THEOLOGY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Udo Schnelle
Translated by M. Eugene Boring
Contents

Translator’s Preface 9
Author’s Preface to the German Edition 11
Abbreviations 13

   1.1 How History Is Made and Written 27
   1.2 History as Meaning-Formation 33
   1.3 Understanding through Narration 36

2. Structure: History and Meaning 41
   2.1 The Phenomenon of the Beginning 41
   2.2 Theology and the Academic Study of Religion 45
   2.3 Diversity and Unity 49
   2.4 New Testament Theology as Meaning-Formation 54

3. Jesus of Nazareth: The Near God 61
   3.1 The Quest for Jesus 61
   3.2 Beginning: John the Baptist 72
   3.3 Point of Departure: The Coming of the One God in His Kingly Power 81
   3.4 Center: The Proclamation of the Kingdom of God 86
   3.5 Ethics in the Horizon of the Kingdom of God 111
   3.6 Jesus as Healer: God’s Miraculous Power 121
   3.7 The Imminent Judgment: Nothing Is without Its Consequences 128
   3.8 Jesus and the Law: To Will the Good 133
   3.9 Jesus’s Self-Understanding: More Than a Prophet 146
   3.10 Jesus’s Destiny in Jerusalem: End and Beginning 155

4. The First Transformation: The Emergence of Christology 163
   4.1 Jesus’s Pre-Easter Claim 165
   4.2 The Resurrection Appearances 166
4.3 Experiences of the Spirit 169
4.4 The Christological Reading of Scripture 170
4.5 History-of-Religions Context 174
4.6 Language and Shape of Early Christology: Myth, Titles, Formulae, and Traditions 180

5. The Second Transformation: The Early Christian Mission without the Precondition of Circumcision 193
   5.1 The Hellenists 193
   5.2 Antioch 195
   5.3 The Stance of Paul 198

6. Paul: Missionary and Thinker 203
   6.1 Theology 205
   6.2 Christology 221
   6.3 Pneumatology 268
   6.4 Soteriology 275
   6.5 Anthropology 282
   6.6 Ethics 319
   6.7 Ecclesiology 328
   6.8 Eschatology 342
   6.9 Setting in the History of Early Christian Theology 359

7. The Third Transformation: Composition of Gospels as Innovative Response to Crises 363
   7.1 Death of the Founders 363
   7.2 Delay of the Parousia 367
   7.3 Destruction of Jerusalem and the Earliest Christian Congregation 369
   7.4 The Rise of the Flavians 370
   7.5 The Writing of Gospels as Innovative Response to Crises 373

8. The Sayings Source, the Synoptic Gospels, and Acts: Meaning through Narration 377
   8.1 The Sayings Source as Proto-Gospel 380
   8.2 Mark: The Way of Jesus 399
   8.3 Matthew: The New and Better Righteousness 429
   8.4 Luke: Salvation and History 463

   9.1 Social, Religious, and Political Developments 525
   9.2 Pseudepigraphy/Deuteronymity as a Historical, Literary, and Theological Phenomenon 534

10. The Deutero-Pauline Letters: Paul’s Thought Extended 539
    10.1 Colossians: Paul in Changing Times 539
    10.2 Ephesians: Space and Time 557
    10.3 Second Thessalonians: Date (of the End) as Problem 574
    10.4 The Pastoral Epistles: God’s Philanthropy 578

11. The Catholic Epistles: Voices in Dangerous Times 603
    11.1 First Peter: Testing by Suffering 603
    11.2 James: Acting and Being 617
Contents

11.3 Hebrews: The God Who Speaks  632
11.4 Jude and 2 Peter: Identity through Tradition and Polemic against Heresy  653

12. Johannine Theology: Introduction to the Christian Faith  659
   12.1 Theology  660
   12.2 Christology  669
   12.3 Pneumatology  704
   12.4 Soteriology  712
   12.5 Anthropology  716
   12.6 Ethics  726
   12.7 Ecclesiology  734
   12.8 Eschatology  741
   12.9 Setting in the History of Early Christian Theology  746

13. Revelation: Seeing and Understanding  751
   13.1 Theology  752
   13.2 Christology  754
   13.3 Pneumatology  759
   13.4 Soteriology  760
   13.5 Anthropology  761
   13.6 Ethics  762
   13.7 Ecclesiology  765
   13.8 Eschatology  768
   13.9 Setting in the History of Early Christian Theology  771

Bibliography  773
Index of Subjects  839
Index of Greek Words and Phrases  853
Index of Modern Authors  857
Index of Ancient Sources  871
Translator’s Preface

Udo Schnelle has established himself as a scholar of international reputation especially by his works on Paul and John.¹ His comprehensive introduction to New Testament studies has become the standard work in German-speaking countries.² He is editor of a multivolume collection of texts from the Hellenistic world that illuminate the context and interpretation of the New Testament.³ In the present volume, he integrates, updates, and expands his previous work into a full-scale theology of the New Testament that brings together detailed individual studies under a single overarching perspective. His command of primary sources from the Hellenistic world and of the vast secondary literature of New Testament exegesis and interpretation is documented in the footnotes and bibliography, but that the volume is rooted in careful study of the New Testament itself is manifest in the more than 10,000 biblical references. Udo Schnelle presents his own point of view with clarity, in the context of a discussion of alternatives addressed with fairness and respect. He is an active churchman, has served as the pastor of a congregation, and writes as one concerned to allow the New Testament authors to speak their own messages,


and to equip modern readers to perceive their theological breadth and depth. This book not only informs, it also generates dialogue—with the author, with his conversation partners past and present, and with the New Testament itself. These are among the reasons I am glad to have a part in commending it to the English-speaking world.

At the author’s and the publisher’s request, I have augmented the bibliography with English books and articles, mostly listing books and articles comparable to the ample German bibliography already present, for the benefit of students who do not read German, and I have combined the author’s original sectional bibliographies into a single comprehensive bibliography in the back of the book. I have also complied with the author’s and publisher’s request that I occasionally provide translator’s notes on the German text reflecting the European context with which the reader might not be familiar. In both cases, I have kept my own contributions to a minimum. (My notes are generally in square brackets and signed with my initials.)

For biblical citations, I have generally followed the NRSV, sometimes adjusting it to accommodate the emphasis or particular nuance of the German text cited or translated by the author. For translations of literature from the Hellenistic world, I have generally followed the Loeb Classical Library.

The translation has been read by the author, Udo Schnelle, and by James Ernest of Baker Academic. Each made helpful suggestions that contributed to a more readable and accurate translation, and to each I express my deep gratitude.

M. Eugene Boring
Fort Worth, TX
March 29, 2009
Since a theology of the New Testament must both (1) bring the thought world of the New Testament writings into clear focus and (2) articulate this thought world in the context of a contemporary understanding of reality, it has to work with different temporal planes. Its task is to envision the past in view of the present, to explicate it in such a way that its future relevance can be seen. New Testament theology is thus linked into the question of the lasting significance of past events. So it is always a historical discipline, and as such it must participate in theoretical debates on the nature and extent of historical knowledge. Thus the discipline of New Testament theology is involved from the start in the deliberations of the philosophy of history, how history as past reality is grasped, and which categories play a central role in this process.

People can understand reality only within the human capacity for interpretation, that is, for channeling past events into the worlds of human experience and ascribing significance to them in different ways. These processes are also events of “meaning-formation,” for they always aim at establishing or maintaining a valid orientation to the world and to life. Meaning-formation can entail ascertaining the validity of one’s present orientation, or expanding it, or initiating a new departure. It confers meaning on both past and present. Such constructions provide the sense-making capacity that facilitates the individual’s orientation within the complex framework of life.\(^1\) Meaning is an inherent

aspect of human existence as such. It emerges from events, experiences, insights, thought processes, and hermeneutical accomplishments, and it comes together in concepts. These concepts then can provide perspective on the central issues of life, bridging temporal gaps. They can be presented in a narrative mode, and they can generate normative statements and cultural models.  

The category meaning\(^3\) is particularly appropriate as a way of connecting the world of the New Testament and that of the present. In every age—including the Greco-Roman era—reality has been perceived through constant processes whereby religious meaning-formation happens in parallel with meaning-formation in other cultural domains: politics, philosophy, art, literature, economics, the natural sciences, and social structures. Human life is always a matter of the realization of meaning, so that the question is not whether human beings undertake meaning-formation but what resources, structure, quality, and argumentative force their efforts exhibit.

For a theology of the New Testament, the concept of meaning is key, for it enables divine and human to unite by encompassing the gift whereby God establishes meaning in Jesus Christ together with the testimony to that gift in the New Testament writings. The New Testament, as the basic documentary archive of Christianity, represents the formation of a meaning-formation or symbolic universe with an extraordinary history of effects. Early Christianity developed in a multicultural milieu with numerous, attractive, and competing religious and philosophical systems.\(^4\) On the foundation of the Jesus-Christ-history, narrated in numerous ways in the New Testament, it succeeded in building, inhabiting, and constantly adding on to a “house of

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2. Cf. Jörn Rüsen and K.-J. Hölkeskamp, “Einleitung,” in Sinn (in) der Antike (ed. K.-J. Hölkeskamp et al.; Mainz: Von Zabern, 2003), 3: “The concept meaning may be defined as follows: It is a product of reflection on the connections within one’s experienced world that proves to be plausible and dependable, serves to make sense of the world, to provide orientation within it, to form one’s identity, and that leads to purposeful action.”

3. The German word Sinn (meaning), like the English word sense, is derived from the Indo-Germanic root sent-, which basically means to take a particular direction, to go along a particular way. There is a connection with the Latin sentio (feel, perceive), sensus (sense, perception, understanding), sententia (meaning, purpose, thought); Old High German sin (Sinn), sinnan (strive for, desire); cf. Julius Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (2 vols.; Bern: Francke, 1959), 1:908.

meaning” capable of grounding, establishing, and structuring human life as a whole. This meaning structure, or symbolic universe, obviously had tremendous hermeneutical potential at its disposal, and a theology of the New Testament must aim to ascertain and delineate the basic elements of its hermeneutical potential. The category meaning as the hermeneutical constant thus prevents a narrowing of the focus to issues of historical facts, for what is at stake is how we can appropriate the New Testament traditions historically and make them theologically accessible without violating their religious content and their formative power to generate meaning. The truth claim of these texts is not to be avoided, for “truth” is meaning that makes a binding claim. The goal is not a gutted Christian house, but an appreciation of this house that perceives its architecture, the load-bearing floors and walls, the doors and stairways that create connections between its components, and the windows that make it possible to look outside. At the same time, focusing on the category meaning opens to theology the possibility of entering into critical discourse with other academic disciplines devoted to meaning and truth, and doing so on the basis of its own normative tradition.

1.1 How History Is Made and Written

Jesus of Nazareth is a historical figure, and the New Testament is testimony to his impact on history. When a New Testament theology is written on this basis from a distance of two thousand years, the fundamental problems of historical inquiry and historical knowledge inevitably arise. How was history made and how does research and writing about history take place? What happens when a document from the past that makes a claim on the future is interpreted in the present? How do historical reports make a binding claim? The goal is not a gutted Christian house, but an appreciation of this house that perceives its architecture, the load-bearing floors and walls, the doors and stairways that create connections between its components, and the windows that make it possible to look outside. At the same time, focusing on the category meaning opens to theology the possibility of entering into critical discourse with other academic disciplines devoted to meaning and truth, and doing so on the basis of its own normative tradition.

5. Regarding terminology: I use the German terms “Geschichte”/“geschichtlich” to refer to what happened, and “Historie”, “historisch” to indicate the ways in which historians attempt to determine what this was. “Historik” refers to the philosophical theory of history. Cf. H.-W. Hedinger, “Historik,” in Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie (ed. Karlfried Gründer et al.; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974). “Geschichte” is never directly available except as “Historie,” but nonetheless the two concepts and terms must be distinguished, because the questions posed from the point of view of philosophical theories of history are not simply identical with “what happened” as that was understood by people in the past. [The German language has two words for “history,” while English has but one. Many German authors, including some quoted by Schnelle, use the two words interchangeably. The nuances distinguished by Schnelle are sometimes difficult to preserve in English. Since the context usually makes clear which meaning is intended, I have generally rendered both words by history and its cognates, though sometimes using event or story for Geschichte to preserve the author’s nuance, or rendering geschichtlich by historic in contrast to historical. See note 2 in §2.1 below. Here the original reads: “Wie entsteht Geschichte/Historie?”—MEB]
and their incorporation into the thought world of the historian/exegete relate to each other?²⁶

**Interest and Acquisition of Knowledge**

From several points of view, the classical ideal of historicism—to present nothing more or less than “what actually happened”⁷—has proven to be an ideological postulate.⁸ As the present passes into the past, it irrevocably loses its character as reality. For this reason alone it is not possible to recall the past, in intact form, into the present. The temporal interval signifies a fading away in every regard; it disallows historical knowledge in the sense of a comprehensive restoration of what once happened.⁹ All that one can do is to declare in the present one’s own interpretation of the past. The past is available to us exclusively in the mode of the present, and only in interpreted and selected form. What is relevant from the past is not that which is merely past, but that which influences world-formation and world-interpretation in the present.¹⁰ The true temporal plane on which the historian/exegete works is always the present,¹¹ within which he or she is inextricably intertwined, so


7. Cf. Leopold von Ranke, “Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494–1514,” in *Leopold von Ranke’s sämmtliche Werke* (ed. Alfred Wilhelm Dove and Theodor Wiedemann; 3rd ed.; Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1875), vii: “People have conferred on history the responsibility of restoring the past, to make it useful for the instruction of years to come. The present work does not accept such a high office: it only wants to set forth what actually happened” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen [ist]*)


10. Cf. Johann Gustav Droysen, *Outline of the Principles of History* (trans. E. Benjamin Andrews; New York: Fertig, 1893), 11: “The data for historical investigation are not past things, for these have disappeared, but things which are still present here and now, whether recollections of what was done, or remnants of things that have existed and of events that have occurred.”

that present understanding of past events is always decisively stamped by the historian’s own cultural standards. The historian or exegete’s social setting, traditions, and political and religious values necessarily affect what he or she says in the present about the past.\textsuperscript{12} We are all committed to our various intellectual orthodoxies. Even the very preconditions of understanding, especially reason and the particular context in which it operates, are subject to a process of continuing transformation, inasmuch as historical knowledge is conditioned by the aims that direct the quest for knowledge in each period of intellectual history.

The writing of history is thus never an uncontaminated reproduction of “what happened.” Rather, each act of history-writing includes something of its own history—the history, that is, of its writer! Insight into the historicalness of the knowing subject calls for reflection on his or her role in the act of understanding, for the knowing subject does not stand over history but is entirely interwoven within it. It is therefore altogether inappropriate to describe historical understanding in terms of a contrast between “objectivity” and “subjectivity.”\textsuperscript{13} The use of such terminology serves rather as a rhetorical strategy of declaring one’s own position as positive and neutral in order to discredit other interpretations as subjective and ideological. The object known cannot be separated from the knowing subject, for the act of knowing also always effects a change in the object that is known. The awareness of reality attained in the act of knowing and the past reality itself do not relate as copy and original.\textsuperscript{14} One should thus speak not of the “objectivity” of historical arguments but of their plausibility and fittingness.\textsuperscript{15} After all, those reports introduced into historical arguments as “facts” are as a rule themselves already interpretations of past events. Already interpreted as meaningful, they necessarily undergo further meaning-formation in order to continue to be history. The past event itself is not available to us, but only the various understandings of past events mediated to us by various interpreters. Things do not become us; neither what one has already done, nor what one expects of the future. The one is already gone, and the other may not happen” (trans. MEB).

\begin{enumerate}
\item Cf. J. Straub, “Über das Bilden von Vergangenheit,” in \textit{Geschichtsbewußtsein: Psychologische Grundlagen, Entwicklungskonzepte, empirische Befunde} (ed. Jörn Rüsen; Cologne: Böhlau, 2001), 45: “Representations of events and developments do not deliver mimetic models of events that once happened, but perceptions of events bound to particular capacities of understanding and interpretation. Such interpretations are formed from the perspective of a particular present by particular persons, and are thus directly dependent on the experiences, expectations, orientations and interests of these persons.”
\item Cf. Goertz, \textit{Umgang mit Geschichte}, 130–46.
\end{enumerate}
what they are for us until we ascribe meaning to them. History is not reconstructed, but unavoidably and necessarily *constructed*. The common perception that things need only be “reported” or “re-constructed” suggests a knowledge of the original events that does not exist in the manner presupposed by this terminology. Nor is history simply identical with the past; rather, it is always only a stance in the present from which one can view the past. Thus within the realm of historical constructions, there are no “facts” in the “objective” sense; interpretations are built on interpretations. Hence the truth of the statement: “Events are not [in themselves] history; they become history.”

**Reality as Given**

And yet we by no means give up on reference to actual events; rather, we reflect on the conditions under which their reality is perceived. To say that history is constructed does not imply anything arbitrary or self-derived; we proceed according to method and on the basis of data. We must connect data from the sources in a meaningful framework, necessarily remaining within the academic discourse that makes it possible to receive and discuss the data.

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16. Cf. Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik: Rekonstruktion der ersten vollständigen Fassung der Vorlesungen* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1857), 69. On the same page Droysen judiciously comments regarding historical circumstances: “They are only historical because they are interpreted historically, not objective realities in and of themselves, but in and through our observation and appropriation. We must, so to speak, transpose them into a different key.”

*Schnelle is here opposing Radical Construction, a recent philosophical movement centered at the University of Vienna. The basic tenet of this view, popular among some postmodern authors, is that any kind of knowledge is constructed rather than perceived through senses. Among its leading proponents are Heinz von Foerster and Humberto R. Maturana. Maturana, as the founder of the epistemological theory of *autopoiesis*, focuses on the central role of the observer in the production of knowledge. For English introductions to the topic cf. Paul Watzlawick, *The Invented Reality: How Do We Know What We Believe We Know? Contributions to Constructivism* (New York: Norton, 1984), and Lynn Segal, *The Dream of Reality: Heinz von Foerster’s Constructivism* (2nd ed.; Berlin: Springer, 2001).—MEB*

17. Despite the unavoidable constructive character of history writing, these considerations allow us to reject the frequently made charge that the historian’s own will to power tends to dominate the objects of historical research. For a critique of the postmodern, radically constructivist theories of arbitrary historical construction, see Jörn Rüsen, “Narrativität und Objektivität,” in *Geschichte im Kulturprozeß* (ed. Jörn Rüsen; Cologne: Böhla, 2002), 99–124; and Jörn Rüsen, ed., *Kann gestern besser werden?* (Berlin: Kudnos, 2003), 11–12: “Even if, in the turbulent time of our own present, history is at our disposal, so we, the interpreters, are always already at its disposal. We, the ones who ‘construct,’ are as history’s constructors always in the situation of already having been constructed by history itself.” Günter Dux, *Historisch-genetische Theorie der Kultur: Instabile Welten: Zur prozessualen Logik im kulturellen Wandel* (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2000), 160: “The blind spot in logical absolutism, as we have known it in the postmodern understanding of Constructivism and the theoretical system associated with it, consists in the fact that Constructivism does not understand itself to be subject to any systemic complex of conditions.”
Everything we say is always bound up in existing general understandings of time and reality\textsuperscript{18} without these preunderstandings, meaningful construction and communication would not be possible. Every human being is genetically preconstructed and is constantly being coconstructed by sociocultural dynamics. Reflection and construction are always later actions that refer to something already given. Thus self-consciousness is never based on itself but necessarily requires reference to something beyond itself that grounds it and makes it possible. The fact that the question of meaning is even possible, and that history can be seen as meaningful, points to an “unimaginable reality,”\textsuperscript{19} preceding all being, that gives it reality. The fundamental principle is that history originates only after the event on which it is based has been discerned as relevant for the present, so that necessarily history cannot have the same claim to reality as the events themselves on which it is based.

**Language and Reality**

In addition to these epistemological insights we now come to reflections on the philosophy of language. History is always mediated to us in linguistic form; history exists only to the extent that it is expressed in language. Historical reports become history only through the semantically organized construction of the historian/exegete. In this process, language not only describes the object of thought accepted as reality but also determines and places its stamp on all perceptions that are organized as history. For human beings, there is no path from language to an independent, extralinguistic reality, for reality is present to us only in and through language. The past event is thus available only as memory, a reality that is mediated and formed by language. Language itself, however, is in turn culturally conditioned and subject to constant social

\textsuperscript{18} L. Hölscher, Neue Annalistik: Umrisse einer Theorie der Geschichte (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003), 44, emphasizes this aspect: “Were it not for the relative stability of the categorical apparatus of basic models of reality, temporal though they are, historians could not even relate different portrayals of history to each other. It is the relative constancy of temporal categories that first makes possible the historical evaluation and balancing of different portrayals of [the same] history.”

\textsuperscript{19} Cf. Jörn Rüsen, “Faktizität und Fiktionalität der Geschichte—Was ist Wirklichkeit im historischen Denken?” in Konstruktion von Wirklichkeit: Beiträge aus geschichtstheoretischer, philosophischer und theologischer Perspektive (ed. Jens Schröter and Antje Eddelbüttel; TBT 127; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), 31: “What makes meaning work? The fact that reality already impresses itself into historical thinking is a meaning-event, an event that generates historical meaning. Apart from this unimaginable reality it could not determine historical thinking so in the mental operations of historical consciousness, as is necessary for the fulfilling of its cultural orientation function. The awareness of this meaning as an element of unimaginable reality within one’s life-world of human suffering and action is a procedural factor that binds secular and religious thinking together. Religion gives this unimaginable reality its own quality of meaning. Secular historical thinking hesitates to take this step but ultimately draws from similar wellsprings of meaning.”
transformation. It is not surprising, then, that historical events are construed and evaluated differently in situations shaped by different cultures and values. Language is much more than a mere reflection of reality, for it regulates and places its own stamp on the appropriation of reality, and thereby also on our pictures of what is real. At the same time, language is not the reality itself, for language too first comes into being in the course of human history, and in the personal history of every human being within the framework of his or her biological and cultural development. This means that in this process it is decisively influenced by the varieties of human cultures and individual lives. This constant process of change to which language is subject can be explained only in relation to the different social contexts by which it is conditioned. This means that the connection between the symbol that signifies and the reality signified must be maintained if one does not want to surrender reality itself.

Facts and Fiction

History is thus always a selective system by means of which interpreters order and interpret not merely the past but especially their own world. The linguistic construction of past events always therefore takes place as a meaning-creating process that confers meaning on both past and present; such constructions provide the sense-making capacity that facilitates the individual’s orientation within the complex framework of life. Historical interpretation means the creation of a coherent framework of meaning; facts become what they are for us only by the creation of such a historical narrative framework. In this process, historical reports must be made accessible to the present and expressed in language, so that in the presentation or narration of historical events, “facts” and “fiction”—data and

20. Goertz, Unsichere Geschichte, 50–51.
21. Ernst Cassirer, An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 191: “History is not knowledge of external facts or events; it is a form of self-knowledge.”
23. “Fiction” is not here used in the popular sense of “unreal” or “untrue,” but is intended in the functional-communications sense, and thus approaches the original meaning of “fictio”: “construction,” “formation.” [Cf. the use of “fabrication” in English.—MEB] Cf. Wolfgang Iser, The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 54: “If it [fiction] is not reality, this is not because it lacks the attributes of reality, but because it tells us something about reality, and the conveyer cannot be identical to what is conveyed. Furthermore, once the time-honored convention has been replaced by the concept of communication, attention must be paid to the hitherto neglected recipient of the message. Now if the reader and the literary text are partners in a process of communication, and if what is communicated is to be of any value, our prime concern will no longer be the meaning of the text (the hobbyhorse ridden by the critics of yore) but its effect. Herein lies the function of literature, and herein lies the justification for approaching literature from a functionalist standpoint.”

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Theology of the New Testament,
the creative-fictive work of an author—are necessarily combined. In that historical reports are combined, historical gaps must be filled in, reports from the past and their interpretation in the present flow together to produce something new. Interpretation inserts the past event into a new structure that it did not previously have. There are only potential facts, for experience and interpretation are necessary to grasp the meaning-potential of an event. “Bare” facts must have a meaning attached to them, and the structure of this process of interpretation constitutes the understanding of facts. It is the fictional element that first opens up access to the past, for it makes possible the unavoidable rewriting of the presupposed events. The figurative, symbolic level is indispensable for historical work, for it develops the prefigured plan of interpretation that shapes the present’s appropriation and interpretation of the past. This brings us to the second part of our reflections: the necessarily and inevitably constructive character of history is always part of meaning-formation.

1.2 History as Meaning-Formation

Human existence and action are characterized by their capacity for meaning. No form of human life can be defined “without reference to meaning. It makes sense to understand meaning as the fundamental category of

24. Cicero, Or. 2.54: The historian Antipater is singled out for praise, because “he imparted to history a richer tone,” while “the rest did not embellish their facts, but were merely chroniclers”; Luke 1:1–4; Plutarch, Alex. 1.1 (οὔτε γὰρ ἱστορίας γράφομεν ἀλλὰ βίους,” for I am not writing history but portraying lives”). These texts unmistakably illustrate that ancient authors too had a clear awareness of these connections (see further Thucydides, Hist. 1.22.1; Lucian, Hist. conscr. 51; Quintilian, Inst. 7.3.70).

25. Cf. the discussion in Goertz, Unsichere Geschichte, 16ff., oriented to how these issues have been dealt with in the history of scholarship. See further M. Moxter, “Erzählung und Ereignis,” in Der historische Jesus (ed. J. Schröter and R. Bruckner; BZNW 114; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), 80: “One must say that the narration of the event already goes beyond the event itself on the basis of the temporal gap that separates them.”

26. This constructive aspect of the knowledge process also applies to the natural sciences. Constructiveness and contextuality determine the fabrication of knowledge; the natural sciences are always an interpreted reality that increasingly reflects the invisible currents of political and economic interests that involve us both individually and globally. Cf. K. Knorr-Cetina, Die Fabrikation von Erkenntnis: Zur Anthropologie der Naturwissenschaft (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991).

27. Cf. Goertz, Umgang mit Geschichte, 87: “It is thus not pure facticity that constitutes a ‘historical fact.’ Rather, it is the significance of an event, which is only gradually perceived and adopted, and which otherwise would have sunk unnoticed into the past, that confers this special quality upon it. Not in its own time, but only after its time does a ‘bare fact’ become a historical fact.”


human existence.” The insights of cultural anthropology have made it clear that meaning-formation is a necessary consequence of the ability of human beings to transcend both themselves and the life-world of their society and culture. Meaning-formation is not an option that human beings may choose or decline, but something inevitable, necessary, and natural. Moreover, human beings are always born into a world of meaning. The drive to make sense of things is an unavoidable part of human life, for the human life-world must be thought about, disclosed, and appropriated in some meaningful way—only so is human life and action possible in this world. Every religion—including early Christianity and the theologies that developed within it—is a form of meaning-formation and thus is such a process of disclosure and appropriation. Concretely, this process of disclosure and appropriation takes place as historical meaning-formation. Historical meaning is constituted from the “three components of experience, interpretation, and orientation.” The meaningfulness of an event cannot be derived from its facticity alone; it still needs the experience of a particular person or persons before its meaning potential can be actualized.

Meaning and Identity

Meaning-formation is always bound to the projection of identity and succeeds only by projecting a convincing identity. Human beings attain their identity above all by giving their lives an enduring orientation that connects all of their diverse desires and intentions into a stable, coherent, and intersubjectively defensible whole. Identity develops as a constant negotiation between the

30. Cf. Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, The Structures of the Life-World (trans. Richard M. Zaner and H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr.; 2 vols.; NUSPEP; Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973–83), 2:99–158. Their point of departure is the undeniable experience of everyday life that always necessarily transcends that of any individual, which means that existence is not livable without transcendence: we live in a world that was here before us and will be here after us. Reality almost always retreats from our efforts to grasp it, and the existence of other people, whose inner selves can never be truly known, provokes the question of our own selfhood.
33. Ibid., 36.
34. Cf. Thomas Luckmann, Die unsichtbare Religion (2nd ed.; Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1993), 93, who explains “worldview” as the matrix of meaning that forms the framework within which human organisms formulate their identity and thereby transcend their biological nature.
processes of positively defining oneself and coming to terms with experienced differences. An identity is not formed in a vacuum; rather, an existing identity is taken up and transformed into a new one that is perceived as an improvement and strengthening of the previous self. This is why identity can never be grasped as a static entity, for it is part of an ongoing process of reformation, since “as unity and selfhood of the subject” identity is “conceivable only as a synthesis of different, heterogeneous elements that must be brought into relationship with each other.” The process of identity-formation is determined by three equal factors: (1) perceiving one’s distinctness from the surrounding world; (2) bumping into boundaries, both self-imposed and externally determined; and (3) thus coming to an awareness that one actually exists as a discrete self. So also collective identities are formed by the processing of differentiating experiences and feelings of commonality. Symbols play a decisive role in this process, for only with their help can collective identities be created and maintained. Universes of meaning must be articulable in the world of secular reality and while keeping their content communicable. To a considerable extent this happens through symbols, which function in the life-world to build bridges “from one province of reality . . . to another.” Particularly in the processing of the “great transcendencies” such as sickness, crises, and death, symbols play a fundamental role, for they belong to another level of reality and are themselves bearers of that reality, and thus can establish a relation with that level of reality. Symbols are a central category for the communication of religious meaning. Identity-formation is thus always integrated into a complex process of interaction between the individual or collective subject, its experience of differentiation and boundaries, its perception of self and nonself.

The respective determinations of identity are necessarily achieved through universes of meaning or symbolic universes, which as social constructions make interpretive models available for the meaningful experiencing of reality. Symbolic universes are objectified as signs and symbols, and thus represent reality in


37. Schutz and Luckmann, Structures, 2:117.

38. Ibid., 99–134.

a communicable form. Among other things, symbolic universes legitimize social structures, institutions, and roles; that is, they explain and provide the basis for things as they are. In addition, symbolic universes integrate these roles into a meaningful whole within which individual persons or groups can act. They enable both synchronic coherence and the diachronic placement of individuals and groups in an overarching historical framework; that is, they provide a framework of meaning. Religion simply constitutes the symbolic universe as such. Far and away more than law, philosophy, or political ideologies, religion claims to represent the one, all-encompassing reality that transcends all other realities: God, or The Holy. As the all-encompassing reality within which every human life is lived, religion presents a symbolic universe that, especially by means of symbols, integrates both individuals and groups into the wholeness of the universe, interprets the phenomena of life, offers guidelines for conduct, and ultimately opens up perspectives beyond death. Understanding history in terms of meaning-formation and the formation of identity raises the question of mode: how does this understanding work in practice?

1.3 Understanding through Narration

A historical event is not meaningful in and of itself, nor does it play a role in the formation of identity, until its meaning potential has been inferred and established. This potential must be transferred from the realm of chaotic contingency into “an orderly, meaningful, intelligible contingency.” The fundamental construct that facilitates this transfer is narration, for narrative sets up the meaning structure that makes it possible for human beings to come to terms with historical contingency. This is the form in which both

40. Ibid., 42–43, 48–50, 86.
44. Here we presuppose a broad understanding of narrative that is not bound to particular literary genres. Proceeding from the fundamental insight that experience of time must be processed in the narrative mode, to interpret “narrative as a meaning- or sense-laden linguistic form, or one that creates sense or meaning. That is to say: the narrative form of human thematizing makes sense of and confers meaning on the happenings and actions—Independently of the particular content of the narrative presentation” (Straub, “Bilden von Vergangenheit,” 51–52). For a broad concept of narrative, cf. also Roland Barthes, The Semiotic Challenge (trans. Richard Howard; New York: Hill and Wang, 1988), 95–135.
The innermost human self and external events can be expressed. Narrative secures events in a temporal framework and gives permanence to the unique incident; only then are the formation, transmission, and reception of tradition possible. Narrative brings things into a factual, temporal, and spatial relationship; “it arranges things ex post facto in a plausible structure that shows they necessarily or probably happened that way.” A narrative establishes insight by creating new connections and allowing the meaning of the event to emerge. The processing of religious experiences occurs in a twofold manner, namely in/through narratives and ritual(s). The religious experiences of groups or individuals trigger processes of meaning-formation that find expression in narratives and rituals and thus lead also to the composition of texts, so that they can be further communicated. In the face of the cross and resurrection, meaning-formation was inevitable. All early Christian authors were faced with the task of fitting the chaotic contingency of the crucifixion and resurrection into a meaningful theological structure—and they did this through narrative.

Functions of Narrative

The first and fundamental function of narrative is to constitute reality by setting it within a temporal framework. Narratives order reality in a particular way without which the communication of this reality would be utterly impossible. A further function of narratives consists of the formation and transmission of knowledge. Narratives report, describe, and explain events, increase knowledge, and form a worldview within which human beings can orient themselves. Narratives establish relations and causal connections that make understanding possible. Oppositions are broken down and new relationships are determined—the absolute and the finite, the temporal and the eternal, life and death.

A particularly important feature of narratives is the capacity to form, present, and stabilize identity. Narratives establish and authenticate a complex

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48. Cf. Aleida Assmann, Zeit und Tradition: Kulturelle Strategien der Dauer (Cologne: Böhlau, 1999), 15: “As actions intended to be repeated, rites secure continuity and duration by establishing the identical in the course of a changing world. They do not eliminate time, but constitute it by creating continuities.”
49. Cf. ibid., 4: “Horizons of meaning are established through temporal constructions.”
of meanings that leads through particular instances of identification to the formation of identity. Narratives evoke and convey memories, without which there can be no enduring identity. In particular, narratives function to sort out and process collective experiences, and evoke personal identification in members of the group, which then become orientations for life and action. This orientation-formation is one of the fundamental practical functions of narratives. Narratives open and close possible courses of action and provide structure for the free space in which decisions must be made. Narratives thus also always have a normative dimension; they function to orientate one’s ethical perspective. An additional function of narratives is the mediation of values and norms, the provision or revision of standpoints. Since narratives mediate experiences and expectations, values and orientations, they contribute to the formation of an ethical and pedagogical consciousness. When the proposals presented in narratives are accepted and shared, they create the basis for common judgments and a common social world. Narratives bind people together in one sociocultural fabric and lay the foundation for joint action in the present and a common perspective on the future.

At the same time, narratives deliver the basis for the formation of tradition, of which they themselves are part, in that they generate and secure continuity, so that information, interpretations, values, and particular ways of life can be handed on through time.

**Narration and Narratives in Early Christianity**

The fundamentally constructive character of historical meaning-formation is clearly seen in the New Testament authors: especially with the help of narrative units, key terms, and symbols, they create symbolic universes that integrate individuals and groups into the wholeness of the cosmos, interpret the phenomena of life, offer guidelines for conduct, and ultimately open up perspectives that transcend death. Narratives are always concerned with memories, with interpreting experiences through time. Memory is the definitive reference to the experience of time. The New Testament narratives about Jesus Christ express a memory process, and they form a consciousness of history: they proclaim the meaningfulness of God’s act in Jesus of Nazareth for past, present, and future. All the New Testament authors use narrative to establish an inner coherence between interpretation of the past, understanding of the present, and perspective on the future, so that those who receive the narrative receive the event that it preserves. Events are made present, given form in the process, resulting in meaning-formations as narratives. To connect times and topics into a coherent whole is to create a narrative.

All these functions of narrative make clear that the effort to make a clear distinction between fictional and nonfictional narration does not work. Because the memory-preserving narrative is always oriented to understanding and act-
ing in the present, fictional and nonfictional elements flow together in every narrative. *Narrative theory thus a priori prohibits the alternative “historical Jesus”—“Christ of faith,” for there cannot be any access to Jesus of Nazareth that excludes his significance for the present.* Narration is what opens up spaces for reception and interpretation in the first place, making possible the kind of transformations that lie before us in all New Testament writings.

The above considerations apply to oral as well as written narration, which in early Christianity should not be understood as mutually exclusive alternatives, since for a long time they existed alongside each other, with much cross-fertilization. Nonetheless, putting the narrative in writing gave it new accents, a process that demonstrably was already beginning in Paul’s time and accelerated with the gospels. The written medium lessened the (emotional) immediacy of communication while creating some distance between the contents of the history and the way it was communicated. This distance created new potentialities for thought, interpretation, and transformation, and permitted the kind of dissociation, even alienation of effects that can occur in the theater; these are all inevitable when events are described, recorded, communicated, and received. Writing unburdened the memory, fixed the events in a particular form, abstracted them from the necessity of an immediate response, and thus created the room necessary for objectifications and interpretations of the narratives. As narrators became authors, hearers/readers could become critical in their reception; they could establish normative interpretations by arranging explanations, establishing terms and concepts, and making moral appeals.

**After-as-Before**

We have no records that come directly from Jesus or from his immediate associates but only testimony from a somewhat later time. This is in no way a lack, for the posteriority of memory signifies no epistemological loss, since the significance of an event is not really seen until viewed in retrospect. The past always exists only as present appropriation, and in the context of present identity it is repeatedly perceived and made accessible. Only within such an ongoing process can we recognize the relevant past, communicate it, and discern its significance. The distance of posteriority creates room for thinking things through in new and transformative ways. This allows the de-

52. In this regard Jesus of Nazareth finds himself in good company, for there are also no written traditions directly from Socrates. For Dio Chrysostom, *Oratationes* 55.8–9, this is no deficiency but evidence of Socrates’ powerful personality.

53. Eckart Reinmuth, “Neutestamentliche Historik,” *TLZ* 8 (2003): 47–55, uses the term *Nachträglichkeit,* “supplementary-character” that memory adds to the event in the process of remembering. [Schnelle had used *Nachzeittigkeit,* translated *posteriority* above. In grammar, the term refers to the action of a subordinate clause that takes place later than the action of the main clause, e.g., “I know what you will do.”—MEB]
development of the metaphorical potential inherent within the event itself and makes understanding possible. We will see how creative and multifaceted—how astute, incisive, and enduring—the later New Testament narratives of the Jesus-Christ-history proved to be.

Summary

We have reflected on fundamental issues concerning the origin of history, historical knowledge as the product of meaning-formation, and narrative as the primary form of perceiving, representing, and communicating historical events. What is the significance of these reflections for a theology of the New Testament?

1. Theology in general and New Testament theology in particular are no worse off epistemologically than any other domain of knowledge. All knowledge is a construction bound to particular standpoints and perspectives. Every academic discipline has its own appropriate object of study. For the discipline of theology as a whole, the object of study is God as the bearer and final ground of all being; for the theology of the New Testament, the object is the manifold witness of the New Testament.

2. Like all other academic disciplines, New Testament theology participates in the prior meaningfulness of all being, which is the basis upon which the posing of systematic questions and the formation of meaning are even possible in the first place.

3. Methodologically, the category of meaning is particularly important for grasping the work of New Testament authors, i.e., for interpreting it and presenting its contemporary significance.

4. Faced with the cross and resurrection, efforts at meaning-formation were unavoidable. New Testament authors responded in a variety of ways, as they all narrated the Jesus-Christ-history from their own perspective, in their own way, for their own community of faith.

5. The task of a theology of the New Testament is to apprehend these achievements of meaning-formation and to present them in their theological, literary, and history-of-religion dimensions. The aim is to facilitate authentic reception of the New Testament’s meaning-formation in the present.