REVIEW ESSAY

Setting the Record Straight: 

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In 2004, the very year that Robert Yarbrough’s book appeared, Wayne Meeks gave his presidential address to the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas on the question, “Why Study the New Testament?”1 This address provides a counterpoint to Dr. Yarbrough’s book and demonstrates the timeliness of his argument.

Dr. Meeks candidly admitted that the answer to this question was not at all obvious anymore. When the Society was founded in 1947, it had a substantial audience of primarily Protestant theologians, who were, in turn, training pastors that preached each Sunday. These pastors thought they were supposed to connect their preaching with the Bible, and therefore exegesis mattered to them. New Testament scholars of that era knew who they were and what they were doing: they were historians and exegetes, and their job was to teach the scholars who trained pastors. The Society had a method (the historical-critical method), a text (the NT), and an audience (the churches).2

Now, explains Meeks, the world has changed. The historical-critical method has been called into serious question because of its close ties to “post-Kantian” epistemology and the Cartesian notion that “the disembodied rational self” is “the arbiter of truth.” This method, it turns out, had an ideology of its own, and this ideology was unable to cope with, for example, the horrors of the Holocaust.3

The viability of exegesis as a discipline has also been called into question. Textual criticism cannot even deliver to us an “original text” that a single group...

3. Ibid., 159–60.
of readers had in their hands. The text we think we have, moreover, turns out to have a multiplicity of meanings, depending on who is reading it.\textsuperscript{4}

The audience of the Society, moreover, has shrunk dramatically as Europe has become more secular. Even in America, where many people still attend church, most of those who attend either ignore or despise the kind of work that the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas does.\textsuperscript{5}

For NT scholars to move forward in this somewhat bleak landscape, says Meeks, they should continue to be good historians and exeges. The demise of these disciplines, he predicts, is only temporary.\textsuperscript{6} They should also embrace rather than be embarrassed by the reality that the primary audience for biblical scholarship is the mélange of faith communities that consider the NT to be sacred Scripture.\textsuperscript{7}

Surprisingly, Meeks proposes that the first step of professional NT scholars into this new world ought to be the erasure “from our vocabulary” of “the terms ‘biblical theology’ and, even more urgently, ‘New Testament theology.’”\textsuperscript{8} The problem with these terms is threelfold.\textsuperscript{9}

First, biblical theology privileges doctrine over life. Meeks seems to mean by this that biblical theology is absorbed with tracing doctrinal themes through the Bible and forgets that the texts making up the Bible were forged by real people, in real places, with real experiences that, if fully known, would seem foreign to us. It is a concern reminiscent of William Wrede and of the history-of-religions school generally.\textsuperscript{10}

Second, Meeks says that “biblical theology” implicitly claims textual and historical warrants for propositions that in truth arise only out of continuing transactions between text and reader through many times and places, and it invites our complicity as historians in this masking of the source of authority. Whenever we hear the phrase, “The Bible clearly teaches,” in contemporary debates, we may be sure that this covert relocation of the warrant is taking place.\textsuperscript{11}

Meeks seems to be concerned here that when NT academics practice what they call “New Testament theology” they are using what looks like objective historical inquiry to support dogmatic conclusions that were already in place on other, faith-based grounds. Again, this is reminiscent of Wrede’s claim that “the theologian who obeys the historical object as his master is not in a position to serve the church through his properly scientific-historical work, even if he

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 162–63.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 164.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 164–65.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 167.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid. Compare the similar calls of J. M. Robinson and C. T. Craig, as described in Yarbrough, \textit{Salvation Historical Fallacy} 62–63 and 143–44.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 168.
were personally interested in doing so." The historian of early Christianity must be free to follow the rules of historiography without concern for the church's needs.12

Third, says Meeks, NT scholars have used biblical theology to secure a place in the theological hierarchy.13 I take this to mean that, by finding some theological unity in the Bible, biblical theologians thought the church would consider them crucially important and award them positions of authority.

Meeks is both a gifted and a fair-minded scholar. He knows that his comments are provocative, and he made them not to state an unassailable conclusion but to start a much needed "argument" about what biblical studies has to say to the church.14

It is exactly here, I think, that Yarbrough's thoughtful, mature book makes its strongest contribution: it provides a judicious and convincing response to the perspective that Meeks articulates and that has been an influential paradigm in the academic study of the NT at least since William Wrede.15 Yarbrough's response accomplishes several important tasks.

First, he is concerned to dispel the notion that the salvation-historical approach to the Bible was a unified movement, whose adherents read each others' works and whose case for the salvation-historical approach stands or falls as a unit. People make a serious mistake if they think that the salvation-historical approach came crashing down with the mainly North American Biblical Theology movement of the 1940s and 50s or with the lone scholar Oscar Cullmann. Yarbrough shows that the term salvation history originates in Germany in the mid-19th century with the work of J. C. K. von Hofmann, and the concept dominates the thinking of the late-19th- and early-20th-century scholar Adolf Schlatter, who nevertheless rarely uses the term and does not align his own work with Hofmann's.16

In a fascinating study of Cullmann,17 Yarbrough shows that he began his career as a garden-variety historical-critical scholar of the Baur-Wrede, neo-Kantian type. Manifesting no explicit evidence that Hofmann or Schlatter influenced him at all, Cullmann eventually became dissatisfied with a method that on philosophical grounds banished the involvement of God in historical events. He was interested in taking seriously the possibility that an actual, physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead might help explain the considerable theological unity of the NT.

The salvation-historical approach, therefore, is not a "school" of thought in which a group of closely knit scholars developed a certain, cohesive method for biblical interpretation: it was developed by several scholars, relatively independently of each other, as a serious attempt to explain how early Christianity arose and what it believed.18 It is not as if James Barr's criticism of

17. Ibid., 213–60.
18. Ibid., 337–38.
Cullmann’s explanation of biblical terms for time has somehow undermined the entire salvation-historical approach to biblical theology. Barr’s criticism does not even touch the heart of Cullmann’s primary concern, much less call into question the work of Hofmann, Schlatter, and Martin Albertz, who show little or no formal connection with Cullmann.

This element of Yarbrough’s study successfully refutes a common myth that allows Hofmann, Schlatter, Cullmann, and Albertz to be ignored with sweeping judgments and one-sentence dismissals. He puts his readers directly in touch with these great historians so that people learn their positions from these scholars themselves rather than from their critics. He makes sure, then, that readers of his book who might have an inherited negative view of the salvation-historical approach to NT theology know what they are criticizing if they want to continue to disagree with it. This is a good piece of work, and Dr. Yarbrough deserves our thanks for it.

Second, and even more significantly, he brings to the fore the fundamental importance of the epistemology of the scholars that he describes. He shows successfully that the basic reason salvation-historical scholars have been marginalized in academic discussion has nothing to do with their lack of knowledge of the primary and secondary literature, or the dullness of their critical skills, or even their conservative theological convictions. Their marginalization arises from their refusal to work within the reigning Cartesian and neo-Kantian epistemological paradigm that dominated historical study in European universities of the 19th and 20th centuries.

This paradigm had banished God from the realm of sense experience and therefore from acting in history in any way that the historian could reliably detect. Hofmann, Schlatter, Cullmann, and Albertz all have in common their dissatisfaction with this banishment: why not consider God to be a possible cause for historical effects, such as the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and see what explanatory power this possibility has for the historical evidence available to us of early Christianity? Yarbrough shows that it is the willingness of the advocates of salvation history to ask this question and not the relatively minor foibles that their critics often make so much of that resulted in the disappearance of salvation history from scholarly discourse.

At the same time, he makes the case that the victorious Kantian paradigm goes almost entirely unexamined in the history of biblical scholarship. Early in the 19th century, Kant received a rail pass to the universities of Europe, and the attempt of Hofmann, Schlatter, Cullmann, and Albertz to play the role of conductors and examine the legitimacy of this free ride was considered an impertinence. In the end, the conductors were tossed off the train, and Kant continued his ride. It is the great merit of Yarbrough’s book that he gives the issue of philosophical, and specifically, epistemological presuppositions such prominence. This is the right place to begin our discussion with scholars who think there is something intellectually dubious about biblical theology. The charge is not new. It echoes down the hallways of Western universities throughout the

19. Ibid., 232.
20. Ibid., 259.
19th and 20th centuries, and it runs something like this: Biblical theology is motivated by the needs of the church rather than sober historical inquiry, and it therefore claims a unity for the texts that the church requires in order to prove that God is somewhere behind them. This unity, however, is in reality unsupported by disinterested historical research. Biblical theology seeks to keep a low theological profile so that it can make its investigations look like sober historical inquiry: the church then benefits from the authority that the secular world has conferred on historical investigation but can rest assured that its theological convictions will not be called into question by this investigation.

Against this characterization of biblical theology, Yarbrough shows that, on one hand, the direction for NT studies so decisively set by Wrede and Ernst Troeltsch rested on philosophical presuppositions that excluded God from acting in history from the start. These philosophical presuppositions, although rarely examined or even acknowledged by writers who stand in the tradition of Wrede and Troeltsch, are themselves open to criticism. They do not self-evidently supply the right starting point for understanding either early Christian history or the NT texts.

Yarbrough also shows, on the other hand, that for Hofmann, Schlatter, Cullmann, and Albertz the charge of some sort of secret, dogmatic motivation for their historical work does not stick. They are believers, and this may have predisposed them to question the reigning Kantian paradigm and to give the texts the benefit of the doubt, but they are actually more, not less, open to going wherever the text leads them.

Schlatter was against any approach to the NT that privileged “doctrine at the expense of life.” Yarbrough tells us that he saw “the ideas and concepts of the New Testament” as “components in a concrete and living history. They take on significance and meaning when seen in the context of the lives of those who recorded them . . . [and] must be seen in close connection with the individual events, temporal actions, and actual lives which give them substance.” Schlatter, moreover, disagrees with the history-of-religions approach of Wrede and Troeltsch, not because he is driven to do so by his commitment to the church, but because of his scientific convictions. Yarbrough summarizes Schlatter’s position this way: “The systematic separation of New Testament history from the effects worked by the personal God to which the texts testify . . . is not necessitated by the subject matter itself, at least not primarily. This separation is spawned rather by acquiescence to the atheistic presuppositions gaining sway in other disciplines.” Hofmann, Cullman, and Albertz would basically agree with this approach.

Meeks is quite right to affirm the continuing importance of historical inquiry and the exegesis of texts in the academic study of the NT. Yarbrough reminds us that the epistemological starting point of Hofmann, Schlatter, Cullmann, and Albertz, although different from the starting point of Wrede and

23. Ibid., 97.
Troeltsch, is philosophically defensible and should receive a hearing from anyone interested, as a historian and exegete, in the life-experience of the first Christians and in understanding the literary texts they produced.  

Although Yarbrough does not make the point explicitly in his book, his treatment could also be read as an appeal to the academy not to dismiss the present-day evangelical successors to these scholars. If the philosophical starting point of evangelical biblical scholars is reasonable, their familiarity with the literature sound, and their critical skills sharp, they should have a place at any table where informed historical inquiry is on the menu.

Descartes and Kant have dominated the conversation around the table long enough, argues Yarbrough. It is time to listen again to the advocates of salvation history. They are not likely to succeed in convincing everyone present of their position, but they may at least provide an atmosphere that the church will also find hospitable. If, as Meeks says, the church remains the primary audience for the academic study of the NT, then Dr. Yarbrough has not merely urged the academy to mind its manners but has outlined a strategy for the survival of the discipline.

25. Yarbrough, *Salvation Historical Fallacy?* (e.g., pp. 50–51, 59, 145, 175–76, 212, 246, 310).