

GARDNER-WEBB UNIVERSITY

GERMAN DEVELOPMENT OF HISTORICAL-CRITICAL BASED  
METHODS OF NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION FROM 1918-1975

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Germany was a different place after the end of World War I, which had torn the country apart for nearly five years. In a post war Germany disillusioned men and women tried to deal with the shock of seeing the world around them, as they knew it fall apart. Many of the scholars, who also had their world shaken, began to take notice of a need for what they considered to be a clearer understanding of who Jesus was and what role he played in the lives of people in their day.<sup>2</sup> Many methods are attempted ranging from the quest for the historical Jesus to the development of important forms of Historical- Criticism such as Form Criticism, and the later development of Redaction Criticism. Important Scholars such as Albert Schweitzer, Rudolf Bultmann, Hans Conzelmann, and Max Weber play very important roles in the development and refining of these critical methods.

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<sup>1</sup>Editorial corrections to the format of this paper have been made in order to bring it into closer conformity to the Turabian Style Guide requirements. Dr. Cranford.

<sup>2</sup> Livingston, James C., Francis Schussler Fiorenza, Sarah Coakley, James H. Evans Jr., *Modern Christian Thought* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 10.

**DEVELOPMENT OF HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHODS  
OF NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION  
IN GERMANY FROM 1918 TO 1975**

The theological issue that seems to bridge the gap between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the issue of trying to find a clear picture of who Christ was. The interesting turn that has taken place in Christian theology during this time is linked with the new historical way of examining the theology itself. Christianity for the most part has always been considered to be a religion that is grounded in the pages of history. Christianity has been able to claim this as a unique part of its history separating it from the many religions that are pure myth and legend.<sup>3</sup> The problem that seems to arise in the nineteenth century, and has still not been completely solved even today, is trying to root Christianity, but more specifically Christ himself, in the pages of history in a way that is confirming to the understanding of Christ held by the church. As scholars in the nineteenth century began to dig into the scripture and find historical basis for their beliefs many were left with more questions than answers. At the root of the problem was the fact that Jesus was both a historical figure that was here on earth for a set time and in a set place, but at the same time the scholars had to deal with Jesus as the Son of God and as a divine being.<sup>4</sup> Just as this problem seems to cross the line between the nineteenth and twentieth century so does one scholar seem to represent a very crucial turning point between the methods of the

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<sup>3</sup>Livingston, 9.

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nineteenth century and the development of Form-Criticism and Redaction-Criticism in the twentieth century.

### Albert Schweitzer

Born in 1875 Albert Schweitzer grew up in the town of Kaisersberg, which is situated between Germany and France and acts as a small buffer zone between the two powers. This boy who was the son of a simple Lutheran pastor would go on to be one of the most revered men of his day.<sup>5</sup> Schweitzer observed many of the undertakings by scholars to try and come up with a picture of Christ that was separated completely from the Christ of the Bible, but instead the Christ that was being created had no place in history whatsoever and took on many of the goals and beliefs of the person trying to complete the work. Schweitzer, who himself wrote *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, recognized that the image of Christ that was coming out of these studies was incomplete and wrong. The Jesus being dealt with in Schweitzer's time was being looked at in a much different worldview than the view of first century Palestine. Schweitzer said that scholars, "were eager to picture Jesus as truly and purely human, to strip from him the robes of splendor with which he had been appareled, and clothe him once more with the coarse garments in which he had walked in Galilee."<sup>6</sup> Schweitzer's work in the area of finding the historical Jesus seemed to prove beyond a doubt that the quest for the historical Jesus was bound to fail, but his work at the same time delivered a "deathblow" to many of the views of Christ that were established and accepted within the church.<sup>7</sup> This was not a problem in Schweitzer's mind because

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<sup>5</sup>Brabazon, James, *Albert Schweitzer: A Biography*, (New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1975), 20.

<sup>6</sup>Livingston, 10.

<sup>7</sup>Ice, Jackson Lee, *Schweitzer: Prophet of Radical Theology*, (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1971), 13.

for him Christianity does not need to be anchored in history to be valid. To call into question what was accepted as fact in history was not an issue because according to Schweitzer, “Jesus means something to our world because a mighty spiritual force streams forth from him and flows through our time also. This fact can neither be shaken nor confirmed by a historical discovery.”<sup>8</sup> The realization that the methods being used were not enough to come up with a complete picture of Christ is largely due to the excellent work by Schweitzer, and this sets the stage for the further development of new methods of dealing with the text.

### Rudolf Bultmann

Before dealing with Bultmann’s views and theology it is important to have a general understanding of the method of interpretation that he used so frequently. Bultmann throughout his works will make great use of form criticism, which is, “A systematic, scientific, historical, and theological methodology for analyzing the forms, and to some extent the content, of the primitive Christian literature.”<sup>9</sup> By taking this understanding Bultmann analyzed the text of the New Testament with the intention of trying to understand the time period that was being talked about in the text by understanding the mindset of the community in which the text was written.<sup>10</sup> Many of the founders of what will become known as the history of religion school were still in positions at many of the universities as Bultmann came along and he had the chance to study under

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<sup>8</sup>Livingston, 13.

<sup>9</sup>Freedman, David Noel, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 841.

<sup>10</sup>Bray, Gerald, *Biblical Interpretation Past & Present*, (Downer’s Grove. Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 439.

more than just one of these men.<sup>11</sup> Even though as time progressed Bultmann would be viewed as one of the top scholars in the history of religion school, at first he was only viewed as a good theologian due to people being unaware of many of his writings and views.<sup>12</sup> In his works, Bultmann tries to deal with the gospels by examining them in the light of the Two Document Hypothesis with the assertion that Mark is the common source for both Matthew and Luke. It was believed at one time that in Mark could be found a reliable outline of Jesus' life that was used to try and come up with a biographical story of Christ.<sup>13</sup> From the works of Wellhausen though, which Bultmann was aware of, it is asserted that the picture of Jesus in the gospels is not a historically accurate picture but instead a picture based on the understanding of Christ in the early community where the gospel was written.<sup>14</sup> As Bultmann develops this method even farther he wants to break the gospels down as far as possible into small units so that he can try and understand them in their original setting. Out of this five principals can be decided on that deal with the information inside the synoptic Gospels particularly.

1. The synoptic Gospels are popular, sub-literary compositions.
2. They depict the faith of the primitive Christians who created them, not the historical Jesus
3. They are artificial collections of isolated units of tradition.
4. These units originally had a definite literary form, which can still be detected.
5. This form was created by a definite social situation.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Hobbs, Edward C., ed., *Bultman, Retrospect and Prospect: The Centenary Symposium at Wellesley*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), 65.

<sup>12</sup>Hobbs, 60.

<sup>13</sup>McGinley, Laurence J., *Form-Criticism of the Synoptic Healing Narratives*, (Woodstock, Maryland: Woodstock College Press, 1944), 1.

<sup>14</sup>McGinley, 2.

<sup>15</sup>McGinley, 4.

These guidelines form the basis for how Bultmann will use form criticism to help develop his picture of, “The Gospel of the Earliest Church”, which is Bultmann’s basis for understanding the gospel message.<sup>16</sup>

One of Bultmann’s biggest concerns throughout his career, which he gave considerable time to dealing with, was the idea of the myth within the gospels, and what became known as demythologizing of the gospel message. In Bultmann’s opinion present man was not capable of understanding the Christ of the New Testament because of the very different world view that is present between first century times and present day. Much of this inability to understand the gospel message as presented is because of the tendency man today has to think in terms of modern science.<sup>17</sup> This much more critical analysis of the world and what goes on in it does not lend itself to stories of miracles, healings, and supernatural events. Bultmann is afraid that modern man cannot confirm these parts of the gospel accounts as they are presented without going against the personal knowledge held about the world that says such things are impossible. Also two mindsets of modern man can be looked at, and it does not matter which view is taken man cannot reconcile his thought to the ideas of the New Testament. The mindsets dealt with are whether man sees himself as one with nature or as a distinct personal being apart from nature.<sup>18</sup> The problem is that no matter which view is taken man today sees himself as a being in control of oneself. This view is hard to reconcile with the gospel of the New Testament that seems to advocate a God that is directly involved in a person’s life. Not only does this present a problem but even the understandings of sin, death and even salvation can become quite confusing accord-

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<sup>16</sup>Hobbs, 76.

<sup>17</sup>Ogden, Schubert M., *Christ Without Myth*, (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1961), 34.

<sup>18</sup> Ogden, 35.

ing to Bultmann. A person that believes they are in control of their own life and that certain things are just a part of the natural occurrence of life find it hard to understand death as being a punishment for sin since death is only natural. Finally even salvation itself can become an idea that seems implausible. That one man could die for the sins of all and be raised again as a payment for these sins does not fit the logical understanding of modern man, who would need to see God acting out a plan in his own life to recognize its value for him.<sup>19</sup> If this myth that surrounds the New Testament is the problem for modern man that keeps him from grasping the value of the gospel Bultmann believes the logical step is to remove the myth as it is present in the understanding of the text. The question then is what does myth consist of. According to Bultman, “Myth is the report of an occurrence or an event in which supernatural or superhuman powers or persons are at work; hence the fact that it is often defined simply as history of the gods.”<sup>20</sup> The solution that Bultmann reaches for dealing with the myth of the New Testament is his undying support of the Existential interpretation of the scripture. Existential interpretation is, “one which seeks to explain statements of faith and theological statements as being primarily expressions of man’s self-understanding.”<sup>21</sup> The whole idea is that instead of trying to understand the text in light of the myth or supernatural expression in the text that man can understand himself and how he relates to the world that he is living in based on the teachings of the gospels. An example of this found in Bultmann’s work *Theology of the New Testament* is when he is dealing with the event of Paul’s conversion. Instead of the incident being described as a supernatural encounter with God Bultmann describes the event in light of Paul coming to a new understanding of him-

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<sup>19</sup>Ogden, 36.

<sup>20</sup>Ogden, 24.

<sup>21</sup>Cairns, David, *A Gospel Without Myth?*, (London, England: SCM Press LTD, 1960), 95.



self.<sup>22</sup> The last key thing that needs to be understood to truly grasp what Bultmann is trying to accomplish is best seen in his discussion of what he believes are the three main ways of thinking in this world. Bultmann stresses that there is scientific thinking, existential thinking, and mythical thinking and that only scientific and existential thought can be considered as having any value. The whole goal is to be able to interpret myth, which contradicts scientific thinking, through the filter of existential thinking. By doing this there is no longer a problem in accepting both the scientific thought and the interpretation of the Bible without conflict.<sup>23</sup>

Hans Conzelmann

Born in 1915 Hans Conzelmann would become one of the top scholars of his time. Conzelmann taught at both Zurich and Gottingen Universities and will be most remembered for his extensive use of redaction criticism, which seemed to be a logical next step to form criticism that had been so heavily used by his mentor Rudolf Bultmann.<sup>24</sup> Conzelmann in his mind had detected the weak points in his teacher's method and believed that redaction criticism could provide much more complete answers simply because of the concentration on the individual writers of the gospel and their purpose in writing them.<sup>25</sup> Before looking at three of Conzelmann's writings that express his different views and his use of redaction criticism it would be appropriate to look at what the method involves. Redaction Criticism is, "the study of New Testament text that concentrates on the unique theological emphases that the writers place upon the materials they used, their specific purposes in writing their works, and the *Sitz im Leben* out of which they

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<sup>22</sup>Cairns, 96.

<sup>23</sup>Cairns, 96-97.

<sup>24</sup>Bray, 431.

<sup>25</sup>Bray, 441.

wrote.”<sup>26</sup> The point of this method is to try and figure out if the writer or redactor had any kind of agenda or plan when writing the gospel and if so how does knowing that help understand the text more clearly. An example of this is *The Theology of St. Luke*, which Conzelmann published in 1954. After a careful analysis of Luke Conzelmann came to the conclusion that the author of Luke had kept in mind a “salvation history” while writing the gospel.<sup>27</sup> This knowledge can help when trying to read and interpret Luke so a scholar can keep in mind the objective of the author.

In his work *Jesus*, Conzelmann seems to deal with different approaches that he has seen in the past being used to try and interpret the gospels and who Christ is, and he offers a critique of many of these approaches as they change and develop. One approach he deals with is the early attempt around the turn of the century to try and reconstruct a picture of who Jesus was based on the gospels and using Mark as the key source. It would not take long before the scholars noticed that too many holes were being left and they had nothing to fill them with outside of educated guesses.<sup>28</sup> Conzelmann points out that it was going to have to be recognized that, “the gospels are not historical reports, but documents of faith.”<sup>29</sup> Conzelmann points out that as form criticism became the next step it became even more apparent that it would prove an impossible task to write a biography or life story of Christ based on the gospels. The idea of finding the historical Jesus was no longer the focus for many theologians, but instead finding the “Christ of faith” seemed to take on the most importance.<sup>30</sup> For Conzelmann, who studied the faith and un-

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<sup>26</sup>*Anchor Bible*, 647.

<sup>27</sup>*Anchor Bible*, 647.

<sup>28</sup>Conzelmann, Hans, *Jesus*, transl. by J. Raymond Lord, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1973), 6.

<sup>29</sup>*Jesus*, 7.

<sup>30</sup>*Jesus*, 8.

derstanding of the early church as it related to Christ came to the realization that the church's view of Christ could be linked directly back to the person of Christ.

Even though Conzelmann is a firm believer in redaction criticism he does not claim to not deal with some of the limitations and problems one can encounter when working with the method in New Testament studies. In his work, *History of Primitive Christianity* he takes time in the first section to deal with some of the problems and steps one has to take to make use of redaction criticism. When trying to come up with an exact history or understanding of the text problems can occur. One important thing in trying to understand all relevant points of view. Conzelmann makes the point that if you wanted to get the clearest understanding of the early church you would not only have to see it through the eyes of the church but also through the eyes of the evangelist that spoke for it, the Roman officials that had to deal with it, and even the philosophers that became familiar with the teachings of this new religion.<sup>31</sup> Not only is this wide view of opinions very important, but also other problems have to be looked at and dealt with. Trying to put together an understandable story of the early church is difficult for no other reason than the lack of sources. There is only the book of Acts to be used as a history of the early church. Conzelmann does not think this is accidental though, but in fact that the early church had no thought of recording multiple histories for future generations. The understanding among those in the early church was that they were in the last days, and that Christ would return fairly soon. Not only this but the early church was a small community and could not have foreseen the growth of the faith.<sup>32</sup> Basically Conzelmann points out that even though it would be wonderful

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<sup>31</sup>Conzelmann, Hans, *History of Primitive Christianity*, (Translated by John E. Steely. New York, NY: Abingdon Press, 1973), 14.

<sup>32</sup>*History of Primitive Christianity*, 15.

to have a more clear understanding of the early church for the purpose of redaction criticism it is very hard to get a very complete picture due to lack of sources alone.

## Max Weber

The last scholar being looked at did not only produce information that can be applied to biblical interpretation, but on top of this Weber is considered to be one of the greatest German economist, philosophers and sociologist of his time. After teaching for a few years he became overworked and had to leave the profession, but it was actually after his recovery that he did some of his most impressive and talked about research. Even though he died in 1920 near the beginning of this time period his work on methods of interpretation would prove to be very valuable.<sup>33</sup> Weber was definitely another pioneer of redaction criticism. He believed that it was a necessity to do whatever needed to be done to get at the original meaning or idea that the author was trying to get across in a text. The idea behind Weber's procedure was that by determining the exact meaning of the text scholars can see the idea that was in the writers mind prior to writing the text.<sup>34</sup> If the meaning of a text is not known then one must consider every meaning and compare the answers to other parts of the work in a way to see if the ideas line up and are consistent or if they seem to be of different thought patterns. Weber seems to firmly believe that unless there is a "completely spontaneous riot" that somehow there is a way to find an explanation for any happening by comparing common elements.<sup>35</sup> These common elements could include,

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<sup>33</sup>Lachmann, L. M., *The Legacy of Max Weber*, (Berkeley, CA: The Glendessary Press, 1971), 143.

<sup>34</sup>Lachmann, 18.

<sup>35</sup>Lachmann, 22.

“norms, institutions, and sometimes institutionalized behavior.”<sup>36</sup> As long as there exist some kind of pattern that can be seen and mapped then somehow any event can be understood and explained.

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<sup>36</sup>Lachmann, 22.

## **CONCLUSION**

This period of history in Germany was riddled with war and destruction yet some of the most important breakthroughs in theological studies came about during this time period. The different ideas that came about shook the foundation of Christianity as it had stood for hundreds of years, and forced many scholars to take a closer look at the New Testament and what studying it was all about. Through methods of historical criticism such as form criticism and redaction criticism whole new worlds have been opened up for New Testament studies that to this day have still not been explored as fully as they can be.

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