

**HISTORY AND ITS RELEVANCE  
TO NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGICAL FORMULATION:  
A Pivotal Issue for the Interpretation of the New Testament<sup>1</sup>**

“Ist Geschichte »eine unentrinnbaren Schicksals«?”<sup>2</sup> Concern with history has preoccupied much of modern scholarship in regard to New Testament interpretation. The emergence of the historical method in New Testament interpretation reflects the dominance of this concern throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Ronald Nash accurately reminds us that “the faith of the Christian believer has an inherent historical component. From its inception, Christianity has been a religion with a past. Without that past, Christians can have no grounded hope for the future.”<sup>3</sup> Thus theology and history are bound together in Christian experience. History has then played a significant role in the interpretation of the New Testament. W. G. Kümmel in his *Das Neue Testament im 20. Jahrhundert* observes that the historical nature of the New Testament is one of the foundational presuppositions inherited from the eighteenth century by the nineteenth century and has set the stage for much of the work in the twentieth century: “Die dritte Voraussetzung neutestamentlicher Forschung, die das 19. Jahrhundert vom 18. Jahrhundert übernahm, war die Forderung, das Neue Testament als geschichtliches Dokument auch grundsätzlich geschichtlich im Sinn seiner Bedeutung für die ersten Leser auszulegen.”<sup>4</sup> Thus beginning in 1829 the first massive New Testament commentary series came into being in order to interpret the New Testament on this historical basis of **sensus literalis**: H.A.W. Meyer’s *Kritisch-exegetisches Kommentar über das Neue Testament*.

## I. ISSUE

Yet in 1972, the well respected German New Testament professor later at the University of Munich, Ferdinand Hahn, published in the *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* an important article entitled “Probleme historischer Kritik.”<sup>5</sup> In it he decries the skepticism created by historical criticism in its undermining of theological affirmation. He levels two specific charges against this interpretative method: (1) it alienates the text from the interpreter (Verfremdungseffekt) and (2) it tends to isolate the text into a remote, irrelevant past (Tendenz zur Isolierung).

What does he mean? By Verfremdungseffekt, he means the creation of a great distance between the text and contemporary understanding of it. To be sure this has had some positive results in modern times. When one’s ecclesiastical system is automatically, naively read into a text, then historical criticism has rightfully objected by stressing the ‘then’ and the ‘now’ aspects of exegesis. But historical exegesis has often so emphasized that distance that no bridge of confident understanding between the ‘then’ and the

‘now’ aspects is possible. The concern for historical awareness tends to nullify the quest for theological understanding out of the text. Thus Redaktionsgeschichte, for example, has often gotten straitjacketed into mid-first century historical concerns without producing any normative theological affirmations for issues in our day. Yet, the inherent nature of the biblical text is to affirm spiritual truths to Christians caught up in the issues of their own world.

This Verfremdungseffekt is closely tied to what Hahn calls the Tendenz zur Isolierung.<sup>6</sup> This he goes on to clarify as when “the specific incident or the individual text being dealt with is narrowed down to its determinative elements and described in these terms. Correspondingly, when a comprehensive presentation is made, the recognizable and possible causal connections between individual events or texts are pointed out. But transcendent points of reference are systematically excluded by this approach.”<sup>7</sup> In short, our historiography is in stark contrast to that found in the biblical texts. Modern historiography tends to see events in terms of a flat, horizontal cause and effect, presupposing a universalistic frame of reference. Hahn then declares, “Ich bin skeptisch gegenüber jedem Versuch, irgendeinen universalgeschichtlichen Rahmen für die Interpretation heranzuziehen.”<sup>8</sup> The transcendent aspect, so much a part of the historiography in the biblical text, is ignored or excluded. Thus the theological dimension of meaning is often greatly diminished, leaving the text with no purpose other than to historically inform the reader. A situation in clear contrast to the original intention of the text!

Thus the modern dilemma is that of history and theology—how are they connected, especially in the biblical text? What exegetical procedure can best appropriate their relationship both in regard to the ancient approach to historiography and its relevance to ours? In short, how can one move from history to theology and preserve the sanctity and intentionality of the biblical text?

## II. THE IDEA OF HISTORY

The resolution of this dilemma is no easy solution. Voices are often heard among conservatives to the effect that the historical critical methodology should be rejected outright. Even among more moderate conservatives one hears the pronouncement of Gerhard Maier’s *Das Ende der historisch-kritischen Methode*. Yet is such possible? To reject the positive accomplishments of the last two hundred years is to doom one to the older dogmatic reading of the text. Exegesis becomes eisegesis, and one’s externally conceived theological system becomes the real authority, not the Scriptures. The theological sterility of the middle ages, or of Protestant Scholasticism, becomes our fate. Christianity is then perceived by the outside world, more than ever, as an archaic relic of the ancient world with nothing to say to modern man struggling with nuclear annihilation, rampant violence in his community, job insecurity and a host of other problems, much less his gnawing quest for meaning and fulfillment in life.

No, rather than throwing out the baby with the wash, a way must be found to do exegesis with our full intellectual commitment to God’s Word as authoritative revelation.

Hahn proposes no definitive solution, other than to suggest that the modern view of history must be

thoroughly revised before a resolution to the current exegetical dilemma can be found: “die Divergenz ist zu großgeworden, um auf diese Weise die historische und theologische Aufgabe der Exegese wieder miteinander zu verknüpfen.”<sup>9</sup>

Thus a major concern is with the meaning of history. This I want to explore more detailedly, for it will be a continuing concern throughout the year of study. Let me simply raise issues both conceptually and historically on which we need to work in the quest for a solution to the modern dilemmas and for a personal exegetical program.

First, what is history? Ronald Nash<sup>10</sup> notes several distinctions in attempting a definition: it is the human past, not just the past; it is significant past human events, not all past human events. It is less a chronicle (simple narrative) than a significant narrative of significant past human events. This distinction has been deeply ingrained into modern historiography since the work of the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce in the early modern era.

What is the distinction between chronicle and significant narrative? W. H. Walsh, in his *Philosophy of History: An Introduction* makes the distinction as follows: The historian is not content to tell us merely what happened; he wishes to make us see why it happened, too. In other words, he aims. . . at a reconstruction of the past which is both intelligent and intelligible.”<sup>11</sup>

Another way of distinguishing between chronicle and narrative has become common in theological circles since Martin Kähler’s *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche biblische Christus* (1892): **Historie** and **Geschichte**. **Historie** was identified with the nineteenth century Empirical historiography: “*Historie* is the sum total of historical facts lying ‘back there’ in the past which can be objectively verified” by impartial investigation and neutral observation.<sup>12</sup> The latter qualifiers are significant to the methodology; this is usually what is meant by the label “scientific history.”

The term **Geschichte** has been described by James Peter as “the study of past events in such a way that the discovery of what happened calls for decision on our part.”<sup>13</sup> This understanding arises out of existentialist thought. To some degree, it has to do with the subjective sense of history, whereas *Historie* focuses on the objective, factually verifiable event.

For many, *Geschichte* is where the meaning of history lies; *Historie* is little more than a chronicling of events. Yet, is this true? Is there not an artificial identification of history’s meaning with *Geschichte* over against *Historie*? In nineteenth century ‘*Historie*,’ was not the meaning attributed to history? Normally some ‘key’ to history was sought, since the presupposition was that the past events were somehow connected. Most often, in the flat, horizontal reading of history, the Hegelian dialectic was seen as the ‘key’ to explaining the ‘cause and effect’ relationships among events. Thus an “objective” meaning of history is derived from *Historie*.

Thus, it should be asked: Is meaning found only in *Historie*? Or, only in *Geschichte*? How can meaning be derived from history? What is historical “meaning”? A conceptional view of relationships among events? But does not that leave history as past event? Is not history relevant to the present, if it is

worthwhile?

If so, what is the legitimacy and significance of *Geschichte*? How can one bridge the past into the present? For Bultmann, the key from the ‘then’ (*Historie*) to the ‘now’ (*Geschichte*) was ἡ πίστις εἰς τὸν Χριστόν. In this existential encounter with the Christ of faith one experienced the past as present spiritual reality—the modern believer encounters Christ to the same degree of life-changing experience as Paul or John in the first Christian century. The past is relived as decisive call to commitment. For Bultmann, the fourth Gospel with its hellenized Logos portrait both models and exemplifies this *geschichtlich* encounter with history.

But a further question arises: what is the relation between *Historie* and *Geschichte* in this spiritual encounter? Dependency? Independence? A major criticism of the existentialist approach to history, especially in theological circles, is its tendency to drive a wedge between *Historie* and *Geschichte*. As Carl Braaten identifies, “sooner or later the thought will occur that since meanings do not arise *from* the facts, they do not need to rest *on* the facts; meanings can stand on their own feet, and facts can be handed over to those who are entertained by archaeological studies.”<sup>14</sup>

Thus the quest for the historical Jesus in classical liberalism, for example, becomes irrelevant to the faith encounter with Christ. Yet, is this wedge legitimate? As the new quest for the historical Jesus illustrates, *Historie* and *Geschichte* in theological circles, at least, must be seen as somehow connected in a meaningful way. But what is this connection? Increasingly the assertion that *Geschichte*, in close correlation with Walsh’s “significant narrative,” grows out of, and depends on *Historie*, is finding acceptance.

This brings us to the early issue posed by Hahn: we need a new view of history in order to reduce the distance between historical exegesis and theological exegesis of the text. Let me toss out a possibility—not original with me. Actually, an old idea, but in freshly tailored clothes. It is in part the proposal of Hahn and, more precisely, that of Peter Stuhlmacher whose article “Thesen zur Methodologie gegenwärtiger Exegese” appeared in the same issue of *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* with that of Hahn’s.<sup>15</sup> I would note this: this proposal has distinctly Cranford tailored clothes—not Stuhlmacherin or Hahnian. So they must not be blamed for any inadequacies therein.

A possible “key,” if one is really needed for understanding history, may very well lie in the historiography found in the Scriptures themselves. History is seen with a certain transcendency, which is God’s purpose and intentionality present in each historical event. The connecting link between the events of history, which is occasionally horizontally explainable, must also be viewed vertically. God’s will is a part of that bridge; God’s presence and activity is inherent to each event. Thus, there is meaning from the *Historie* dimension; but, via this supernatural aspect, there is also the existential demand of the *Geschichte* inherent in the event. Our faith experience in the Gospel facilitates this ‘demandivess’ of the historical event.

A certain tension will inevitably exist here. If meaning is derived solely or even dominantly from the *Historie* approach, the objective external events, it will invariably lead, in my opinion, to a propositional

oriented faith which will be as spiritually dry and dead as Scholastic Lutheranism. The spiritual dynamic, the ethical compulsion for holiness in living, will be lost and then be replaced with a dead legalistic formalism. Faith becomes “the Faith” to be recited in creedalism, not faith as life-changing union with its object—the person of Jesus Christ. The failure to address this adequately is a major weakness of Ronald Nash’s conclusion in his *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*.<sup>16</sup> Faith winds up being mainly belief, not commitment.

Yet, the other extreme of the existentialist focus has clearly reflected the tendency toward a subjectivism which ignores the presupposition of some understanding of History clearly present in the historiography of the Scriptures. Without question, the external event was significant to the New Testament writers. To reject or ignore this is to undercut a major basis of derived meaning from the event in the text. But, the direct encounter, the demandiveness of the event, the call to meet and respond to God oozes out of every narrative of biblical text. Faith must be held foremost as the facilitator of that encounter with God. And it is a commitment kind of faith, much more than a dogma-oriented faith; that is, an ecclesiastical belief recited in worship.

Now, the yet to be resolved angle—one among many I suspect—is the nagging criteria of the objective verification of the external event. The new quest for the historical Jesus movement attempts to work generally in the framework of the older nineteenth century Empirical historiography, but with a higher degree of confidence in the historical accuracy of the New Testament texts than that of their nineteenth century predecessors such as Harnack and Ritschl. Much of contemporary fundamentalism—the relatively informed segment, e.g., Harold Hoehner<sup>17</sup> also buys into the parameters of the so-called “scientific historiography.” Historical objectivity is “assured” through a rigid doctrine of inspiration—(for this approach).

Yet, is the presupposition of scientific objectivity, and thus of historically verifiable accuracy, really necessary—and worthwhile? Is one not forced by the New Testament text, especially the Synoptic Gospels and the use of the Old Testament by the New Testament, into unnatural, unnecessary and unneeded harmonizationalism in order to uphold historically verifiable details of the narrative events? Since this inevitably leads up a blind alley and constantly forces one into an apologetical stance—always defending one’s insecurities—is there not a better way? I want us to wrestle with this issue of objectivity and verification of accuracy this year. Rigid application of the Empirical approach creates a good breeding ground for skepticism and agnosticism—both in the far left and in the far right.

Also to be dealt with is not only the application of one’s view of history to the issue of the historical Jesus. But, also, we must wrestle with the application of our historical presuppositions to apostolic history. Historical criticism and its children—Formgeschichte, Redaktionsgeschichte etc.—insist on some type of historical reconstruction of the apostolic age as the means to establishing the Sitz im Leben of the biblical text—be it gospel, acts or epistle genre.

Is this necessary? If so, how must we attempt it? With the book of Acts as the basis? With

biographical and autobiographical statements in epistolary materials? Then, how is the author of Acts to be assessed historically? From the criteria of “scientific history?” Or, within the framework of ancient historiography? Is he an ancient writer of *Historie* or of *Geschichte*? These issues must be dealt with in our pilgrimage.

### III. HISTORY AND THEOLOGY

Finally, I want to raise the question of the connection between history and theology. How can one find theology in history? Does meaning lie exclusively in an objective interpretation of the external history, the *Historie*, in the biblical text? Or, is meaning best seen in a *geschichtliche Methode*? What is the theological meaning to be wrestled out of the historically oriented text? Is it to be seen against the background of a conceptualized *Heilsgeschichte* as Cullmann, Käsemann and other twentieth century interpreters contend? How does one get at that theological meaning? Through allegorization, as the ancient Alexandrian exegetes assumed? Through *Redaktionsgeschichte*, as many modern exegetes suppose? Or, through linguistic analysis which often ignores the historical orientation of the text? Many, in recent times, seemingly fall back on the new forms of literary criticism, such as Structuralism, Audience Criticism et als, either in despair over historical issues seemingly unresolvable in the text, or else by only paying lip-service to historical issues. For these exegetes, theology comes out of linguistics, much more than out of history. But can this be successfully accomplished? The answer to Maier’s issue, raised in the beginning—*Ist Geschichte eine unentrinnbaren Schicksals?*—is yes. History and historical concerns are inescapable to theological concerns in Christianity.

Thus we must do some “*Ring*en” this semester. But, by the final bell, my intention is for us to have pinned down for the full count most all of these issues.

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**ENDNOTES:**

<sup>1</sup>Lecture for NT 651-771 seminar by Lorin L. Cranford. All rights reserved by author.

<sup>2</sup>Gerhard Maier, *Das Ende der historisch-kritischen Methode* (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1974), 98.

<sup>3</sup>Ronald Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 9.

<sup>4</sup>W. G. Kümmel, *Das Neue Testament im 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1970), 16.

<sup>5</sup>Ferdinand Hahn, "Probleme historischer Kritik," *ZNW* 63 (1972): 1-17.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 15.

<sup>7</sup>Ferdinand Hahn, *Historical Investigation and New Testament Faith*, trans. Robert Maddox (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 28-29.

<sup>8</sup>*ZNW*, 16.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>10</sup>Nash, 13-15.

<sup>11</sup>W. H. Walsh, *Philosophy of History: An Introduction* (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1960), 31.

<sup>12</sup>William Hordern, ed. *New Directions in Theology Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), vol. 2, History and Hermeneutics, by Carl E. Braaten, 38.

<sup>13</sup>James Peter, *Finding the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1965), 174.

<sup>14</sup>*History*, 39.

<sup>15</sup>Peter Stuhlmacher, "Thesen zur Methodologie gegenwärtiger Exegese," *ZNW* 68 (1972): 18-26.

<sup>16</sup>111-153.

<sup>17</sup>See his response to Nash in Nash's book, 157-159.