . . . alienated from, but living among, residents of the Roman Empire. . . . Their behavior must be blameless, as it reflects on the community as a whole”:

For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, (14) or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. (15) For it is God’s will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. (16) As servants (δοῦλοι) of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. (17) Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor. (1 Pet 2:13–17 NRSV)

We need to read between the lines here. True, as Boring says, these are “churches struggling in difficult social situations.” But why are these Christians advised to be above reproach so as not to draw undue attention to themselves? 1 Peter, as does the book of Revelation (which includes Sardis among its addressees [3:1–6]), fits the situation of Christians facing regional persecution. In the first and second centuries there was considerable Jewish/Christian overlap. The “border lines” were not precise. Even the “Christians” 1 Peter addresses were probably a combination of Jews and Gentiles. The general situation is described well by Keresztes:

When the worship of the Emperor became, especially in the East, a symbol of loyalty to Rome, the Jews from Augustus on had daily sacrifices in honour of, or for, the ruling Emperor. In the use of the official epithets for the Emperor, it seems that the Jews by a curious discrimination tried to avoid the recognition of the ‘divine character’ of the Emperor. While they never seemed to use the title theos and only with repugnance the word despotēs, they did freely use the Latin word divus and dominus or even [Gk] kyrios. Thus in the oath of loyalty to the Emperor, the Jews were allowed to use expurgated formulas. The Jewish attitude toward public games in honour of the emperor and in connection with the Imperial cult was also quite flexible.

60. Boring, “First Peter,” 2126.
61. Boyarin, Border Lines.
62. “Unlike Paul (see, e.g., Romans 9–10), the author of 1 Peter does not discuss the problem posed by an unbelieving Israel. Rather, adopting Old Testament language to describe the new community grounded in God’s redeeming act in Christ, the author makes clear that God’s new chosen people is to be a unity comprising all people, Gentiles as well as Jews” (Balch and Achtemeier, “First Peter,” 2060).
The very active proselytizing efforts of the Jews caused much of the friction between the Imperial power of Rome and Judaism. For this was not simply a religion with eyes on the world to come but also it had much political content, which, if retained, would have secured the conquest of the world by the Jewish race. The aim of Jewish proselytism was to ‘israelize’ the world, not only by imposing on its converts Jewish customs and social practices but also by calling upon them to ‘denationalize’ themselves and become part of the Jewish nation. It is easy to see that Jewish proselytism would have undermined the whole Roman system. . . .

On the [one] hand Rome respected its own traditional principle that every nation had the right and duty to observe the religion established by its ancestors, but on the other hand it applied its other principle that Rome had the right to rule the world and to subordinate to its institutions the religions of the subject nation. Thus Rome adopted the gods of all other national religions. This solution being impossible with the Jewish religion, Rome recognized the right of the Jews to live according to their ancient customs and as a special privilege granted them exemption from all functions which were in opposition to or interfered with their religious laws. This special status of the Jews was an attempt at a compromise between Rome's two conflicting religious policies.63

Similarly, including Christian Jews or Jewish Christians or whatever hybrids there were in the melting pot of Asia Minor, Christians of various persuasions were not opposed because they worshiped Jesus as God, as if threatening the Roman belief that the emperor was god. “The problem was not whom the Christians worshiped, but whom they refused to worship: the Roman gods.”64 And of these gods there were many. A Mediterranean cruise lecturer in 2011 even facetiously said, “The Romans never met a god they didn’t like!”65 Helmut Koester issues a caveat not to take too seriously much of the hype from the Romans for their gods and the nature of the emperor as a god. He argues that the cult of the emperor was part of the official Roman state religion, it never became a new religion as such, or a substitute for religion. . . . No one was urged to accept the emperor cult as a replacement for a traditional religion. On the contrary, the Romans supported the veneration of all gods in their native cities and nations, and they expected that these gods would in turn lend their support to the Roman state. When inscriptions speak about the emperor as “savior” (sōtēr) and announce his “appearance” (epiphaneia) as a “gospel” (euangelion) praising him as the benefactor and bringer of peace to all humankind, the religious content of these terms did not question the legitimacy of other religions. In official usage, such terminology soon became hackneyed language.66

64. Ehrman, Jesus to Constantine, 56.
True, ancient Roman historians often seem to describe their “divine” emperors with tongue in cheek. After Augustus, for whom could one even make a case to qualify as a god? But even if the emperor cult arguably “never became a new religion,” it was not for lack of trying by the government, which went far in presenting itself, for many, as a “substitute for religion.” Through sacrifices and votive offerings and state favors the Roman government displayed a pervasive system of all these gods, including the emperor cult, as being a united and harmonious whole. It projected itself as overseer and guarantor of the system of the gods, guardian and agent of its own cosmos. As Koester even admits, “the Romans expected that these gods would in turn lend their support to the Roman state.” And, as Keresztes says, Rome “applied its other principle that [it] had the right to rule the world and to subordinate to its [Rome’s] institutions the religions of the subject nation. Thus Rome adopted the gods of all other national religions.” It is this pervasive aspect of the Roman system that Crossan and Reed mean when they speak of “an entire world of meaning” and “not the isolated peculiarity of emperor worship, but the integrated universality of imperial theology.”

Melito, in addressing the Roman government via the person of Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180 ce; ruled 161–180), refers to “new decrees (καινοῖς δόγμασι)” and a “new ordinance” whose severity is unprecedented, even compared to the last decade of the first century. This Melito was a prolific writer, serving the Sardis Quartodeciman (Fourteenth-er) church that customarily celebrated Easter on the Jewish Passover date of 14 Nisan, perhaps only two generations after the book of Revelation (he was a chiliast, understandably). He has been denigrated for alleged anti-Judaism in his homily On the Pascha, but the accusation has been refuted. The homily is also known for striking typological Old Testament imagery and a graphic description of the crucifixion of a naked Jesus, the only such known in all of early Christian literature (no medieval loincloth):

O frightful murder! O unheard of injustice! The Lord is disfigured and he is not deemed worthy of a cloak for his naked body (γυμνῷ τῷ σώματι), so that he might not be exposed. For this reason the stars turned and fled, and the day grew quite dark, in order to hide the naked [person] (γεγυμνωμένον) hanging on the tree, darkening not the body of the Lord, but the eyes of [humans].

In writing his celebrated apology to the emperor, Melito tried to soften the contrast between the gospel of Caesar and the gospel of Christ for the sake of

69. Crossan and Reed, In Search of Paul, 188; see 73–74 above.
70. Eusebius, Church History 4.26.5.
73. Hanneken, “Melito’s Peri Pascha.”
the well-being of his people and their relief from persecution. The date has been associated with either of two persecutions in 161–168 CE or around 177 CE, the latter of which seems preferable. The Romans would call for general sacrifices, when faced with war and pestilence, to propitiate the gods and raise money, and the Christians were sadly affected. The emperor wrote his Stoic Meditations in the period 170–180 while mostly at war with the Germans. Melito appealed to him:

(4.26.5) For—a thing that never happened before—the race of the pious is persecuted, harassed by new decrees (καινοῖς δόγμασι) throughout Asia. For shameless informers and lovers of others’ goods, taking advantage of the decrees, openly plunder us, night and day robbing innocent persons. (6) And if this is done by your order, let it be done properly. For a just king should never deliberate unjustly. We, indeed, glad to accept the honour of such a death; but we must ask only this favour of you—that you yourself, first taking note of the workers of such contention, justly judge whether they are worthy of death and punishment or safety and security. But if this decision, and this new ordinance, which is not proper even against hostile barbarians, are not from you, all the more we beg you not to [abandon] us in such a public persecution.

(7) For our philosophy at first flourished among barbarians, but after appearing among your peoples during the powerful rule of your ancestor Augustus it became a blessing especially to your empire. For at that time the might of the Romans increased to something great and splendid; you, hoped for by men, have become its successor, and will continue, along with your son, if you protect the philosophy which was cradled and took its beginning with Augustus, and which your ancestors honoured along with the other [religions]. [8] This is the greatest proof that our teaching flourished for the good along with the empire as it happily started out: from the time of Augustus nothing evil has befallen it, but on the contrary everything has been splendid and praiseworthy in accordance with the prayers of all. (9) Alone of all, persuaded by certain malignant persons, Nero and Domitian wanted to bring our teaching into ill repute; and since their time by an unreasonable custom false information about such people has become common.

(10) But your godly fathers corrected their ignorance, many times rebuking in writing those many persons who had dared to make disturbances about them. Among these was your grandfather Hadrian, who wrote to the proconsul Fundanus, governor of Asia, and many others; and your father, when you were ruling the world with him, wrote to the cities—among others to the Larissians and the Thessalonians and the Athenians and all the Greeks—not to make disturbances concerning us. (11) But since you have the same opinion on these matters as they did, and a much greater love of mankind and of wisdom, we are the more persuaded that you will do everything we ask.

Melito “tried to link together the imperial and Christian cults,” showing that they are both for the good of life in the empire. He speaks approvingly of the “philosophy which was cradled and took its beginning with Augustus, and which your ancestors honoured along with the other cults” (4.26.7). He goes on to assert that “[t]his is the greatest proof that our teaching flourished for the good along with the empire as it happily started out.” Christianity and the emperor cult can co-exist. Christian “teaching flourished for the good along with the empire as it happily started out: from the time of Augustus nothing evil has befallen it . . . in accordance with the prayers of all.” Melito commends syncretistic prayer, suggesting that the empire’s welfare has been enhanced by “the prayers of all,” in which he wants the emperor to believe that Christians have a positive part, and thus are to be treated well. All this is in accord with the philosophy of Augustus in which the emperor cult is anchored. Melito is struggling for Christian legitimacy in a hostile world. “According to this bishop the world has had two saviours, who appeared together, Augustus and Christ.”

Conclusion

Thus we have traced a mini-trajectory on the meaning of “gospel” from Rudolf Bultmann to Dominic Crossan. In Part 1 we saw that Bultmann did not agree that the meaning of “gospel” was influenced by Roman culture, particularly the emperor cult. He tended to see “gospel” as an abstraction or absolute, grounded in the Pauline proclamation. In Part 2, under the influence of Adolf Deissmann, we saw how New Testament language is not in isolation from its original culture, but is influenced by that language more than we initially like to admit. The Priene inscription in Asia Minor became our focal point for understanding the matrix in contrast to which the “gospel” took its linguistic meaning.

In Part 3, since early Christian tradition is fragmentary, we looked at ways to reduce that fragmentation. We inquired about “the earliest form of the gospel” and compared the beginning of the Gospel of Mark to the Priene inscription. The result was parallels between “the gospel of Jesus Christ” and “the gospel of Caesar Augustus” so significant that a linguistic correlation seems obvious. Also, a comparison of the “singular and plural” forms of “gospel” suggests a lack of distinctiveness at the level of ordinary usage. The focus of any gospel emanating from Jesus and/or his earliest followers we came to understand as in the best prophetic tradition of Israel, calling one and all to transformation of life. Finally we examined a second-century situation, our “smoking gun,” involving specific contrast between an emperor (Marcus Aurelius) and a Christian

77. Friedrich, εὐαγγέλιον, 725 n. 41.
78. Harnack, “Als die Zeit erfüllet war,” 305; see Friedrich, εὐαγγέλιον, 725 n. 41.
leader (Melito of Sardis), showing that the tension between “the gospel of Caesar Augustus as Lord” and “the gospel of Jesus Christ as Lord” was a real acknowledged conscious tension even back then. This adds validity to Dominic Crossan’s contemporary perception of the reality out of which the Christian religion has arisen.

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