

NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY RE-LOADED  
INTEGRATING BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN ORIGINS<sup>1</sup>

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**Summary**

*This study examines the problem of balancing the historical and theological components of New Testament Theology. It presents a critique of both Biblical Theology and Christian Origins and finally argues for a 'Theology of the New Covenant' where theology emerges out of the interface of canon and community.*

**1. Introduction**

It is an interesting exercise to compare the *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas* presidential addresses of Martin Hengel (1993) and Wayne A. Meeks (2004) and what they both have to say about New Testament Theology.<sup>2</sup> Both scholars set forth a proposal for the future direction of scholarly study of the New Testament, but while they share a commitment to historical study of the New Testament, they have violently different opinions about the role of New Testament theology in that future.

Hengel notes the efforts of several scholars (e.g. W. Wrede, G. Lüdemann, and H. Räisänen, and I would add P. Vielhauer), who have made the New Testament canon obsolete as a historical entity with the result that: 'In place of Introduction to the New Testament we are to have the History of Early Christian Literature; in place of a New

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally delivered as the Tyndale Fellowship New Testament Lecture in Cambridge on the 8 July 2008. I am grateful for the interaction and comments from the audience (especially David Wenham), which have stimulated and corrected my thinking.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Hengel, 'Aufgaben der neutestamentlichen Wissenschaft', *NTS* 40 (1994): 321-57 = 'Tasks of New Testament Scholarship', *BBR* 6 (1996): 67-86; Wayne A. Meeks, 'Why Study the New Testament?' *NTS* 51 (2005): 155-70.

Testament Theology, the History of the Religion of Earliest Christianity.<sup>3</sup> He says in counterpoint:

To be sure, I cannot share this fear of the concept ‘theology,’ the Christian understanding of which is ultimately grounded in the Prologue of John. It is not by chance that an irreducible connection between the word of God, faith, and history is presented to us in this particular passage. The concepts θεολόγος, θεολογία, and θεολογεῖν enter at first on the basis of the Johannine λόγος in the language of the early Church Fathers and preserve over against the Greek environment a wholly new meaning. Our discipline would self-destruct were it to give up the question of truth pressed by Pauline and Johannine theological thinking and transform itself into a merely descriptive history of religion. For this is the salt that seasons our work and warrants its existence.<sup>4</sup>

Hengel acknowledges that study of the New Testament should be comprehensive and the boundary of study should be expanded to include the Judaism of the early Hellenistic period and in reference to the study of Christian writings the upper echelon should be pushed up towards the Third Century AD.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Hengel affirms the value of the canon precisely on historical grounds since the decisive ground work for the canon has already been established by AD 180. In Hengel’s view, the writings deemed canonical by the church are not only earlier than the extra-canonical writings, but also:

[T]he genuine *Corpus Paulinum* and *Johanneum* together with the synoptics represent the basis of *Christian* theology—who would doubt this? And on what would it base itself otherwise, if it expects to be and to remain *Christian* theology? And what authorizes the existence of our Societas, if these things were no longer so? These texts do certainly form the center of our efforts, but we shall only do them justice if we draw the circle around them more broadly, so that we grasp them in relation to their Jewish and Hellenistic antecedents as well as to their early Christian effects.<sup>6</sup>

According to Meeks, New Testament scholars should ‘erase from our vocabulary the terms “biblical theology” and, even more urgently, “New Testament theology”’. It is the opinion of Meeks that whatever ‘contribution these concepts may have made in the conversation since J. P. Gabler, we have come to a time when they can only blinker our

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<sup>3</sup> Hengel, ‘Tasks’, 72.

<sup>4</sup> Hengel, ‘Tasks’, 72.

<sup>5</sup> Hengel, ‘Tasks’, 72-73.

<sup>6</sup> Hengel, ‘Tasks’, 74.

understanding'.<sup>7</sup> He substantiates this on the grounds that, first, Biblical Theology smuggles in a cognitivist model of religion that privileges doctrine at the expense of life. A theological approach overlooks that the Bible was formulated by people whose experiences and worldview are foreign to our own. Secondly, Biblical Theology claims textual and historical warrant for propositions that emerge out of the relationship between text and reader. This approach tacitly masks the construction of authoritative truth claims derived from biblical texts in support of faith-based dogmas. Thirdly, Biblical Theology has functioned ideologically in order to secure one's beliefs in a theological hierarchy within the church.<sup>8</sup> In other words, an ability to postulate a theological unity to the Bible is one way of cementing one's authority within the church.

There are elements from both addresses that I would be prepared to affirm and reject. Against Hengel, I find it strange that he should minimise the significance of *Religionsgeschichte* when he himself has led a resurgence in the new *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* in New Testament christology (along with Richard Bauckham and Larry Hurtado)<sup>9</sup> in undermining the older theories of christological evolution propounded by Wilhelm Bousset and Rudolf Bultmann and their theological progeny. Moreover, Hengel has not assuaged the doubts of those who think that one can and should construct a Christian theology from sources broader than Paul, John and the Synoptics. For example, Helmut Koester writes: 'The canon was the result of a deliberate attempt to exclude certain voices from the early period of Christianity: heretics, Marcionites, Gnosticism, Jewish Christians, perhaps also women. It is the responsibility of the New Testament scholar to help these voices to be heard again.'<sup>10</sup> Who decides the 'theological quality' of Mark over the *Gospel of Thomas* or Marcion's Luke over canonical Luke? Against Meeks, I would be prepared to argue that George

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<sup>7</sup> Meeks, 'Why Study the New Testament?', 167-68.

<sup>8</sup> Meeks, 'Why Study the New Testament?', 168.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Hengel, *The Son of God: The Origin of Christology and the History of Jewish-Hellenistic Religion* (London: SCM, 1976); Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1999); Larry Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); idem, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Helmut Koester, 'Epilogue: Current Issues in New Testament Scholarship' in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester*, ed. Birger A. Pearson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991): 472.

Lindbeck's attack on the cognitivist model of doctrine is greatly overstated and amounts to a straw man argument. Alister McGrath has shown that the cognitivist-linguistic model has a lot more going for it than what critics acknowledge.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, theology does not necessarily promote antipathy towards authentic Christian living, but rather, it constitutes the generative force for a Christian praxis soaked in the world of the biblical texts.<sup>12</sup> In addition, while all truth claims may amount to a claim to power, those who attempt to deconstruct these truth claims are themselves engaging in an ideological power play by attempting to dismantle the permanent structures of human existence (church, society, collective identity) in order to create a vacuum that can be filled with another ideological platform that is at once rampantly secular and aggressively pluralistic. The ideological deconstruction of biblical meta-critics becomes itself an equally totalizing and prescriptive program as that of the scholarship that they criticize.

While some recent authors have argued that New Testament interpretation remains too theologically bound and others insist that it is not theological enough,<sup>13</sup> I want to suggest a way forward beyond a crass historical phenomenism and without an unwieldy theological dogmatism. It is my central conviction that a theology of the New Testament is indeed possible, but only through the history of the early church and only in light of its canonical function in the church. What I intend to do in the rest of this study is to look at the relative strengths and weaknesses of (1) Biblical Theology, (2) Christian Origins, and (3) to then propose a way in which they might be joined together.

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<sup>11</sup> George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-Liberal Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1984); Alister E. McGrath, *The Nature of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrine Criticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: WJK, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Henri Blocher, 'Biblical Metaphors and the Doctrine of the Atonement', *JETS* 47 (2004): 645, who points out that 1 Peter 2 includes references to substitutionary atonement (2:24) as well as the imperative to follow the pattern of Christ's suffering in Christian living (2:21).

<sup>13</sup> Contrast John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville/London: WJK, 2007) and Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (STI; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006).

## 2. Biblical Theology

According to Brian Rosner, Biblical Theology may be defined as the '[T]heological interpretation of Scripture in and for the church. It proceeds with historical and literary sensitivity and seeks to analyse and synthesize the Bible's teaching about God and his relations to the world on its own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus.'<sup>14</sup> Biblical Theology can be undertaken in various ways (thematically, chronologically, by corpus, etc). The primary advantage of Biblical Theology is that it is where 'the text itself sets the agenda' and attention is paid to how each author, corpus, or testament addresses their own issues on their own terms and in their own language.<sup>15</sup> It also situates the New Testament in the wider frame of a single theo-dramatic story of redemption that stands in continuity with the Old Testament. More specifically, a Biblical Theology of the New Testament unashamedly assumes the canonical context of its writings as well as its reception with a believing audience. There are, however, several issues that give us pause for thought when it comes to a Biblical Theology of the New Testament.

First, historically speaking, we should lay considerably more stress on the world outside of the text and its influence upon the formation of a New Testament Theology. In writing a New Testament Theology one may choose to focus exclusively upon the text of the New Testament given a presupposition of its status as inspired and canonical. Such an exercise will be concerned with the major theological themes of each book, how to explicate the unique theological contribution of each New Testament author, as well as expositing the New Testament's theological message as a whole. The problem I have with this approach is that while it studiously engages the content of the New Testament itself, it can potentially abstract the New Testament from its historical setting. In other words, if we take seriously the socio-historical context of the New Testament writings it means that somewhere along the way we shall have to concern ourselves with the historical occasion and purpose that a given document had among the first Christians. Instead of speaking of a theology of Romans perhaps we should speak of

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<sup>14</sup> Brian Rosner, 'Biblical Theology' in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. D. Alexander and B. S. Rosner (Leicester: IVP, 2000): 10.

<sup>15</sup> D. A. Carson, 'Current Issues in Biblical Theology: A New Testament Perspective', *BBR* 5 (1995): 29.

Paul's theology for the Romans.<sup>16</sup> Biblical Theology must account for the fact that the textual and social worlds of the early Christians overlap.<sup>17</sup>

A broader focus on social location brings the interpreter into contact with the religious, social and political world behind the text. Even conservative biblical scholars like Bernhard Weiss recognized that any decent theology of the New Testament has to be based upon the results of an *Einleitung* of the New Testament (i.e. an introduction to historical issues including dating, sources, origins, and contexts).<sup>18</sup> This requires a broader set of tasks beyond extrapolating doctrinal concepts from the New Testament. To use Romans and Galatians as an example, Paul's articulation of righteousness by faith is umbilically connected to his Damascus road conversion and his apostolic call—this is where the seeds of a Pauline *sola gratia* are sown—but the concrete articulation of it took place in his struggle to legitimize the identity of his Gentile converts in mixed house churches (or clusters of house churches) in light of debates with Jewish Christian proselytizers. This claim countered any ethnocentric nomism which declared that *Torah* obedience was the basis of vindication before God and the basis of membership in the renewed people of God.<sup>19</sup> Discerning the *theological claims* of the text follows on from reconstructing the *social context* behind the text. I would not for a minute reduce justification to a social epiphenomenon, but all too often a doctrine of justification is articulated without any recognition of this Jew-Gentile context.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Adolf Schlatter ('The Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics' in *The Nature of New Testament Theology*, ed. Robert Morgan [SBT 25; London: SCM, 1973]: 140): 'This theology [of Paul] is aimed at the community and takes its shape from it.'

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005): 29; I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004): 26 (esp. n. 13).

<sup>18</sup> Bernhard Weiss, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (3rd edn; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1888-89): 10-11; Schlatter, 'New Testament and Dogmatics', 158-59; Marshall, *New Testament Theology*, 46-47; William Wrede, 'The Task and Methods of New Testament Theology' in *The Nature of New Testament Theology: The Contribution of William Wrede and Adolf Schlatter*, ed. Robert Morgan (SBT 25; London: SCM, 1973): 94.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Wrede, 'Task and Methods', 100; Michael F. Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God: Studies in Paul, Justification, and the New Perspective* (PBM; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007): 113-54.

In addition, because the New Testament authors focus on the behaviour and beliefs of their competitors and rivals, our capacity to understand early Christian literature is contingent upon a description of their opposition. Paul's theology can be developed only in relation to the social space, beliefs, and practices of the Jewish Christian antagonists that he encountered. The same is true of the Johannine epistles with the secessionists, the 'Jews' behind the Gospels of Matthew and John, and the libertines of the epistle of Jude. A theology of Revelation emerges out of a messianic sect unable to embrace the pluralism and politics of the Roman pantheon, in heated exchanges with local synagogues over group boundaries, and in light of intra-Christian debates with clusters of 'other' Jesus-believers like the Nicolaitans. In many cases the theological message of a given book emerges against the backdrop of certain controversies in a particular milieu. Thus, any New Testament Theology must be orientated towards the contingent social situation of the original author and audience and not content with merely tracing doctrinal concepts.<sup>20</sup>

Second, Biblical Theology has always had the problem of traversing historical exegesis and systematic theology and doing justice to both.<sup>21</sup> To begin with, there is the danger of importing a systematic schematisation (i.e. christology, eschatology, pneumatology, theology) into analyses of the text and thereby forcing the text into certain structures that may not represent the most fitting way to organize the biblical data.<sup>22</sup> I would add that there can sometimes be competing loyalties among biblical theologians in this Scripture/system interface. That is because Biblical Theology may potentially falsify some of the assured results of Systematic Theology in certain ecclesial communities and undermine their much valued *ordo salutis* or their preferred eschatological scheme. Mark Seifrid points out that at the root of debates about the 'New Perspective on Paul' is a fundamental

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. correctly Wrede, 'Task and Methods', 73, 100.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. discussion in Robert Morgan, 'Introduction: The Nature of New Testament Theology' in *The Nature of New Testament Theology* (SBT 25; London: SCM, 1973): 24-26, 59-62.

<sup>22</sup> A good example of this is that in the New Testament the purpose of Jesus' death is to incorporate Gentiles into the Abrahamic family (Gal. 3:14), to regather the dispersed children of God in accordance with prophetic promises (John 11:51-52; cf. e.g. Isa. 11:12; 43:5-10; Jer. 31:8-10; 32:37-38; Ezek. 34:14-16), and to enable people to live in righteousness (1 Pet. 2:24). But I have never read a book on Christian theology that includes these functions under the heading 'the Work of Christ'.

tension between historical exegesis and theological interpretation of Paul's letters.<sup>23</sup> I find it most disturbing that a number of Systematic Theologians attack the discipline of Biblical Theology precisely because, in my perception, Biblical Theology represents a powerful and provocative challenge to the purported hegemony of their system in certain ecclesial settings.<sup>24</sup> I am also alarmed by a number of recent authors who wish to minimise the necessity of studying the New Testament in the context of Second Temple Judaism and the Graeco-Roman world.<sup>25</sup> I do not want to regard biblical truth as the unique

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<sup>23</sup> Mark A. Seifrid, *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme* (Leiden: Brill, 1992): 1; for my own attempt to integrate historical and theological concerns into the debate see, Michael F. Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God*; idem, *A Bird's-Eye View of Paul: The Man, the Mission, and the Message* (Nottingham: IVP, 2008): 74-113. See also Simon Gathercole, 'Paul's Doctrine of Justification: A Proposal' in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006): 219-41.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. e.g. the negative remarks about Biblical Theology by Tom Ascol, 'Systematic Theology and Preaching', *Founders Journal* 4 (1991) and Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul: A Review and Response* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004): 202. We should remember that Adolf Schlatter himself had to defend New Testament Theology as a theological discipline against liberals and as a historical discipline against conservatives (Morgan, 'Introduction', 32; Schlatter, 'New Testament and Dogmatics', 151-52).

<sup>25</sup> Water, *Justification*, 154-57, 193; Henri Blocher, 'Justification of the Ungodly (*Sola Fide*): Theological Reflections' in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: Volume 2—The Paradoxes of Paul*, ed. D. A. Carson, Mark A. Seifrid, and Peter T. O'Brien (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004): 470; and John Piper, *The Future of Justification* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007): 34-36. In response, I contend that: (1) The New Testament *assumes* a certain degree of background knowledge and as such it *demand*s to be read with as much historical knowledge as possible. Did authors/readers/hearers of the New Testament recognize the Pharisees as atemporal examples of impious legalism or as a zealous renewal movement in Israel? Did authors/readers/hearers of Revelation realize the significance of the imperial cult for interpretation of the Apocalypse? What are we to do with the citation of *I Enoch* in Jude 9 or with Paul's citation of Aratus in Acts 17:28? Must we dismiss the significance of archaeological findings in ancient Corinth and Galilee if they would lead us to change our theological interpretation of certain texts? Although some will accept historical study *in so far* as it confirms their theological system, for some there is no thought towards correction or qualification to their system by listening to the Bible in its own context. (2) Canon is one context in which Scripture is read and interpreted, but so is the first-century environment and the reception of the Bible in the history of the Church. In other words, the 'analogy of Scripture' does not have the divinely given right of veto over historical and patristic exegesis. (3) Theologically speaking, a basic and sufficient understanding of Scripture is available through its canonical location and via the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. Even so, historical study gives us a deeper, richer, and more vibrant understanding of Scripture like switching from black and white television to colour. Christians are led by the Holy Spirit in interpretation, but

possession of the few elite historical critics who alone are competent to deal with these daunting sources, but neither should we for a second submit biblical truth to the historical revisionism of a magisterium of Theologians.

I am not denying the value and necessity of good theology. On the contrary, I rejoice in its continued practice. I only propose that there is a symbiotic existence between exegesis and theology as they are mutually dependent from the very beginning. For this reason, there is no such thing as theologically presuppositionless exegesis and hence there can be no study guided by ‘a pure disinterested concern for knowledge’.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, a church or pastor without a robust Systematic Theology will inevitably end up suffering from theological schizophrenia. However, Systematic Theology is never a finished product and it returns again and again to Scripture for validation and correction. Karl Barth was surely right to regard theology as ‘consistent exegesis’<sup>27</sup> and John Webster has more recently labelled theology as ‘biblical reasoning’.<sup>28</sup> The interpretive spiral between exegesis, tradition, and theology must be mutually critical and continually reflective.<sup>29</sup> In terms of the exegetical dimension of theology, I affirm the words of Robert Morgan: ‘The historical component in theological interpretation of the New Testament is essential if Scripture is to remain definitive of Christian belief. It helps preserve the givenness of revelation *ab extra* and makes possible some degree of consensus about valid meanings by excluding arbitrary interpretations from doctrinal contexts.’<sup>30</sup>

A third problem for New Testament Theology is the hobgoblin of diversity.<sup>31</sup> The problem is well-rehearsed and it emerges most acutely

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historical study gives the Holy Spirit more to work with in terms of conforming our minds to the pattern of God’s Word.

<sup>26</sup> Wrede, ‘Task and Methods’, 70.

<sup>27</sup> Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* 1.2; 1.1.261; 2.1.523-98.

<sup>28</sup> John Webster, ‘Biblical Reasoning’, *Anglican Theological Review* 90 (2008): 733-51.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Schlatter (‘New Testament and Dogmatics’, 126): ‘Neither [historical research nor dogmatics] is simply independent; neither is merely the basis of the other. And neither is merely derivative or conditioned’.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Morgan, ‘Jesus Christ, the Wisdom of God (2)’ in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom: Scripture and Theology*, ed. David Ford and Graham Stanton (London: SCM, 2003): 34.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. David Wenham, ‘Appendix: Unity and Diversity in the New Testament’ in G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (rev. edn; ed. D. A. Hagner; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993): 684-719; Peter Balla, *Challenges to New Testament*

when we attempt to formulate an overall theological centre to the New Testament or to a certain corpus without imposing a procrustean view of unity upon them. I envisage several problems for a New Testament Theology in this regard:

(1) There is the problem with the idea of *centrality* itself as the theological centre of the Pauline corpus might not be the same as the theological centre of Philemon. The central message of the New Testament might not even appear in the theology of the epistle of Jude. Does the theological centre of the New Testament have to be the centre of every constituent part?

(2) Another matter is that of *contingency* as not all of the New Testament is actually binding and prescriptive. For instance, the apostolic decree which commands Gentiles to abstain from eating meat with blood in it appears to be a temporary *via media* whereby Gentiles do not have to follow the entire Mosaic code only the Noachide commandments as an interim measure to keep the peace between Jewish and Gentile Christians.<sup>32</sup> How does a New Testament theology account for the cultural or situational limitations of its contents?<sup>33</sup>

(3) There is the issue of *development* as some New Testament authors could change, modify, and reshape their theological formulations even within the New Testament itself. The most common example of this is Paul's view of the *Torah* which differs between Galatians and Romans in tone and rhetorical handling of the subject, if not in actual content. How does New Testament theology take into account the theological development, refinement, and maturity of the New Testament authors?<sup>34</sup>

(4) An additional problem is that of *disengagement* between texts and persons. A theology of Paul is by definition impossible since we

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*Theology* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997): 147-209; Andreas J. Köstenberger, 'Diversity and Unity in the New Testament' in *Biblical Theology*, ed. Scott J. Hafemann (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002): 200-23; J. Barton and M. Wolter, ed., *Die Einheit der Schrift und die Vielfalt des Kanons* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. I. Howard Marshall, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004): 56-63.

<sup>33</sup> We can also note that in Revelation (2:14, 20) eating idol food is expressly forbidden, while in 1 Corinthians (8:1-13; 10:25-33) it is a matter of conscience in so far as it does not offend a 'weaker' brother. This arguably signifies different appropriations of the apostolic decree but both share a conviction that Christians should avoid idolatry.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. the conservative but not uncritical handling of this subject by Schlatter, 'New Testament and Dogmatics', 142-43.

have only thirteen situational letters that bear his name (and the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, and the Pastorals are disputed) and we possess only a barest narrative about him from Acts (which again is disputed in its representation of Paul). At a strictly phenomenal level we have only a theology of the Pauline corpus and not of Paul himself.<sup>35</sup> One might say that righteousness by faith, being-in-Christ, or reconciliation is the theological centre of Paul's letters whereas Paul's real theological rubric may have resided somewhere completely different such as in his call to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Likewise, one might say that the theological centre of the New Testament is the gospel or salvation-history or the Lordship of Christ, whereas the theological hub of the early Christians might have been something like the experience of the risen Lord in life and worship.<sup>36</sup> How do we bridge the gap between the theology of the text and the theology of authors and communities behind the text and which one do we privilege?

(5) A final conundrum is the genuine *difference* between biblical authors and among the Christian movement as a whole. I am convinced that Paul's articulation of righteousness by faith without works of the law as espoused in Galatians and Romans is completely reconcilable with James 2:14-26. James and Paul are not using the words πίστις ('faith') and ἔργα ('works') univocally. For Paul, πίστις is more than an act of faith but implies faithfulness and obedience (e.g. Rom. 1:5; 16:26; Phil. 1:25-29, 2:12-13; Eph. 1:1). Paul also speaks positively of works (e.g. Rom. 2:13; 13:3; Gal. 5:6; 6:9-10; Eph. 2:10). His rejection of righteousness by ἔργα νόμου ('works of the law') is a strenuous denial that covenant status and eschatological vindication are apprehended by adopting the Jewish way of life as codified by the *Torah*. In contrast, James appears to be attacking not Paul personally, but those who have taken Paul's teaching in an antinomian direction (an allegation Paul in fact knew of already, see Rom. 3:8, 6:1-3). James

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<sup>35</sup> I would be prepared to argue that in so far as these letters reveal the essence of Paul's theological convictions we certainly do have windows into the theological dynamics of Paul himself. In contrast some argue that a Pauline theology can at best be a theology of the individual Pauline letters (e.g. J. M. Bassler, D. M. Hay, and E. E. Johnson, ed, *Pauline Theology* [4 vols.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991-97]), while James D. G. Dunn (*Theology of Paul the Apostle* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998]: 14 n. 40, 17) responds that this would give us at most a theology of Paul's disputes and not a theology of Paul.

<sup>36</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *Religious Experience in Early Christianity: A Missing Dimension in New Testament Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

rejects πίστις as mere assent and seeks to inspire his readers to works understood as outworkings of love-in-action and not as meritorious deeds *coram Deo*.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, James' use of Genesis 15:6 which incorporates a fairly standard Jewish interpretive strategy of reading Genesis 15:6 in light of Genesis 22:9-18 (see 1 Macc. 2:52) is the exact hermeneutical approach that Paul rejects in Romans 4 and Galatians 3. Paul disallows any attempt to read Abraham's subsequent act of obedience back into Genesis 15:6 or otherwise it would make salvation based on works and not grace.<sup>38</sup>

What these three challenges to New Testament Theology (social context, bridging biblical and systematic theologies, and diversity) imply is that a New Testament Theology must be pursued as part of a wider study of the sociological, textual, and theological profile of the early church. While this might sound like the subordination of New Testament Theology to the phenomenological study of Christian communities in their settings, I think it important to stress that these same communities were overtly theological in their activities.<sup>39</sup> To talk about what the early Christians talked about will mean talking about God. We are also engaging in revisionist fantasies if we think that there was nothing but the barest points of theological agreement between them. These same communities developed *creeds* summarizing the apostolic kerygma, they made gradual *collections* of selected writings for their churches by the end of the First Century, and finally they formed an entire *canon* that is the most lasting deposit of their theological testimony. In which case, a genuinely historical investigation of the New Testament will also take into account its confessional content and canonical trajectory within the early church.

### 3. Christian Origins

The field of Christian Origins pertains to the study of the historical phenomenon of early Christianity in its oriental and Hellenistic contexts. It embraces the New Testament within this domain but

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1997): 732-34; Timo Laato, 'Justification according to James: A Comparison with Paul', *TrinJ* 18 (1997): 43-84; Richard Bauckham, *James* (NTR; New York: Routledge, 1999): 112-40; Balla, *Challenges*, 195-96.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Bauckham, *James*, 130-31.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word*, 106-108.

ultimately exceeds it both temporally in reaching into the early centuries of the Christian era and also in terms of sources by including documents that are not part of the canon and by reporting on groups that were on the fringes of proto-orthodox Christianity.<sup>40</sup>

William Wrede followed J. P. Gabler's distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology, but departed from Gabler by severing the link between the two altogether and by concerning himself with a descriptive portrait of the religious history of early Christianity.<sup>41</sup> The Wredian approach, as pursued Heikki Räisänen, has the following characteristics: (1) Study is not limited to the biblical canon, but works on equal terms with non-canonical material to the middle of the Second Century. (2) It makes no distinction between 'heresy' and 'orthodoxy'. (3) It pays attention to the roots of Christian ideas in their religious and cultural environment. (4) It focuses not on doctrine but on religious experiences of individuals and communities. (5) It concentrates on the fault lines and problems in the early church thereby doing justice to the diversity of early Christianity. (6) It acknowledges the intellectual and moral problems in the sources. (7) It contains hints at the reception and influence of ideas, thus helping to build a bridge to the present.<sup>42</sup>

One problem with studies of Christian Origins of this order is that, while drawing attention to the diversity and social complexities of early Christianity, they treat the canon as an arbitrary or totalizing collection of texts and often eschew exploration of their theological texture and unity. I advocate that we do not have to choose then between socio-religious approaches and Christian theology as neither the texts nor any of its readers (until now) assumed the need for such a bifurcation.<sup>43</sup> Whatever social intricacy or religious context lies behind the texts of

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. Philipp Vielhauer, *Geschichte der urchristlichen Literatur: Einleitung in das Neue Testament, die Apokryphen und die Apostolischen Väter* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1975).

<sup>41</sup> Wrede, 'Task and Method', 68-69.

<sup>42</sup> Heikki Räisänen, 'Towards an Alternative to New Testament Theology: "Individual Eschatology" as an Example' in *The Nature of New Testament Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006): 168; idem, *Beyond New Testament Theology* (2nd edn; London: SCM, 2000); and see discussion of Räisänen's work in Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele, ed., *Moving Beyond New Testament Theology: Essays in Conversation with Heikki Räisänen* (Göttingen/Helsinki: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht/Finnish Exegetical Society, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> On the convergence of sociological and theological approaches for a New Testament Theology, see Philip F. Esler, *New Testament Theology: Communion and Community* (London: SPCK, 2005).

the New Testament we cannot shrink away from the fact that these writings are fundamentally concerned with an otherworldly reality known as God, the world to come, faith and salvation, and their connection to the people of God, viz. theology. Commentators, by negating the theological dimension of the New Testament in their inquiry, ignore the primary message of these writings which is largely theological. Yet a history of early Christianity is only available through the theological witness of the New Testament, so historians of Christianity must do business with early Christian theology. As Bockmuehl states about these texts, ‘the story they tell is inalienably theological’.<sup>44</sup> J. P. Gabler may have wished to cordon off the descriptive and historical character of Biblical Theology from the didactic questions and dogmatic agenda of Systematic Theology, but he did not intend a permanent separation between the two disciplines as is often supposed.<sup>45</sup> To the contrary, he asserted that the results of Biblical Theology should feed into systematic formulations. Adolf Schlatter and Alan Richardson both urged the dogmatic significance of Biblical Theology and Nicholas Lash has drawn attention to the impossibility of any theological neutrality or a two-stage theology.<sup>46</sup>

There is no *sogennanten* (‘so-called’) New Testament Theology as Wrede alleged. The contents of the New Testament are theological and the text assumes that the interests of the readers (implied, flesh-and-blood, subsequent, and modern) are also theological to some degree or other. Wrede himself could not separate religion from theology in his work on Paul,<sup>47</sup> and the genius of Wrede’s greatest successor Rudolf Bultmann was in his synthesizing of the history of religions approach with the theological quest to discover meaning for human existence. In fact, when the various writings are read individually or placed in the

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<sup>44</sup> Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word*, 47. Cf. Morgan, ‘Introduction’, 26: ‘[I]t is one thing to say that theological interest in the New Testament must not contravene the canons of modern historical method, and quite another to imply that these prohibit any theological interest in it or interpretation of it by a historian while he is wearing his historian’s hat’.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. the misrepresentation of Gabler by Waters, *Justification*, 202. More accurate expressions of Gabler’s positive construal of dogmatic theology can be found in Hendrikus Boers, *What is New Testament Theology?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983): 27; and D. A. Carson, ‘New Testament Theology’ in *DLNTD*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997): 796.

<sup>46</sup> Schlatter, ‘New Testament and Dogmatics’, 117-66; Alan Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1961); Nicholas Lash, *Theology of the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM, 1986).

<sup>47</sup> Wrede, ‘Task and Methods’, 76, 106.

context of the canon or when infused into the life of a believing community, they naturally lend themselves to dogmatic formulation and raise the important question of *applicatio*. Whereas Wrede said that: ‘How the systematic theologian gets on with its [Biblical Theology’s] results and deals with them – that is his own affair’,<sup>48</sup> this has not been true in the history of interpretation of these texts, an historical factor that Wrede and his heirs neglect.<sup>49</sup>

It is, then, unsatisfactory to merely list and describe the beliefs and rituals of the early churches, to plot the origin and evolution of certain beliefs, to map out factional differences, and to highlight endless instances of diversity. In the end, such commentators leave us with nothing more than ‘historicism or antiquarianism, with its lack of interest in relevance’.<sup>50</sup> Such authors have laid the foundations for a New Testament Theology but refused to build a house upon it. For a New Testament Theology to be theological it must ultimately go beyond the descriptive task and reach out for something to say about the theological message of the collection in its entirety.<sup>51</sup>

Secondly, the postulations of endemic diversity in the early church as a way of shutting down a New Testament Theology do not always carry the freight that critics of the discipline have often claimed. One might reject what has been known as the ‘ecclesiastical position’,<sup>52</sup> the ‘classical theory’,<sup>53</sup> the ‘traditional view’,<sup>54</sup> and even the ‘big bang’ theory of Christian origins<sup>55</sup> where the initial stages of Christianity were a period of pure, pristine doctrine and schismatic dissensions only

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<sup>48</sup> Wrede, ‘Task and Methods’, 69.

<sup>49</sup> Bockmuehl (*Seeing the Word*, 44-46, 108; cf. Schlatter, ‘New Testament and Dogmatics’, 133) notes that we should not assume that once the historical-critical questions have been answered the theology will automatically look after itself. The continued reading and application of these texts will require a set of additional theological, pastoral, and homiletical tasks.

<sup>50</sup> Krister Stendahl, ‘Biblical Theology, Contemporary’ in *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1962): 1.419.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (2 vols.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992-1999): 2.287; Ferdinand Hahn, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (2 vols.; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2002): 1.770.

<sup>52</sup> Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM, 1972): xxxiii.

<sup>53</sup> H. E. W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth: A Study in the Relations between Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Early Church* (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1954): 3-35.

<sup>54</sup> Arland J. Hultgren, *The Rise of Normative Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994): 7-8.

<sup>55</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (COQG 1; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992): 452.

occurred later.<sup>56</sup> In its stead some scholars perpetuate an alternative ‘myth’ of Christian Origins that goes something like this: the early church was characterized by a deep-seated diversity where proto-orthodox and proto-gnostic Christians existed side-by-side from the beginning, there were yet no heresies or heretics (except perhaps for Paul), neither were there any hierarchical orders, no single theology of Christ’s person was in expression, and it was a period of innocent pluralism; but this ended some time between AD 80-100 when a vociferous minority of proto-orthodox leaders sought to silence certain voices within the Christian movement and imposed their own rigid theology, ethical rigorism, sacred texts, and ecclesial hierarchy upon a religious movement that was beginning to tire in the absence of Christ’s *parousia* and this led to the eventual catholicizing of the church.<sup>57</sup>

I do not deny the radical diversity and sheer density of the early church, but I suggest that this ‘myth’ contains an equal number of distortions, assumptions, and half-truths as does the ‘classical theory’. By analogy, the attempt of J. D. G. Dunn to do for New Testament studies what Walter Bauer did for patristics can result in a somewhat atomistic approach that exaggerates any and all differences.<sup>58</sup> Since ‘diversity’ has come to mean inconsistency, violent divergence, and outright hostility, I prefer to speak of ‘complexity’ in the early church so as to include friendly rivalry (e.g. between the beloved disciple and Peter in the Gospel of John), gracious disagreements (e.g. over matters that are *adiaphora* in Rom. 14:1–15:7), as well as variegated

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. Hegesippus in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.32.7-8; Tertullian, *Prae. Haer.* 29; Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.10.1-2.

<sup>57</sup> If this sounds somewhat like a caricature then I recommend readers consult several works which show that my description possesses a certain verisimilitude, such as Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979); idem, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003); Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (Oxford: OUP, 2003); idem, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: OUP, 2003).

<sup>58</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (2nd edn; London: SCM, 1990). For a critique see D. A. Carson, ‘Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology’ in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983): 61-95.

viewpoints that are different but not mutually exclusive (e.g. christologies of Paul and John).<sup>59</sup>

What is more the idea of ‘heresy’ as false teaching did not require decades of development but was indebted to the Jewish context of Christianity that had a long history of combating apostasy, false prophecy, blasphemy, idolatry, and syncretism.<sup>60</sup> Similarly Graeco-Roman religions and philosophies operated without categories of heresy and orthodoxy and were outwardly pluralistic in so far as religious practices did not interfere with the social order. The philosophical schools show evidence of internal divisions, transfers of allegiance from one school to another, and sometimes even the abandonment of a philosophy altogether by a student. When this is combined with competing rivalries over who properly represents the pristine teaching of the school’s founder, then notions of dissidence and defection are a real occurrence even if they do not contain the vituperative rhetoric and same terminology of Christian and Rabbinic authors.<sup>61</sup>

A third problem is that several authors fail to take serious account of a network of shared symbols and stories that imply a theological unity in early Christianity and the New Testament.<sup>62</sup> There are considerable overlaps and continuities among the diversity of Christian groups in the First Century.<sup>63</sup> The Christian movement as a whole was an identifiable and homogenous sect according to several Christian and non-Christian authors.<sup>64</sup> Paul Trebilco has recently argued for an acute consciousness by Christians of being a worldwide movement that saw itself connected

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<sup>59</sup> Klaus Berger, *Theologiegeschichte des Urchristentums* (Basel/Tübingen: Francke, 1994), 5-7, uses the terms ‘Divergenz und Konvergenz’ which might be equally less loaded than ‘unity and diversity’ (‘Einheit und Vielfalt’).

<sup>60</sup> Oskar Skarsaune, ‘Heresy and the Pastoral Epistles’, *Themelios* 20 (1994): 10-11; Balla, *Challenges*, 49-56.

<sup>61</sup> Stephen G. Wilson, *Leaving the Fold: Apostates and Defectors in Antiquity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004): 20-21.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Michael F. Bird, ‘Sectarian Gospels for Sectarian Christians? The Non-canonical Gospels and Bauckham’s *The Gospels for All Christians*’ in *The Audience of the Gospels: Further Conversation about the Origin and Function of the Gospels in Early Christianity*, ed. Edward W. Klink III (LNTS; London: T&T Clark/Continuum, forthcoming 2009).

<sup>63</sup> An insight which is programmatic for Berger, *Theologiegeschichte des Urchristentums*, 4.

<sup>64</sup> Acts 24:5, 14; 28:22; Suetonius, *Nero*, 16; Justin, *Dial. Tryph.* 108; Tertullian, *Apol.* 5.

to various groups, Jewish and Gentile.<sup>65</sup> Several Pauline texts, pre-Pauline fragments, summary statements in Acts, the Gospel narratives, and the later New Testament documents indicate wide recognition of a commonly agreed ‘gospel’.<sup>66</sup> In 1 Corinthians 15:11, Paul assumes that the Corinthians could have heard the same Gospel from Peter, John or James. In Galatians 1:6-9; 2:1-10 the ‘different gospel’ departs from the one that Paul and the Jerusalem pillars agreed on.<sup>67</sup> Craig Hill is right to say: ‘Paul assumed that the Jerusalem Christians were Christians, that there was a unity and a consistency to the gospel both they and he preached (Rom. 15:27; Gal. 2:7-10).’<sup>68</sup> There was already developing in the mid-First Century a notion of ‘Faith’ as a distinct body of belief even if it lacked the content and formality of later orthodox creeds.<sup>69</sup> There was perhaps a common denominator to Christian religious experiences that identified the exalted Lord with the earthly Jesus of preaching and teaching.<sup>70</sup> The Jewish Scriptures

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<sup>65</sup> Paul Trebilco, “‘Global’ and ‘Local’ in the New Testament and in Early Christianity”, Inaugural Professorial Lecture, University of Otago, 21 September 2006. Cf. Reidar Hvalvik, ‘All Those Who in Every Place Call on the Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ: The Unity of the Pauline Churches’ in *The Formation of the Early Church*, ed. J. Ådna (WUNT 183; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2005): 123-43; Bart D. Ehrman (*Lost Christianities*, 179-80): ‘The proto-orthodox were in constant communication with one another, determined to establish theirs as a worldwide communion ... The proto-orthodox were interested not only in what happened locally in their own communities but also in what was happening in other like-minded communities’.

<sup>66</sup> Mark 1:1; 13:10; 14:9; Acts 8:12, 25, 35, 40; 13:32; 14:7, 15, 21; 15:7; 16:10; 17:18; 20:24; 1 Cor. 15:1-8; 2 Cor. 8:18; Rom. 1:1-4; Gal. 1:8-11; 2:2-5, 14; Col. 1:5-6; Heb. 4:2, 6; 1 Pet. 1:12, 25; 4:6, 17; Rev. 14:6. See E. E. Lemcio, ‘The Unifying Kerygma of the New Testament’ in *The Past of Jesus in the Gospels* (SNTSMS 68; Cambridge: CUP, 1991): 115-31; Andreas Köstenberger, ‘Diversity and Unity in the New Testament’ in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Scott J. Hafemann (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002): 144-58.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Jeffrey Peterson, ‘The Extent of Christian Theological Diversity: Pauline Evidence’, *RestQ* 47 (2005): 1-14; Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word*, 131.

<sup>68</sup> Craig C. Hill, *Hellenists and Hebrews: Reappraising Division within the Earliest Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992): 174.

<sup>69</sup> Acts 6:7; 13:8; 14:22; 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:13; 2 Cor. 13:5; Gal. 1:23; 6:10; Eph. 4:11, 13; Phil. 1:25; Col. 1:23; 2:7; 1 Tim. 2:2; 3:9; 4:1, 6; 5:8; 6:10; Jude 3; Rev. 2:13. See Balla, *Challenges*, 200-206.

<sup>70</sup> Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 200-201; Johnson, *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity*, 184; Marshall, *New Testament Theology*, 28; Ben Witherington, ‘Jesus as the Alpha and Omega of New Testament Thought’ in *Contours of Christology in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005): 44-45.

likewise had a regulatory role in the faith and praxis of the early communities.<sup>71</sup>

Furthermore, the unity of a New Testament Theology has long been said to be a synthetic construction imposed upon the text or else its unity consists in only the most general and prosaic of statements.<sup>72</sup> It may be fashionable to say that there is no single theology of early Christianity to study, but in the final dust up they did opt for a single theology and they called it the Holy Scriptures. In the words of Bockmuehl again: ‘At the end of the day, when everything is said and done about the genetic vagaries of the New Testament canon’s formation, it remains an equally *historical* phenomenon that the church catholic came to recognize in these twenty-seven books the normative attestation of its apostolic rule of faith.’<sup>73</sup>

The significance of this is that it is historically and sociologically legitimate to speak of theological unities within early Christianity and among the various writings of the New Testament. A description of a shared theological fabric in the early church does not derive from the imposition of dogmatic categories and agendas, but out of a historical analysis of early Christianity. In which case, it is a justifiable and perhaps even necessary task of Biblical Theology to identify the types of unity between the various corpora.<sup>74</sup>

While Christian Origins brings content and colour to New Testament Theology it is no substitute for a New Testament Theology. That is because the New Testament is unassailably theological in character. There were genuine theological unities in the early churches that are reflected in the New Testament and the theological texture of these unities may be legitimately explored. What is more, reading with

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<sup>71</sup> 1 Cor. 15:3; 2 Cor. 4:13; Rom. 1:2; 15:4; Acts 17:11; 2 Tim. 3:16; Jas. 2:8-12; John 10:35; Matt. 5:17-18.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Christine Helmer and Christof Landmesser (‘Introduction: A New Biblical-Theological Approach to the Unity of the Canon’ in *One Scripture or Many? Canon from Biblical, Theological and Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Christine Helmer and Christof Landmesser [Oxford: OUP, 2004]: 7): ‘The argument unifying all contributions in this book is that the unity of the canon is hermeneutically constituted. Unity is a function of interpretation. The unity is “outside” not “inside” the text. It is imposed onto the text by its hearer or reader, by a community of interpretation or by academic scholars, whether from an intra-biblical or an extra-biblical location.’ Dunn (*Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 369) finds unity in the connection between the ‘historical Jesus and the exalted Christ’ but detects no traces of a unified kerygma in the New Testament.

<sup>73</sup> Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word*, 103.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Carson, ‘Current Issues’, 30-31.

the grain of the text, attempting to sympathize with its authors, and even submitting to its authority is perhaps one of the best ways of understanding the text.

#### 4. A Theology of the New Covenant

I want to propose a way of integrating the tasks of Christian Origins and Biblical Theology and avoiding their respective deficiencies through what I call a 'Theology of the New Covenant'. This view proposes that theology emerges from the interface between the new covenant texts and the new covenant community. Moreover, it implies, methodologically, the necessity of exploring the New Testament's socio-historical context and the theological texture of its discourse. What is more, the theme of 'covenant' itself provides a way of addressing the material and formal unity of the Bible in historical, thematic, and even systematic terms.<sup>75</sup> I submit that this approach immediately generates a host of corollaries about the relationship of the New Testament to the Old Testament, the ecclesial context of the New Testament, the ontological status of the New Testament, and the unique focus of the New Testament on Jesus Christ. This represents a new way of exploring the content and unity of the New Testament writings and I engage these more fully below.

First, *the advent of the New Covenant implies a continuing and yet transformed relationship between the new epoch of redemptive-history and the Old Covenant economy*. The question of what is new in the new covenant is an incredibly crucial element of early Christian theology. Among the New Testament authors there is an underlying assumption that the story of Israel is continued in the story of church.<sup>76</sup> There is also, however, a strong element of discontinuity since the New Testament authors emphasized the superiority of the new covenant to the old covenant, they varyingly represented Israel's hopes as partially

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<sup>75</sup> Daniel J. Treier, 'Biblical Theology and/or Theological Interpretation of Scripture?', *SJT* 61 (2008): 20. See also Petrus J. Gräbe, *New Covenant, New Community: The Significance of Biblical and Patristic Covenant Theology for Contemporary Understanding* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006) and the recent discussion in Scott Hafemann, 'The Covenant Relationship' in *Central Themes in Biblical Theology*, ed. Scott J. Hafemann and Paul R. House (Nottingham: Apollos, 2007): 20-65.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. C. Marvin Pate et al., *The Story of Israel: A Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004).

realized, the christological aspects of their faith (theological and devotional) probed the boundaries of common Judaism, they sometimes attributed to the new epoch an Abrahamic rather than a Mosaic character, and they created a fictive kinship that included in its social horizon those beyond the boundaries of ethnic Israel. Yet we must recognize that these general convictions were expressed divergently within the New Testament and they were attained in dialogue with Judaism and through debates among the primitive church as well.

If the theological message of the New Testament developed in this context of reflection and debate about continuity and discontinuity with Israel, then that will of necessity bring to the surface questions of how to properly interpret Israel's sacred texts, discussions about the visible emblems that identify God's people in the messianic age, and the relation of ethnic Israel to the church's past, present, and future. In other words, we are driven to consider the rhetoric of intertextuality, intra-Christian *halakhic* disputes, and the 'parting of the ways' as the generative components of a New Testament Theology.

It appears that early Christian theology was a diachronic dialogue with Israel's sacred traditions and a synchronic dialogue with its own Judean and Diasporan contemporaries on the meaning and significance of the gospel-event. In sum, one implication of 'new covenant' is that it forces us to investigate how the first Christians fought to demonstrate that the Old Testament authorized their theological assertions, religious practices, and social identity, and to remain cognizant of how the early church variously appropriated its Jewish heritage as part of its primal period of theological creativity.

Second, *the New Testament is the story and script of the new covenant community*. The text of the New Testament cannot be studied without proper reference to the first Christians who wrote, received, transmitted, collected, and began interpreting it. After all, the New Testament is the literary imprint of the preaching, apologetics, disputes, divisions, trials, and exhortations of these new covenant believers. The New Testament came into existence in the context of the faith of the early church and, therefore, the circumstances of its composition and the legacy of its reception are important ingredients for any New Testament Theology.

But how does one bring the first Christians into a study of the text? Looking more closely at the early Christian communities is hampered

because access to the initial flesh and blood readers of the biblical texts is strictly impossible; however, we can approximate their profile in a number of ways. First, narrative criticism can successfully illuminate the implied reader in a given text. While narrative approaches focus on the world-in-the-text there is no need to absolutely dislocate this from a world-behind-the-text since the implied reader only has credibility if he or she is a potential real reader.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, reader-response criticism can often result in novel and deliberately anachronistic readings of Scripture (e.g. an Evangelical, Eco, Eskimo reading of Revelation), but if we focus upon the potential influence of texts upon their intended flesh and blood readers given what we know of their mental register, linguistic repertoire, and cultural background one could conceivably try to map the types of impact that a text could have under certain conditions.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, studies in reception-history that describe the construction of meaning by real readers in the subsequent history of interpretation provide yet another avenue as to how texts were initially received and if any kind of continuity between the first readers and subsequent readers exists.<sup>79</sup> In fact, Bockmuehl argues that reception-history (i.e. *Wirkungsgeschichte*) can provide a shared umbrella for a number of sub-disciplines including church history, textual criticism, historical theology, and even a study of the theological exegesis in the patristic period.<sup>80</sup>

I am arguing here that a New Testament Theology must acknowledge the ecclesial context from which and for which the New

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<sup>77</sup> Cf. Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001): 56-58.

<sup>78</sup> Stanley E. Porter, 'Why Hasn't Reader-Response Criticism Caught on in New Testament Studies', *Journal of Literature and Theology* 4 (1990): 280-85, notes how a number of biblical studies researchers have employed reader-response criticism in aid of historical investigation of the New Testament's early readers. For a good example of the historical application of reader-response criticism to a study of the impact of the Gospel of Mark upon Graeco-Roman readers, see Peter G. Bolt, *Jesus' Defeat of Death: Persuading Mark's Early Readers* (SNTS 125; Cambridge: CUP, 2003).

<sup>79</sup> Ironically, it is an affirmation of the value of *Wirkungsgeschichte* that is one of the few areas of agreement between Hengel ('Tasks', 82-83) and Meeks ('Why Study the New Testament?', 165). I would add that Wrede would probably have been open to it as well if only for its historical rather than theological value (see 'Task and Methods', 102-103, 108). Cf. Berger, *Theologieggeschichte*, 4.

<sup>80</sup> Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word*, 66; cf. Heikki Räisänen, 'The Effective "History" of the Bible: A Challenge to Biblical Scholarship?' *SJT* 45 (1992): 303-324; James D. G. Dunn, 'Not So Much "New Testament Theology" as "New Testament Theologizing"' in *Aufgabe und Durchführung einer Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, ed. Cilliers Breytenback and Jörg Frey (WUNT 205; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2007): 242-46.

Testament was written. The complexities of the text are a mirror of the complex social and religious environment of the early Christians. The historical origin and reception of the text in the church is crucial to the text's theological meaning. Yet, the reception of the New Testament did not end with the original audience and is continuing to this day. Ecclesiology enables us to bring the horizons of past and present together. If we see the New Testament as a text that is still being received in the church, then we have validated the task of theological interpretation so as to enable contemporary ecclesial groups to apply the word of God in their own setting.<sup>81</sup> After all: 'Any New Testament theology worth its salt must be seen to offer a meaningful interpretation of the New Testament to the community for which it was written.'<sup>82</sup> While Räsänen urges a secular and global approach to New Testament Theology he still acknowledged that New Testament Theology 'may be a legitimate part of a self-consciously ecclesial theology'.<sup>83</sup> Recognition that the New Testament is the canon of the new covenant community requires a historical investigation of its original context and further theological interpretation of its contents.

Third, *the language of 'covenant' implies a certain set of assumptions about the unity and status of the New Testament collection.* The canonisation of the New Testament, understood as the delineation of these sacred writings from other less authoritative texts, was neither arbitrary nor imposed upon a pluralistic church by a theologically narrow oligarchy. The evolution of the New Testament from correspondence to liturgical resource to Scripture and then finally to canon, justifies an exclusive focus upon it as providing the authorizing narrative and primary ideological fixtures for the new covenant people of God. Eusebius calls the recognized list of Christian writings the 'encovenanted' books (ἐνδιαθήκη) (*Hist. Eccl.* 3:3:1-7; 3:25:3; 5:8:1; 6:25:1). Bruce Metzger translates this term as 'contained in the

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<sup>81</sup> Cf. A. K. M. Adam, *Making Sense of New Testament Theology: "Modern" Problems and Prospects* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999): 180; Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Theology: Exploring Diversity and Unity* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2007): xxvii.

<sup>82</sup> John Ashton, 'History and Theology in New Testament Studies' in *The Nature of New Testament Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006): 10.

<sup>83</sup> Räsänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology*, 8.

covenant'.<sup>84</sup> That is to say that it contains the essential elements of the church's testimony to Jesus Christ.

I concur with many scholars that an exclusive focus on the New Testament is reasonable given that it is, generally speaking, our earliest Christian literature and among the most influential too in the history of reception.<sup>85</sup> Wrede contests the priority of these writings and also objects on the grounds that 'anyone who accepts without question the idea of the canon places himself under the authority of the bishops and theologians of those centuries'.<sup>86</sup> But there is no problem if the New Testament and Second Century literature occasionally overlap since disputed areas that overlap, like border disputes in Kashmir, can still retain fixed boundaries. In fact, Wrede's own delineation between the Apostolic Fathers and the Apologists is not convincing and contains overlaps as well.<sup>87</sup> Also we only receive the New Testament and its history of interpretation from these bishops and theologians and we should do them the courtesy of listening to them rather than disregarding them as we might a Fed-Ex delivery boy after receiving a package. The bishops did not create or impose the canon, but ratified the emerging consensus and the theological convergences that were already happening. Thus, the 'subsequent experience' of the canon might be more illuminating than what Wrede acknowledges.

At the same time the bishops and councils did not merely gather up together the 'inspired' writings and those that were ratified by the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit as there was a dialogical process underway about what should be the universally recognized register of sacred books. While the documents that formed the canon were thought to be inspired, inspiration was not limited to these writings as several patristic authors could refer to non-canonical writings as inspired or as Scripture as well.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, as John Poirier puts it: 'Although the

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<sup>84</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982): 292.

<sup>85</sup> Weiss, *Biblical Theology*, 2 n. 1; C. F. Schmid, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1882): 8-9; Schlatter, 'New Testament and Dogmatics', 145-49; Leon Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982): 2.271-72; Morgan 'Introduction', 19, 64-67; Balla, *Challenges*, 86-145; Marshall, *New Testament Theology*, 18-19.

<sup>86</sup> Wrede, 'Task and Method', 71.

<sup>87</sup> Marshall, *New Testament Theology*, 19; see also Dunn, 'New Testament Theologizing', 243.

<sup>88</sup> See Allert, *High View of Scripture*, 58-65, 177-88; *pace* Thielman, *Theology*, 28-29.

apostles were inspired in the performance of their office, it is not as inspired writings *per se* but as witnesses to the kerygmatic narrative that the New Testament writings were considered authoritative for the early Church'.<sup>89</sup> Consider also Jens Schröter: 'The canonical status of the New Testament scriptures cannot be secured by appealing to their inspiration. This is rather circular, since the special status of these documents is already presupposed, and it is exclusively out of the context of the formation of the canon that it was received. Alternatively, a substantive theology of the New Testament should take into account the development of the historical documents of the early Christian canonical writings of the Christian church.'<sup>90</sup> In my view, an exclusive focus on the canon derives not from inspiration but from its ontological status as the historical testimony of the believing communities to the apostolic kerygma. In that sense the New Testament writings are the most primitive and reliable witnesses to God's new dealings with people through Jesus Christ.

Fourth, *a covenantal scheme accounts for the central place of Jesus Christ in the New Testament*. It is obvious to all interpreters that Jesus is the centre of any New Testament Theology, but why precisely is this so? I would answer that Jesus is the central actor in the salvific event that is the new covenant. He is the instigator of the new covenant and the organic unity among the new covenant community derives exclusively from their relationship with him.

In Pauline perspective the new covenant is the eschatological application of the Abrahamic promises to Jew and Gentile through the promised seed of Abraham: Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:19). For the writer to the Hebrews, the dispensation of Christ is both better than the Old Covenant but also confirms God's faithfulness to Israel. Jesus is the guarantor and mediator of the new covenant (Heb. 7:22; 12:24). In the Second Century, Justin Martyr could say that 'the new covenant ... announced by God is Christ himself' (*Dial. Tryph.* 51:3). The centrepiece of the new covenant is Jesus Christ as he is the link to God's promises to Israel and the constituting principle for the renewed

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<sup>89</sup> John Poirier, 'The Canonical Approach and the Idea of "Scripture"', *ExpT* 116 (2005): 367.

<sup>90</sup> Jens Schröter, 'Die Bedeutung des Kanons für eine Theologie des Neuen Testaments' in *Aufgabe und Durchführung einer Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, ed. Cilliers Breytenback and Jörg Frey (WUNT 205; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2007): 157 (own trans.).

people of God including the determining force of their salvation and new identity.

In sum, (1) a Theology of the New Covenant forces us to explore the ‘newness’ of the new covenant message where, in the primeval period of Christian theologizing, the basic building blocks of Christian beliefs emerged out of their christocentric and ecclesiocentric interpretation of Israel’s Scriptures and from dialogue with Jews and fellow Christians about what it meant to be the people of God in the messianic age. (2) The New Testament provides a community forming narrative and the theological constitution for the church’s continued existence. New Testament Theology then can only be pursued as part of a theology of the communities that it was written to and written for. (3) The promises of God realized among Christians are narrated in the New Testament. In which case, the unity of the New Testament is based on the premise that God’s covenantal promises are embedded in its testimony. (4) The New Testament authors are unanimous in looking to Jesus as God’s principal agent in realizing his salvific promises for his people.

## 5. Conclusion

The discipline of New Testament Theology wrestles with manifold questions such as whether one should adopt a developmental, thematic, or corpus-led approach. There is also the quest for the centre of the New Testament and the matter of how one engages in analytic and synthetic descriptions of the biblical texts as well. On top of that we are faced with the problem of how best to relate the results to Systematic and Practical Theology.<sup>91</sup> Yet the centre of gravity in any New Testament Theology will be found in allowing the text to speak without distortion and situating the text in the wider context of the Christian canon and the Church’s faith.

My own approach of pursuing a ‘Theology of the New Covenant’ recognizes the ecclesial context of Scripture and the contingent sociological origins of the New Testament’s theological formulations. New Covenant is the umbrella for the two entities of canon and

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<sup>91</sup> See the appraisal of the essential questions concerning New Testament Theology by Jörg Frey, “Theologie des Neuen Testaments” in der Diskussion’ in *Aufgabe und Durchführung*, ed. Breitenbach and Frey, 3-53.

community and theology emerges out of the relationship between them. This contention is validated by the observation that a biblical text is the testimony of a believing community to God's act in Christ and the same text continues to shape and impact God's people. If we regard theology as emerging out of this interface between canon and community then we are necessarily committed to a study of the history of the early church as the generative force behind Christian theology. We are also equally committed to tracing how this theology in the texts continues to impact and shape the life of the church in subsequent centuries.