

PETER BALLA

Challenges to
New Testament
Theology

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe*

95

Mohr Siebeck

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zum Neuen Testament · 2. Reihe

Herausgegeben von
Martin Hengel und Otfried Hofius

95



Peter Balla

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An Attempt to Justify
the Enterprise

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To My Wife, Gyöngyi

Preface

In recent years, New Testament Theology has become a major subject of interest for New Testament scholars. Some have questioned the possibility of the enterprise. Others have written works that are related to the discipline and that even have the term *New Testament Theology* in their titles.

It seemed timely to attempt to assess the arguments for and against. Out of that study grew a thesis that was accepted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by the University of Edinburgh in 1994. This book is a version of that thesis brought up-to-date.

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Professor J.C. O'Neill, for raising the possibility of tackling this topic and then for guiding my studies with care, patience and wisdom. I am most grateful to him for the regular supervisory meetings and for his suggestions concerning possible focuses of attention. This greatly helped me to complete the research within the period of three years between 1991 and 1994. I am also greatly indebted to my second supervisor, Dr. D.A. Templeton, for making time for discussion and for his comments on everything I wrote. I am very much indebted to Dr. D.L. Mealand, the Reverend Robert Morgan, Professor Hans Hübner and Professor Gerd Theissen for their helpful comments on the manuscript.

I am most grateful to Professor Martin Hengel and Professor Otfried Hofius for accepting this work into the series *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament*. My special thanks are due to Professor Ulrich Luz who suggested that I should seek a place in this series.

I should like to thank the Church of Scotland for granting me the exceptional privilege of a second bursary which enabled me to return to New College, Edinburgh, for another period of postgraduate research in addition to my MTh year in 1987-88. I would also like to thank the Hope Trust for their generous support.

It is fitting that I should also mention my indebtedness to my home church, the Reformed Church in Hungary, and its earlier leaders who gave me permission to take extended study leave. I also thank Dr. Loránt Hegedűs, my father-in-law, who as the then newly elected bishop allowed me to be absent at such an important time as the years between 1991 and 1994 when Hun-

garians had a great deal to accomplish by making good use of the opportunities afforded by the recently gained democracy.

Last but not least, I thank my wife Gyöngyi for all her support. She has cheerfully taken upon herself the extra burden of being far away from home and giving ceaseless care to a growing family. It is, therefore, my joy to dedicate this work to her.

Easter, 1997

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Table of Contents

Preface.....	VII
Abbreviations.....	XV
<i>Introduction</i>	1
<i>Chapter One: The Relationship between Historical and Theological Interpretation in New Testament Studies</i>	5
1. The separation of the enterprises.....	6
a. J.P. Gabler.....	6
b. D.F. Strauss.....	8
c. William Wrede.....	10
d. Criticisms of the “purely” historical approach.....	11
2. A history of early Christian literature.....	13
a. Ernst Troeltsch.....	13
b. R.G. Collingwood.....	16
c. Van A. Harvey.....	18
3. Religious experience instead of doctrine.....	20
a. History-of-religion.....	20
b. F.C. Baur’s study of <i>Lehrbegriffe</i>	23
c. Wrede’s criticism of Holtzmann.....	26
d. The relationship with systematic theology.....	28
e. The problem of a thematic structure.....	29
f. Experience.....	30
4. Against normativeness as a presupposition.....	32
5. How much theology is there in the New Testament?.....	35
6. Overbeck’s thesis against New Testament theology.....	37
a. Scientific knowledge.....	38
b. Apologetic theology.....	40
c. Liberal theology.....	41
d. Critical theology.....	43
e. Christianity - dead?.....	43
7. Conclusion.....	45
<i>Chapter Two: Early Christianity and Its Writings</i>	48
1. The historian and his sources.....	48
2. “Heresy” earlier than “orthodoxy”? (Walter Bauer’s thesis).....	49

a. Edessa, Mesopotamia.....	50
b. Egypt.....	51
c. Asia Minor.....	52
d. Rome.....	53
e. Why so few heretical writings?.....	54
3. Were the Synoptic Gospels not known to the Apostolic Fathers? (Helmut Koester's thesis).....	57
a. Introductory formulae.....	58
b. The "Lord" as authority.....	60
c. When did εὐαγγέλιον first refer to a written Gospel?.....	60
d. Written Gospel(s) other than our Synoptics.....	61
e. Other examples for the "dissimilarity test".....	63
f. "Changes".....	64
4. "Trajectories".....	65
a. Controversies in early Christianity.....	66
aa) General affirmations.....	66
bb) A criterion.....	68
cc) Palestine.....	69
dd) Edessa.....	70
ee) Countries around the Aegean Sea.....	71
b. The diversity of Gospel forms.....	72
c. The diversity of credal formulations.....	74
d. Koester's conclusions of the 1971 volume of essays.....	75
5. The Bauer Thesis re-examined.....	79
a. Method.....	79
b. Places not suitable for the Bauer Thesis.....	80
c. The best test case: Ephesus.....	82
6. Conclusion.....	83
 <i>Chapter Three: Can the Canon Be Justified?</i>	86
1. Introductory remarks.....	86
a. On methodology.....	86
b. On the discussion of Theodor Zahn's contribution.....	87
2. Is the canon a late decision of the church?.....	88
3. Some aspects of the history of the New Testament canon.....	90
a. The difficulty of reconstruction.....	90
b. From later to earlier sources.....	91
c. The role of Marcion in the history of the canon.....	93
4. On the reasons behind the canonical process.....	95
5. The role of the Old Testament in the formation of the New Testament canon.....	98
a. The Old Testament quoted in the New Testament.....	99
b. Problems concerning the canonisation process of the Old Testament.....	101
aa) The problem of "Jabne".....	101
bb) "Zusammen-Denken" before "canonisation".....	102

cc) Authority and canon.....	103
dd) Early canonisation of the Old Testament?.....	104
6. Excursus: The status of the Temple Scroll.....	106
7. From authoritative writings to canon.....	109
a. The “hidden” writings.....	110
aa) “Secrets” in Qumran.....	110
bb) Fourth Ezra.....	112
b. The sacred writings of the “heretics”.....	115
c. Writing with authority.....	116
aa) The significance of “writing”.....	117
bb) The records of the words and deeds of Jesus.....	119
cc) Apostolic authority.....	121
dd) Apostolic letters.....	124
ee) Objections.....	126
8. Some examples of the “canonical process”.....	129
a. Early authoritative writings.....	130
aa) Collections of writings.....	130
bb) The adoption of the codex.....	132
b. Disputed writings.....	132
aa) Hebrews.....	133
bb) James, 2Peter.....	134
cc) Writings rejected.....	134
9. On the genre of the New Testament writings.....	136
a. Overbeck on the origins of Patristic literature.....	136
b. The Gospel genre.....	140
c. The other New Testament genres.....	142
aa) Letters.....	142
bb) “Acts”.....	143
cc) Apocalypses.....	143
10. Conclusion.....	144

*Chapter Four: What Does Theological Diversity Mean
for New Testament Theology?.....* 147

1. Introduction.....	147
a. “New Testament”.....	147
b. “Theology” defined.....	147
c. “Theology” as expressing unity of views.....	148
2. Development in early Christianity.....	149
a. F.C. Baur’s thesis.....	150
aa) Building on the consensus of his day.....	150
bb) Method and structure.....	150
cc) From opposition to harmonisation of “Lehrbegriffe”.....	151
dd) Criticism of Baur’s “picture” of early Christianity.....	152
b. The problem of the dating of the New Testament writings.....	153

aa) Circular arguments	153
bb) Baur's dating of New Testament writings.....	154
c. "The Proclaimer became the Proclaimed"	155
aa) H.J. Holtzmann.....	155
bb) Alfred Loisy	156
cc) Rudolf Bultmann.....	157
d. An exegetical excursus: Acts 2,36	159
aa) The origin of the term "Lord"	160
bb) The term "Messiah".....	161
cc) The term "made".....	161
dd) Towards a solution	162
e. Summary	165
3. Jesus and Paul	166
a. Loisy on the relationship between Jesus and Paul.....	166
b. The thesis of Johannes Weiss	167
c. Eberhard Jünger's contribution	169
4. Should the teaching of Jesus be part of New Testament theology?.....	171
a. Bultmann's statement.....	171
b. An inconsistency in F.C. Baur's work	172
c. Hans Conzelmann	172
d. Some earlier works: Wrede, Holtzmann.....	174
e. Some recent contributions: Jeremias, Käsemann, Goppelt, Morgan	174
aa) Joachim Jeremias	174
bb) Ernst Käsemann	174
cc) Leonhard Goppelt	175
dd) Robert Morgan.....	176
5. The thesis of contradictory theologies in the New Testament writings.....	177
a. Käsemann's points	178
aa) The explications of Jesus' "sonship".....	178
bb) Gospels criticising traditions	179
cc) Variations in the kerygma.....	180
dd) Paul and James	181
ee) Acts and Galatians	181
ff) Eschatology	181
gg) Early Catholicism	182
b. Herbert Braun's arguments	183
aa) The teaching about the law	183
bb) Eschatology.....	184
cc) The teaching on church and offices.....	184
dd) Christology.....	185
ee) The sacraments	185
ff) Braun's summarising point.....	186
c. On the relationship between "law and gospel" (with an excursus on Eph 2,15).....	187
aa) Excursus: Eph 2,15.....	187
bb) Rom 10,4	192

d. Lack of contradiction	194
e. On the contradiction between Paul and James concerning the theme of “faith and works”	195
6. Is there a centre to the New Testament?	196
a. Hasel’s survey	197
b. Reumann’s summary	198
c. The contributions of Cullmann, Dunn and Thüsing	198
d. Conclusions from the survey	199
7. Did the early Christians share a “creed”?	200
a. Problems	200
b. Methodology	200
c. The thesis concerning a development of credal elements	201
d. An argument from the “external evidence”	206
8. Conclusion	207
 <i>Chapter Five: The Main Characteristics of the Enterprise</i>	 210
1. Defining the enterprise	210
2. A historical, descriptive enterprise	211
3. Is faith a requirement for carrying out the enterprise?	215
4. For and in the church only?	217
5. The need to clarify one’s presuppositions	219
6. The focus of the study	220
7. How much material should be discussed?	222
8. The “canonical approach” of B.S. Childs	224
a. Final form	225
b. Religious community	226
c. Descriptive task?	226
d. “Canon within the canon”	227
e. Text	227
f. The Bible as witness	229
g. The Bible’s subject matter	229
h. Two testaments in one canon	230
9. Robert Morgan on biblical interpretation	231
a. On historical work	231
b. Theological interpretation	233
c. Theory of religion	234
d. Literary framework	235
e. Social sciences	236
10. Hans Hübner’s “prolegomena”	238
a. Whose theology?	238
b. Theology and/or theological reflection in the Bible	239
c. Biblical theology	240
d. The reception of the Old Testament in the New Testament	241
e. Proclaimed word and written word	243

f. Revelation	244
11. Peter Stuhlmacher's major proposals.....	246
a. Method gained from the New Testament.....	246
b. Claim of revelation	247
c. Biblical theology of the New Testament.....	248
d. Relation to systematic theology	248
12. Conclusion.....	249
<i>Conclusion</i>	251
1. "Theology"	251
2. "New Testament"	253
Bibliography.....	255
Index of Authors.....	270
Index of References	272
Index of Subjects	277

Abbreviations

AV	Authorised Version
EKK	Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
ET	English translation
ICC	The International Critical Commentary
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
LXX	<i>Septuagint</i>
NA ²⁶	Nestle-Aland, 26 th edition (of <i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i>)
RGG	<i>Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart</i>
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SNTS	Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas

In this work, references are made by giving the year of publication and the page number in brackets in the main text. If the same work is referred to in the same context more than once, after the first reference giving both year and page, page numbers alone are given in subsequent references. If more than one reference is made to the same page in the same context, then the page number is not repeated. The next occurrence of a page number indicates that the reference is made to another page. On occasion I repeat the page number for the sake of clarity (for example, in the case of a reference to a new theme). The page number is introduced by “p.” if it is necessary in order to avoid a possible misunderstanding (for example, when there is a figure in the same context referring to a year or to a bible verse).

Italics in quotations are always those of the author quoted.

When I use “he” for a non-specific pronoun in the third person, “he or she” should be understood. (As a justification for my usage I note that there is only one word for “he” and “she” in my native - Hungarian - language.)

Introduction

In 1990 Heikki Räisänen published a work entitled *Beyond New Testament Theology*. The very title of the book points in a marked way to the main thesis of Räisänen: New Testament scholarship has reached a state where the discipline of New Testament theology should be abandoned and replaced by another discipline. To quote Räisänen (xviii):

‘New Testament theology’ may be a legitimate part of self-consciously *ecclesial* theology. By contrast, those of us who work in a broader *academic* context should abandon such an enterprise (and, *a fortiori*, any dreams of a ‘biblical theology’ which would cover both Testaments).

In a more recent article Räisänen affirms that his use of the quotation marks around the term New Testament theology points to the proposal that the name of the discipline is a “misnomer” (1992, 252). The quotation marks allude to an essay put forward by William Wrede in 1897, the title of which speaks of a “so-called” New Testament theology. Räisänen has re-affirmed his thesis of 1990: “It is my conviction that Wrede was right and that a synthesis of early Christian thought, rather than of NT theology proper, is called for” (1992, 252).

The programmatic essay of Wrede in question was entitled *Über Aufgabe und Methode der sogenannten Neutestamentlichen Theologie*. In this essay Wrede argued that (1897, 79-80; ET: 1973, 116):¹

... the name New Testament theology is wrong in both its terms ... The appropriate name for the subject-matter is: early Christian history of religion, or rather: the history of early Christian religion and theology.

These quotations show that the enterprise of New Testament theology is under considerable challenge.² Räisänen’s and Wrede’s programmatic works call for a discussion. The scholarly challenge should not remain without some examination of the matters that are involved in the call to move “beyond” the enterprise.

¹ Throughout my thesis the first page reference is made to the original German edition, 1897; then after a semi-colon there follows the reference to the English translation (=ET) made by R. Morgan, 1973, which I adopt.

² For a more recent summary of his main theses, see Räisänen, 1995 and 1997.

My thesis takes Räsänen's and Wrede's works as a starting point for the discussion. However, it does not aim at discussing the works of these two great scholars comprehensively. Rather, I look out - often with the help of their programmatic works - for arguments and theses that are in connection with their general challenge. In doing so, I also must discuss works of scholars other than Wrede and Räsänen.

My thesis is an attempt to answer the challenges that have been put to the enterprise of New Testament theology. In my work I focus on major problems that have to be dealt with, if one maintains that the enterprise of New Testament theology may be justified. I do not focus on one area of problems only - in order to avoid the danger that while the enterprise is justified on one ground, there may be other grounds which make it impossible to justify the enterprise.

However, since the challenges cover a very wide range of problems and themes, I have to observe certain limits. When I focus on arguments that seem to play a key role in the cases of the major theses, I do acknowledge that there are numerous arguments - related to our theme - that do not surface in this thesis. My discussion of the themes includes some exegetical remarks - but only by way of examples.

In a way similar to the limitation in terms of themes, my thesis does not claim to discuss all the available - extraordinarily extensive - literature. Rather, I focus on the works of scholars who can be generally seen as representing a consensus of opinion. At other times, I refer to scholars who may have contributed to our theme - although they may not have been followed by others. On occasion, reference is made to articles of a survey type on individual matters. I try to summarise theses by referring to one or two key figures in scholarship - without following up the history of scholarship on that particular matter. As we shall see, my study involves references to scholars from the nineteenth century - without listing the names of all the scholars who hold the same view up to the present day.

Apart from these general delimitations, one particular theme has to be named which is not addressed in this thesis: the theme of the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament - or, in other words, the problem of justifying the enterprise of a biblical theology that covers both Testaments. This theme in itself could be a topic of research.

However, it is not simply the extensive character of this theme that provides a reason for not including it in this thesis. The problem of justifying biblical theology is a problem that overarches the problems of the justification of the individual Testaments of the Bible. It is true that arguments for justifying biblical theology would strengthen the case for justifying the enterprises of

Old Testament theology and New Testament theology. However, if it turned out to be the case that biblical theology cannot be justified, this - in itself - would not disprove the possibility of justifying New Testament theology as a separate enterprise.

My thesis is that the enterprise of New Testament theology may be justified. In order to support this thesis, I shall examine questions related to the two constituent parts of the name of the enterprise - in accordance with Wrede's challenge seen above. The term "New Testament" has to be argued for; this requires an examination of questions related to the process that led to the canonisation of the writings of the New Testament. These questions are addressed in the second and the third chapters.

The term "theology" in the name of the enterprise raises numerous problems. Some of the problems are related to the relationship between theological and historical enterprises; others are related to the definition of the term. The first and the last chapters address these issues.

"Theology" also raises another type of a problem: the question of the unity of the theology of the New Testament writings. If there are contradictory theologies in the New Testament - with an emphasis on the plural, *theologies*, - then the enterprise can also be challenged on this ground. In this case, perhaps, one would not have to call for abandoning the enterprise, but at least for renaming it accordingly: works in this field would be written only with the title *The Theologies of the New Testament*.³ Chapter four examines the issues related to the diversity of the theological content of the New Testament.

My thesis has a twofold character. On the one hand, I attempt to show that the challenge has not succeeded in proving that the enterprise of New Testament theology cannot be maintained. On the other hand, I attempt to put forward arguments in favour of the two theses that a historian can justify limiting the focus of the enterprise to the canonical writings of the New Testament and that the enterprise can set itself the aim of describing the theological content of the New Testament.

By referring to "a historian" I anticipate here a central argument in this thesis: New Testament theology is a historical enterprise. As a starting point, it may be appropriate to mention two major implications of this statement.

First, I make the claim that New Testament theology may be justified even in an academic context - and not only in an "ecclesial" context as Räsänen

³ Cf. F.W. Horn's quotation from Georg Strecker in the foreword of the posthumously published *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* of Strecker (1995, V-VI): "Es soll der hier vorzustellende Entwurf von der Endfassung der neutestamentlichen Texte ausgehen, also eine redaktionsgeschichtliche Theologie des Neuen Testaments intendieren. Dies meint, daß die einzelnen neutestamentlichen Schriften nach ihren individuellen theologischen Konzeptionen gewürdigt werden sollen, so daß der Begriff 'Theologie des Neuen Testaments' präziser die Komplexität von Theologien im Neuen Testament bezeichnet".

has affirmed. The enterprise of New Testament theology can - of course - be carried out in the church. However, I attempt to discuss Räsänen's challenge in a way that the discussion could also be "tested" and examined by scholars outside a church context. For this purpose I adopt some of Räsänen's proposals - for example, that New Testament theology should be a historical enterprise. I also agree with Räsänen that any attempt to justify the enterprise would have to use arguments understandable to people without a commitment to faith who do not accept the truth claims of the Bible. We only disagree about whether or not such arguments would succeed: whether or not the enterprise can be justified.

Secondly, my thesis differs from Heinrich Schlier's approach which is summarised in his essays entitled "Über Sinn und Aufgabe einer Theologie des Neuen Testaments" (1964, 7-24) and "Biblische und dogmatische Theologie" (25-34). Schlier's thesis is not argued but presented as a set of presuppositions and axioms. For example, he affirms that the New Testament canon is a theological fact (10). New Testament theology builds on this fact. In Schlier's opinion, from the point of view of a history of early Christian religion it is absurd to speak of the theology of the New Testament and also to limit the task to the New Testament writings.

In distinction from this approach, I do not start with the axiom that we have to accept the limitation of the canon on theological grounds provided by the church. My question is whether or not historians can justify their focus on the canonical New Testament within the enterprise of New Testament theology.

Schlier also affirms that the theology of the New Testament is a collection of different theologies (9-10). However, he maintains that the task of New Testament theology should not be the presentation of a historical development (10). Rather, the very name of the discipline expresses the basic theological decision that there is unity in the New Testament. Accordingly, New Testament theology has to deal with a, or: *the* theology of the New Testament (11, 19). Again, the presupposition of a unity of theology - which includes the view that there is no final contradiction among the various basic theological ideas - is in connection with the view that the New Testament is inspired and canonical (19).

I differ from this approach in as much as I do not presuppose that there is a unity in the theology of the New Testament. It may be the case that historical investigation finds that there is a unity in the theology of the New Testament. This can only be the result of inquiry, exegetical discussions - and argumentative study.

I should like my thesis to be a contribution to the on-going debate in this broad field of biblical scholarship.

Chapter One

The Relationship between Historical and Theological Interpretation in New Testament Studies

When Räsänen mounts his challenge to the enterprise of New Testament theology, he affirms as his main thesis that the historical investigation of the Bible and theological reasoning on it must be kept apart (see e.g. 1990, 90). The proposal concerning the separation of the historical task from the theological one is also in some way related to the idea that the theology of the New Testament should not be searched for within the discipline of the study of the New Testament. In this chapter we shall consider the various problems which may emerge in relation to the historical investigation of the New Testament if one attempts to maintain New Testament theology as an enterprise.

Since it is Räsänen who argues for the thesis of the separation of the tasks with full emphasis and in the most detailed way, most of the themes I will focus on in this chapter originate in his arguments.

Räsänen holds that the fusion of the tasks of historical and theological interpretation does not make the understanding of the New Testament clearer (xvii). He puts forward his suggestion (xviii):

... 'New Testament theology' ought to be replaced, in this context, with two different projects: first, the 'history of early Christian thought' (or theology, if you like), evolving in the context of early Judaism; second, critical philosophical and/or theological 'reflection on the New Testament', as well as on its influence on our history and its significance for contemporary life.

He points to two major predecessors of his in this emphasis: "Gabler made a helpful theoretical distinction between historical and theological interpretation of the Bible" (xv); so did Wrede (xvi). Räsänen (89) is dissatisfied with the scholarship of our century, because it has not realised Wrede's programme.

Let us turn to the questions, What is this programme in greater detail?; and, What are the major premises it builds upon?

1. The separation of the enterprises

Räisänen proposes that the primary task of a New Testament scholar should be an exegetical one. Scholars and students of the New Testament should understand themselves as historians. In his summary of the history of the discipline the first aspect he is looking for in other people's work is: "Awareness of the problems involved in relating historical study to theology" (1990, xiv). One of the most important criteria for Räisänen whether or not to agree with another scholar is the scholar's consistency in carrying out a historical enterprise. For example, Bultmann is criticised because his historical understanding "is overwhelmed by actualizing interpretation" (42).

Räisänen is cautious, however, not to oversimplify his emphasis on the historical character of the enterprise. The question mark in the title of the relevant section of his programme, "Purely historical?", already indicates his opinion that "the person of the scholar cannot be wholly bracketed out in historical work" (106). Even the historical reconstruction involves interpretation. The work of the modern interpreter is not independent of his situation. Thus Räisänen proposes "to talk of the relation between two sorts of interpretation: historical and actualizing" (108). The work of the New Testament scholar should move "on the level of historical interpretation" (109).

I agree with Räisänen's refined emphasis on the importance of the "historical" side of New Testament studies. I also accept his proposal concerning the separation between New Testament theology as a historical enterprise and an "actualizing interpretation" - that would be, in my understanding, a systematic theological enterprise. However, I should like to take issue with an implication of his thesis of separation: I argue that the historical study does not have to be "separated" from the study of the theology contained in the New Testament.

Since Räisänen largely bases his view on those of Gabler, Strauss and Wrede, it is appropriate to look at the theses of these scholars and so to discuss Räisänen's thesis (see e.g. xvii).

a. J.P. Gabler

Gabler's inaugural address from 1787 used the terms "biblical theology" and "dogmatic theology".¹ Since his terms differ from the ones discussed in this chapter of my thesis, we have to see what he understands under these terms.

¹ In my thesis Gabler's address is referred to after Sandys-Wunsch, 1980, 134ff.

Gabler used “biblical theology” for what we now discuss as “historical interpretation”; and “dogmatic theology” for what we would nowadays call systematic theological reflections, or, in Räsänen’s term, “actualizing interpretation”. In Räsänen’s thesis Gabler’s first term would cover what a scholar of the New Testament should study.

Gabler distinguished between “religion” and “theology”. Religion is “what each Christian ought to know and believe and do” - we may say: what can be easily understood as the content and meaning of the Bible. On the other hand, theology is the view of the scholar who studies the Bible: “theology is subtle, learned knowledge, ... derived not only from the sacred Scripture but also from elsewhere, especially from the domain of philosophy and history” (136).

Gabler then distinguishes between the method with which one can ascertain the “religion” of the Bible, i.e. “biblical theology”, and the study which is built upon biblical theology, i.e. “dogmatic theology”. The first is “of historical origin, conveying what the holy writers felt about divine matters”; while the second is “of didactic origin, teaching what each theologian philosophises rationally about divine things” (137). Although Gabler sets out the first method at length, it is clear from his address that the aim of the first type of study is to provide solid, reliable material for the second (e.g. 143).

I find it problematic that Räsänen should stress the importance of Gabler’s thesis for Räsänen’s own. Gabler’s inaugural address is often referred to by scholars who engage in Old Testament theology, New Testament theology, or “biblical theology”, as the decisive point in the history of biblical studies when these new “biblical” disciplines originated. Most scholars view Gabler’s distinction to be what it actually claims to be: an emphasis on studying the theology contained in the Bible distinctively from the theological systems of the scholars.

In my opinion, Räsänen might refer to Gabler as the predecessor of his own thesis in three points: 1) although Gabler repeatedly refers to the “Sacred Scriptures” as the field of his study, he does point beyond the boundaries of the canon when he urges the need to include the apocryphal books in the collection and classification of the ideas of biblical figures (140); 2) Gabler describes biblical theology as a historical discipline; 3) Gabler uses the term “interpretation” in relation to biblical theology.

But if Räsänen rightly endorses these points in Gabler’s lecture, he would surely have to disagree with a fourth point, for we have to see clearly that in Gabler’s opinion the result of “exegetical observation” is that “a clear sacred Scripture will be selected” (143). This selected sacred Scripture - also called by Gabler *dicta classica* - contains “universal ideas”, or, “passages which are appropriate to the Christian religion of all times”. In other words, Gabler’s

thesis seems to ascribe more to the historical, exegetical task than Räsänen's thesis would suggest. According to Gabler, biblical theology "in the stricter sense of the word" is achieved only (143-144):

... if these universal notions are derived by a just interpretation from those *dicta classica*, and those notions that are derived are carefully compared, and those notions that are compared are suitably arranged, each in its own place, so that the proper connexion and provable order of doctrines that are truly divine may stand revealed ...

One may argue that the reference to divine revelation is simply due to the language of the age in which Gabler lived. However, to work out the "order of doctrines" implies an understanding of the discipline different from Räsänen's view about the task of the discipline. In my opinion Gabler's thesis rather points in the direction in which I should like to define New Testament theology: the study of the theology contained in the New Testament.

b. D.F. Strauss

Strauss's *Leben Jesu* from 1835 is a historical examination of the Gospels. Strauss set himself the task in the Preface: "... the inquiry must first be made whether in fact, and to what extent, the ground on which we stand in the gospels is historical" (1906, xxix). He gave his own definition of myth and of what can be regarded as legendary (86-87). In the final section of his introduction he described in a detailed way the criteria "by which to distinguish the unhistorical in the gospel narrative" (87ff).

The long historical part of his thesis is followed by a short "concluding dissertation" which summarises "the dogmatic import of the life of Jesus" (757ff). Strauss struggled with the problem of justifying his attempt "to re-establish dogmatically that which has been destroyed critically" (757). He had a twofold answer. 1) Even an honest historian, a thoroughgoing "critic is intrinsically a believer". The critic - "in the spirit of the nineteenth century" - reveres religions (757); and Christianity is "the substance of the sublimest of all religions" (758). 2) The "ultimate object" of historical criticism "can only be arrived at by dogmatical criticism as a sequel".

Strauss affirmed that "the essence of the Christian faith is perfectly independent of his [the author's] criticism" (xxx). He distinguished between "eternal truth" and "reality as historical facts". For example, Christ's birth, his miracles, his resurrection can be the former while not the latter. The question is: Did Strauss succeed in confirming this statement of his in his "concluding

dissertation”? O. Pfleiderer made the following evaluation in his “Introduction” to the same fifth English edition I am referring to (1906, xviii-xix):

In all this Strauss was led astray by the influence of the Hegelian philosophy, which looked for the truth of religion in logical and metaphysical categories instead of in the facts and experiences of moral feeling and volition. But as there is no essential relation between these metaphysical ideas and the person of Jesus, he is made arbitrarily, as any one else might have been, an illustration and example of absolute ideas to which he stands in no more intimate relation than the rest of the human race ...

A similar criticism of Strauss’s two-part thesis has been made recently by Robert Morgan. This criticism is important since it comes from a scholar who does empathise with Strauss’s thesis to a very large extent. In an earlier essay Morgan approved of Strauss’s “separation” model (1976-77, 260): New Testament theology should not be “simultaneously a historical and a doctrinal discipline”; the two tasks should be separated. Morgan shares Strauss’s “radical historical criticism of the Gospels” (243). In Morgan’s opinion Strauss’s critical conclusions are “inescapable”. Morgan seems to share the view with Strauss that supernaturalism is “impossible in the modern world”; and also to share the “refusal to believe that the miracles actually happened” (244, see also 260).

In the same 1976-77 article, Morgan pointed to the failure of Baur’s and Bultmann’s attempts to combine historical investigation with theological interpretation. These are not satisfactory for someone who does not want to stretch “history” so wide that it can include “a metaphysical view of God, man and the world” (Baur) or does not want to narrow theology so that it only discusses the existence of the individual (Bultmann) (245). This failure of two of the greatest scholars supports Strauss’s separation model.

However, in a recent detailed study of the problems I am concerned with in this thesis, *Biblical Interpretation* (1991, orig. 1988), Morgan expresses his view differently. There he discusses the question which is only stated in a footnote in the 1976-77 article (249, n.1): “whether historical work alone can adequately perform theology’s ... task of interpreting human existence”. In *Biblical Interpretation* Morgan uses the term “separation” with reference to those who want to see only a historical task in New Testament studies, and to leave the theological part to systematic theologians. Morgan opposes that view (1991, 74-75, 90, 184-185). He speaks of “the necessity of combining” the “historical and theological tasks” (275). He clarifies this task but does not attempt to perform it (274). We may note that Morgan maintains that historical investigation has a controlling role in New Testament theology.²

² We shall return to this work of Morgan in the final chapter.

In this context it may suffice to make two observations. 1) The way Morgan criticises Strauss's thesis can be used as an argument against Räsänen's thesis: Strauss has not succeeded in providing a good example of separating the tasks of historical and theological interpretation in New Testament studies. It may be argued, of course, that an unsuccessful attempt does not prove that the task of separation is impossible. I propose that the historical and theological tasks should be kept apart if the "theological task" means "systematic theology".

2) If we adopt the separation of the historical task in New Testament theology from a systematic theological study of the New Testament, then another question arises: How successfully is the historical task carried out by Strauss? Since Strauss did not address the question of describing the theology contained in the New Testament, we cannot give a direct answer to this question. It may suffice here to emphasise that Strauss's historical work - and its possible implications for New Testament theology - can be discussed by someone engaging in New Testament theology as a historical enterprise. In other words, historians can argue with historians. In my understanding of the enterprise, New Testament theology should be based on historical arguments. Strauss's work does not refute this definition of the enterprise.

c. William Wrede

As we have already seen, the programmatic essay of Wrede has been very influential on Räsänen's thesis. Wrede's work, *Über Aufgabe und Methode der sogenannten Neutestamentlichen Theologie*, has only quite recently been translated into English. It is of great importance for any discussion of the problems of New Testament theology. I shall discuss various points of it in the chapters of my thesis. Here I shall simply summarise the way Wrede puts his thesis.

Wrede presupposes the "strictly historical character" of New Testament theology (1897, 8; ET: 1973, 69). It has to be treated in the same way as any of the branches of "intellectual history in general or the history of religion in particular" (10; ET: 70).

In his opinion, the task of New Testament theology has to be separated from that of systematic theology. The latter could not help the former; it could only control it which is contrary to the aim of New Testament theology (9-10; ET: 69-70).

I think it is Wrede who has set out in the most consistent way the programme Räsänen is arguing for. Most of Räsänen's points are there in Wrede's es-

Index of Authors

- Abramowski, L. 142
Agnew, F. 122, 123
Aland, B. 131, 134
Aland, K. 130, 131, 134
- Badenas, R. 192-194
Balla, P. 163
Barth, K. 154
Barth, M. 192
Barr, J. 98, 117, 118, 119, 137, 215,
225, 226, 231
Barrett, C.K. 221, 222
Bauer, W. 48-56, 66, 67, 69-71, 77, 79-
84, 116, 190, 253
Baur, F.C. 9, 23-26, 29, 33, 46, 136,
149-154, 165, 172, 208, 223, 237
Berger, K. 124, 125, 138, 142, 149
Best, E. 204
Bienert, W.A. 121, 122, 123, 127, 128
Bouttier, M. 192
Braun, H. 93, 100, 178, 181, 183-186,
197
Brett, M.G. 225, 226
Brooke, G.J. 106, 109
Brox, N. 135
Bühner, J.-A. 122
Bultmann, R. 6, 9, 30, 120, 155-159,
171-174, 181, 197, 208, 218-221,
223, 233, 239, 240, 245, 247
Burridge, R.A. 140, 141
- Campenhausen, H.F.v. 90, 93, 115, 143,
144
Childs, B.S. 104-106, 224-231, 247, 250
Collingwood, R.G. 13, 16-19
Conzelmann, H. 163, 172-174
Cranfield, C.E.B. 192
Cullmann, O. 164, 197, 198, 203, 204
- Dormeyer, D. 142
Dungan, D.L. 94, 154, 180
Dunn, J.D.G. 141, 148, 198
- Ebeling, G. 36, 37, 197, 198, 211, 227
Ellis, E.E. 152, 154
Evans, C.F. 205
- Fergusson, D. 221
- Gabler, J.P. 5-8, 45, 240
Gese, H. 241
Gnilka, J. 190
Goppelt, L. 174, 175, 176
Grant, F.C. 197
Guelich, R. 141, 142
- Haenchen, E. 159
Hahn, F. 122, 123
Harnack, A. 52, 87, 92-94, 96, 97
Harris, H. 152, 153
Harvey, V.A. 13, 18-20
Hasel, G.F. 197
Hengel, M. 159, 160, 164
Hofius, O. 126
Holtzmann, H.J. 23, 26-30, 46, 120, 155,
156, 174, 223, 224
Hübner, H. 11, 12, 45, 89, 98, 101, 102,
110, 153, 238-245, 247, 250, 251
- Jeremias, J. 174
Jüngel, E. 169, 170
- Kaftan, J. 21, 36, 156
Kähler, M. 156
Karrer, M. 119
Käsemann, E. 91, 174, 175, 178-184,
186, 192, 197
Klauck, H.-J. 195
Koester, H. 48, 56-79, 81, 84, 85, 124,
137, 140, 253
Kümmel, W.G. 27, 90, 91, 101, 197,
221, 222
- Lietzmann, H. 91, 201-203, 205
Lincoln, A.T. 188, 189, 191

- Loisy, A. 120, 156, 157, 166, 167
 Lüdemann, G. 152
 Lührmann, D. 212
 Luz, U. 197, 200
- Macpherson, J. 191
 Marshall, I.H. 141
 McDonald, L.M. 135, 136
 Mealand, D.L. 64, 209
 Metzger, B.M. 112
 Mitton, C.L. 190, 192
 Morgan, R. 1, 9, 10, 13, 15, 27, 33, 34,
 88, 149, 152, 154, 174, 176, 177,
 212, 214, 216, 219, 220, 231-238,
 250, 252
 Mowinkel, S. 163
 Munck, J. 162, 164
- Oeming, M. 178
 O'Neill, J.C. 42, 120, 123, 149, 157,
 160, 162, 165, 168, 180, 184, 185,
 204
 Overbeck, F. 37-45, 47, 76, 77, 91, 133,
 134, 136-140, 142
- Pesch, R. 161, 163-165
 Plümacher, E. 98, 99, 100, 105
 Prigent, P. 118
- Räsänen, H. 1, 2, 4-8, 10-13, 15, 20-22,
 29-33, 36, 38, 45, 48, 49, 68, 88,
 147-149, 171, 177, 187, 210-219,
 222, 227, 237, 238, 240, 249-252,
 254
- Reumann, J. 198
 Reventlow, H.G. 120, 126
 Ritter, A.M. 200
 Roberts, C.H. 132, 183, 206, 207
 Robinson, J.A. 188, 189, 192
 Robinson, J.A.T. 154
 Robinson, J.M. 56, 65, 66, 137
 Robinson, T.A. 79-84
 Roloff, J. 159-161, 212
- Sæbø, M. 102-104
 Schelkle, K.H. 29, 30
 Schille, G. 162
 Schleiermacher, F. 33, 130, 132, 133,
 134
 Schlier, H. 4, 48, 49, 187-190, 211, 238
- Schnackenburg, R. 125, 187, 189, 192
 Schneemelcher, W. 87-91, 93-98, 100,
 115, 121, 123, 127, 135, 140, 143,
 145
 Schrage, W. 168, 197
 Seebass, H. 197
 Seeberg, A. 205
 Skeat, T.C. 132
 Stanton, G.N. 63
 Stegemann, H. 107-109
 Stemberger, G. 101
 Stendahl, K. 214-216, 219
 Stone, M.E. 112-114
 Strauss, D.F. 6, 8-10, 43, 231, 232
 Strecker, G. 3, 48, 49, 143, 195
 Stuhlmacher, P. 11, 15, 16, 45, 141, 212,
 216, 246-251
 Sundberg, A.C. 135
- Theißen, G. 16, 182
 Thüsing, W. 198, 199
 Tov, E. 99, 105, 109, 242
 Trobisch, D. 131, 132, 134, 138, 207
 Troeltsch, E. 13-19, 33
 Tuckett, Ch. 127
- Vermes, G. 110-112
 Vielhauer, Ph. 143
- Wacholder, B.Z. 108, 109
 Wedderburn, A.J.M. 170
 Weiss, B. 23, 32
 Weiss, J. 167, 168
 Wengst, K. 201
 Wenham, J. 154
 Westcott, B.F. 187, 188
 Westermann, C. 36, 37
 Wrede, W. 1-3, 5, 6, 10-13, 20-24, 26-
 30, 32, 33, 35, 36, 45, 48, 88, 89,
 109, 131, 147, 156, 174, 210-212,
 217, 222-224, 227, 251, 252, 254
 Wright, D.F. 207
- Yadin, Y. 106-109, 111
 Young, F.M. 200, 201
- Zahn, Th. 61, 67, 87-97, 113, 115, 130,
 131, 133-135, 144
 Zehnle, R.F. 160, 161

Index of References

Old Testament

<p>Genesis 45,5 123</p> <p>Exodus 3,12f 123 4,12 108 18,25 111 24,12 108</p> <p>Deuteronomy 4,7 188 4,8 188 6,4 201</p> <p>1 Samuel 12,6 161, 162 25,40f 122</p> <p>2 Samuel 7,12ff 163 10,1ff 122</p> <p>2 Chronicles 36,15 123</p> <p>Psalms 2 163 16 162 16,10 161 110 162, 163 110,1 161</p> <p>Proverbs 10,1-10 102</p> <p>Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) 11,9 103 12,12-14 103</p>	<p>Isaiah 6,8 122 42,19 123 52,7 123 57,15 188 57,17 188 57,19 188, 189 61,1 123 66,1 69</p> <p>Jeremiah 7,25 123</p> <p>Ezekiel 3,6 123</p> <p>Daniel 12,4 113 12,9 113</p> <p>Joel 3,5a 160 3,5 161</p> <p>Zechariah 2,12f 123</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Old Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha</i></p> <p>1 Enoch 1,9 134 81,6 113 82,1 113</p> <p>2 Enoch 47,1 113 48,6-7 113</p> <p>4 Ezra 8,3 59</p>
---	--

4 Ezra (continued)		8,33	179
9,15	59	9,2-8	158
12,36	112		
12,37-39	112	Luke	
12,42	113	2,1	190
14,19-22	113	2,11	159
14,26	113	3,22	159
14,37-43	113	4,18	159
14,44-48	113	6,27	65
		6,32	65
3 Maccabees		16,10a	62, 64
1,3	190	16,13	64
		24,44	104
4 Maccabees			
7,21	89	John	
		4,48	179
		5,31	121
<i>Qumran Writings</i>		6,26	179
		10,24	121
Psalms of Thanksgiving (1QH)		12,13-15	100
V,24-26	111	19,24	100
		19,28f	100
Community Rule (1QS)		19,36	100
IX,16-17	110	20,29	179
		20,31	119
Temple Scroll		21,24	119
XIII-XXIX	107		
LXVI	107	Acts	
LXVI,8-11	107	2,22-36	157
		2,22	159, 164
		2,23	164
<i>New Testament</i>		2,30	163
		2,33	159
Matthew		2,36	159-165, 179, 208, 252
5,17	187	3,6	203
7,2b	64	4,25f	163
9,13b	64	6,1-8,5	69
16,17	124	6,11	69
16,17-19	158	6,13	69
22,14	59, 60	7,53	69
28,18-20	157	8,1	69
28,19	202	8,36-38	203
		8,37	202
Mark		15	70
2,17b	64	16,3	70
2,27	180	17,7	190
3,14	162		
5,27ff	179	Romans	
7,15	180	1,1-2	126
8,27-30	158, 161	1,2	126
		1,2f	164

Romans (continued)		2,4	69
1,3	126, 202	2,13f	70
1,3f	159, 164	5,4-5	195
1,4	179	6,16	89
2,13	195		
3,25	195	Ephesians	
3,28	151, 195	1,17	191
4	193	2,7	191
7,8ff	190	2,8	196
9-11	193, 242	2,10	161, 196
9,4	189	2,11-13	188
9,6	193	2,12	188, 189, 191
10,4	192-194, 252	2,13	187, 188
10,9	202	2,14-18	187, 188, 190
12ff	196	2,15	187-192, 252
13,9	190	2,17	188
		2,19	187, 188
1 Corinthians		2,22	188
1,12	152	4,19	191
7,10	125	5,26	191
7,12	125	6,2	191
7,17	125		
7,19	190	Philippians	
7,25	125	2,5-11	202
7,40	125	2,6-11	203
8,6	202, 203		
12,3	202, 203	Colossians	
15,1ff	72	1,20	187
15,3-8	203	1,22	187
15,3	200	2,14	192
15,3ff	202	2,16ff	192
15,4	182	2,20	192
16,22	160	4,16	138
2 Corinthians		1 Thessalonians	
3	71	2,6b-7	125
3,7	191		
3,11	191	1 Timothy	
6,2	184	6,13	202, 203
10,8	125		
10,13	89	2 Timothy	
10,15	89	2,8	202
10,16	89	4,1	202
11,22	71		
12,1ff	124	James	
13,10	125	1,3	196
13,13	202	1,21ff	196
		1,25	195
Galatians		2,14	195
1	181	2,17	195
2	69, 70	2,24	151, 195

- | | | | |
|---------------------------|----------|------------------------------------|------------|
| Hebrews | | Philo, Legum Allegoriae | |
| 1,1f | 126 | 1,54f | 190 |
| 1,5 | 179 | | |
| 11,23 | 190 | | |
| 1 John | | <i>Early Christian and</i> | |
| 2,2 | 195 | <i>Patristic Writings</i> | |
| 4,2 | 203 | Athanasius, Second Oration Against | |
| 4,10 | 195 | Arianism | |
| 4,15 | 202 | 12 | 162 |
| 1 Peter | | Epistle of Barnabas | |
| 3,13-22 | 202 | 4,14 | 59 |
| 2 Peter | | 1 Clement | |
| 1,12 | 184 | 13,1f | 58 |
| 1,20f | 137 | 13,2 | 64 |
| 3,16f | 137 | 15,2 | 63 |
| Jude | | 46,7f | 58 |
| 3 | 184 | 2 Clement | |
| 14-15 | 134 | 2,4 | 62, 64 |
| Revelation | | 6,1 | 64 |
| 1,11 | 118 | 8,5 | 59, 62, 64 |
| 1,19 | 118 | 13,4a | 65 |
| 1,20 | 123 | Clement of Alexandria, Hypotyposes | |
| 2-3 | 53, 119 | books 4-7 | 131 |
| 2,1 | 123 | Didache | |
| 2,8 | 123 | 1,3ff | 64 |
| 5,2 | 143 | 10,6 | 160 |
| 5,9 | 143 | 15,3f | 61 |
| 6,1 | 143 | Ignatius, Ephesians | |
| 14,13 | 118 | 18,2 | 202 |
| 19,9 | 118 | Ignatius, Philadelphians | |
| 21,5 | 118 | 8,2 | 61 |
| 22,18 | 144 | Ignatius, Smyrnaeans | |
| 22,18f | 180 | 1,1-2 | 202 |
| 22,20 | 160 | 1,1 | 202 |
| <i>Josephus and Philo</i> | | Ignatius, Trallians | |
| Josephus, Contra Apionem | | tit | 138 |
| I,38 | 104, 114 | 9 | 202 |
| I,42 | 190 | 9,2 | 202 |
| Philo, De Gigantibus | | | |
| 52 | 190 | | |

Justin, Dialogue With Trypho
100,1 60

Muratorian Canon
line 77 135

Origen, Contra Celsum
I,48 120

Rabbinic Writings

Midrash, Numeri Rabbah
8 (149d) 188

Mishna, Jad
III,5 102

Index of Subjects

- actualizing interpretation, 6, 7, 214
apocryphal writings, 29, 139
Apostles' Creed, 204, 205
apostolic authority, 125-129
Apostolic Council, 69
Apostolic Fathers, 57-60, 63-65, 84, 135, 137, 223
apostolic letters/writings, 76, 119, 124, 136, 138, 142, 146
authoritative writings, 109, 118, 119, 121, 130, 136, 225
- Bardesanes, 51, 116
biblical theology, 1, 2, 7, 8, 11, 104, 120, 211, 214, 215, 225, 227, 229-231, 238, 239, 241, 242, 244-247, 249, 250
- canon, 4, 7, 12, 18, 19, 26, 34, 45, 49-51, 56, 67, 72, 73, 78, 82, 84-106, 109, 110, 114-118, 127-137, 139, 140, 143-147, 150, 177, 178, 180-183, 186, 196, 198, 200, 204, 208, 213, 219, 220, 222-227, 229-231, 234, 243, 246, 247, 253, 254
canonical approach, 104, 224, 226, 228, 231
canonical Gospels, 72-74, 76, 127, 140-142, 178, 179
canonical process, 90, 95, 100, 104, 126-129, 134-136, 145, 146, 226, 253, 254
canonical writings, 3, 23, 24, 28, 47-49, 73, 77, 83, 88, 89, 116, 134, 213, 223, 230, 231, 254
Christ, 8, 19, 41, 70, 117-121, 125, 152, 156, 157, 161, 166, 167, 169, 171, 187-191, 193-199, 202, 203, 205, 208, 229, 230, 238, 242
Christology, 119, 158-160, 164, 165, 170, 177, 179, 185, 197, 208, 223, 229, 232
- codex, 132, 134
collection, 4, 7, 56, 62, 67, 72-74, 84, 89, 97, 99, 102-104, 115, 130-134, 141, 145
confession, 120, 158, 164, 165, 186, 202, 203
contradictory theologies, 3, 177, 178, 194-196, 208, 209
credal elements, 76, 137, 187, 201, 202, 204-207, 234
credal formulae, 204, 209, 252, 253
creed, 68, 74-76, 200-207, 209
- descriptive enterprise, 211, 214, 215, 235, 247
dissimilarity test, 63, 64, 79
dogmatic theology, 7, 28, 248
- early Catholicism, 96, 166, 182, 185
early Christian literature, 12, 13, 38, 47, 48, 136, 137, 146, 147
early Christianity, 24, 25, 27, 40, 42, 48, 49, 51, 52, 56, 57, 66, 69, 70, 74-76, 78, 79, 81, 126, 127, 135, 144, 146, 148-150, 152-155, 157, 165, 166, 187, 200, 207, 211, 212, 223, 224, 231, 237, 247, 252, 253
early church, 12, 30, 41, 43, 80, 88, 120, 121, 131, 146, 155, 156, 158, 160, 168, 175, 177, 180-182, 187, 200, 202, 212, 223, 228, 230, 247, 252
Edessa, 50, 51, 70, 71, 81
Egypt, 50-52, 81, 123
eschatology, 169, 181, 182, 198
Eusebius, 50, 51, 53, 55, 79, 80, 90, 132, 143
experience, 18-20, 30-32, 36, 38, 147, 148, 171, 210, 230, 234, 235
- faith, 4, 8, 17, 18, 26, 29, 35, 39, 41, 74, 79, 97, 118, 121, 159, 166-168, 170, 171, 173, 185, 186, 193-196,

- faith (continued), 198-200, 202-205,
 207, 209, 215-219, 225, 227, 229,
 232-234, 236, 239, 240, 248, 251
- genre, 66, 73, 75-77, 84, 85, 124, 136,
 139-144, 146, 254
- Gnosticism, 24, 51, 53, 67, 68, 82, 83,
 128, 141, 220, 221
- Hegelian, 9, 25, 152, 246
- Hellenistic, 30, 68, 70, 77, 125, 143,
 160, 167, 179, 185, 186, 193, 195
- heresy, 49, 50, 52-56, 66-68, 71, 73, 74,
 76-86, 98, 115, 140, 173, 183, 186,
 201, 203, 253
- historian, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 15-20, 27, 31,
 32, 34, 46, 48, 49, 56, 63, 66-68, 78,
 79, 83, 86, 93, 116, 144, 146, 147,
 213, 222, 229, 232-234, 254
- historical criticism, 8, 9, 15, 16, 39, 222,
 226, 236
- historical interpretation, 6, 7, 43, 214,
 218
- historical investigation, 4, 5, 9, 17, 213,
 232, 233
- historical Jesus, 19, 68, 78, 79, 120, 170,
 173, 176-178, 199
- historical reconstruction, 6, 211, 212,
 232, 248
- history-of-religion, 20, 21, 28, 30, 31,
 46, 50, 56, 171, 174, 226
- introductory formulac, 58, 84, 138
- Jabne, 101, 104
- Josephus, 104, 105, 114, 190
- Judaizers, 25, 71
- Judaism, 5, 24, 25, 30, 68, 71, 77, 98,
 99, 122, 151, 160, 174, 182, 185,
 200, 201, 231, 242
- kerygma, 11, 60, 62, 72, 73, 76, 78, 120,
 169, 171, 174-176, 180, 185, 197-
 199, 211
- law, 14, 24, 25, 31, 69-71, 89, 100, 105-
 108, 110, 111, 113, 122, 147, 156,
 181, 183, 184, 187-196, 207, 231,
 252
- Lehrbegriffe*, 21, 23, 24, 26, 46, 150,
 151, 154, 172
- literary approach, 235, 236
- literary theory, 236, 238, 250
- Luther, 181, 196
- Marcion, 51, 53, 70, 81, 93-95, 97, 98,
 115, 116, 128, 130, 144, 145, 149,
 247, 253
- Messiah, 111, 119-121, 146, 155, 156,
 158-165, 167, 173, 180, 185, 186,
 230
- Messianic consciousness, 120, 121, 155,
 167, 185
- modern interpreter, 6, 46, 78, 227, 231,
 232, 241
- Montanist movement, 92, 115, 144
- Muratorian Canon, 134, 135
- myth, 8, 13, 22, 44, 74
- nomina sacra*, 183, 206, 207
- normativeness, 32, 33, 34, 67
- Old Testament, 2, 3, 7, 24, 30, 37, 57-
 59, 62, 63, 66, 71, 77, 88, 89, 97-
 106, 109, 110-112, 115, 117-119,
 122-124, 126, 128, 129, 134, 136,
 145, 151, 162-164, 181, 187, 188,
 190, 194, 201, 225, 230, 231, 233,
 240-243, 247, 248, 250, 252
- orthodoxy, 42, 49-56, 66-68, 71, 73-86,
 115-117, 147, 173, 181, 187, 200,
 201, 253
- Paul, 24, 25, 27, 31, 36, 42, 53, 69-72,
 81, 94, 109, 117, 123-127, 130, 131,
 133, 135, 137, 138, 143, 149-152,
 156, 164, 166-172, 175, 181-184,
 190, 193, 195, 196, 198, 202, 204,
 208, 209, 211, 220, 221, 239, 242,
 243
- Peter, 11, 21, 69, 70, 120, 127, 128, 134,
 152, 158-162, 212, 216, 246
- phenomenological approach, 34
- Philo, 75, 89, 105, 190
- presupposition, 4, 15, 32, 153, 171, 175,
 210, 216, 219-222
- Q, 62, 65, 141, 160
- Qumran, 30, 99, 105-112, 145, 242, 253
- reader, 12, 32, 39, 45, 216, 227, 232,
 234, 240, 249

- regula fidei*, 11, 68, 96, 97, 200, 204
 revelation, 8, 16, 26, 34, 36, 92, 114,
 115, 124, 125, 144, 145, 181, 194,
 197, 214, 216, 225, 230, 238-240,
 244-247
- Sachkritik*, 127, 220, 222
 sacred writings, 92, 103, 104, 106, 113,
 115, 116, 119, 134, 230
 Scripture, 7, 29, 45, 51, 57-60, 62-65,
 67, 73, 77, 84, 86, 88, 89, 94, 97-99,
 101, 102, 104, 106, 110-116, 129,
 131, 145, 193, 216, 227, 247
 second canon, 101, 106, 114, 118, 136,
 145, 146
 separation of the tasks/enterprises, 5, 6,
 9-12, 45, 69, 241
Septuagint, 98, 99, 105, 160, 190, 242
 systematic theology, 10, 28, 29, 32, 36,
 46, 96, 211, 214, 215, 238, 241, 248
- Tatian, 51
 Temple Scroll, 106-112, 145, 253
 theological interpretation, 5, 9, 10, 15,
 19, 37, 80, 215, 231-235
 theory of religion, 234, 235
 tradition, 13, 14, 27, 37, 54, 57, 58, 60,
 61, 63-68, 70-76, 78-81, 84, 85, 94,
 97, 100, 102-104, 113, 114, 117,
 128, 143, 145, 146, 152, 156, 159,
 162, 163, 179, 183, 190, 195, 199,
 200, 206, 209, 217, 219, 225-229,
 231-233, 235, 238, 241, 243, 247,
 249
 truth, 4, 8, 9, 16, 17, 19, 33, 34, 39, 40,
 46, 55, 56, 110, 112, 124, 214, 216,
 218, 232, 234, 235, 250
- Urliteratur*, 76, 139, 140

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