

REVIEW ARTICLE

LOCATING UDO SCHNELLE'S *THEOLOGY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT* IN THE CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSION

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To locate the magisterial work of Professor Udo Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*,¹ within current discussion on the nature of New Testament theology demands reflection along a number of axes. The older axes are well established: how any NT theology (hereafter “NTT”) is organized, how it interacts with the OT, how it treats the tension between the diversity and the unity of the NT, and so forth. But Robert Morgan rightly observes, “As New Testament studies became more varied in the final quarter of the twentieth century, New Testament theology was also drawn into new channels.”² Under the label of NTT have sprung a plethora of new reading strategies generating new theologies: assorted post-colonial theologies, liberation theologies, ethnic theologies, gender theologies, and so forth.³ My own survey of NTT, published in 1997,⁴ already sounds spectacularly out of date. So in no particular order of precedence, I shall try to locate Professor Schnelle’s work along some of these many axes, both older axes and more recent ones:

(1) *Connection to the OT*. Abandoning the essentially Marcionite rejection of OT relevance for the understanding of the NT espoused by Harnack, Bultmann, Baumgärtel, Hirsch, and in some ways Hans Hübner,⁵ most recent NT theologies argue, with various strategies and degrees of intensity,

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¹ Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009.

² “New Testament Theology in the Twentieth Century,” in *Biblical Theology: Introducing the Conversation*, by Leo G. Perdue, Robert Morgan, and Benjamin D. Sommer (Library of Biblical Theology; Nashville: Abingdon, 2009) 207.

³ See especially some of the essays in Perdue, Morgan, and Sommer, *Biblical Theology*.

⁴ D. A. Carson, “New Testament Theology,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997) 797–814.

⁵ I have entered the caveat because Hans Hübner (*Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (3 vols.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990–93) acknowledges that the NT writers frequently make use of the OT, but he denies that the NT revelation remains unintelligible apart from the OT.

that the NT authors understand the significance of Jesus Christ in categories substantially drawn from the OT, or at least in ongoing discussion with such categories. This includes the two-volume work by Ferdinand Hahn,⁶ the still-incomplete work of Ulrich Wilkens,⁷ the work of Peter Stuhlmacher,⁸ and the text-book contributions of I. Howard Marshall,⁹ Tom Schreiner,¹⁰ Frank Thielman,¹¹ and Frank Matera.¹² The nature of the continuity varies from scholar to scholar. For Hahn, there is a “heilsgeschichtliche Kontinuität” between God’s self-disclosure in the OT and his self-disclosure in Jesus in the New, making Christology central to his project. Wilkens ties the NT and the OT together in the identity of God: “Daß im Alten wie im Neuen Testament der eine und selbe Gott bezeugt wird, ist die Grundvoraussetzung jeder Theologie des Neuen Testaments, die dessen Inhalt gerecht werden will.”¹³ Stuhlmacher agrees, but adds to his reason for binding the two Testaments together his slightly peculiar notion of *Kanonsgeschichte* (viz., his argument that the “closing” of the OT canon and the “closing” of the NT canon were one historical process, and therefore they must be construed together as one book).¹⁴

So where does Professor Schnelle fit on this axis of discussion? He devotes little space to a theoretical consideration of the possible relationships between the NT and the Old. Of course, his insistence that as early as Jesus himself the Torah is “decentered” in favor of a theology grounded more firmly in the doctrine of creation does not mean Professor Schnelle avoids discussion of what is meant by fulfilling the law—but the distance Professor Schnelle maintains between OT and NT thought is striking and certainly out of step with current trends in NTT. I shall come back to this point below.

(2) *Connection to the historical Jesus.* Here again, Bultmann provides us with one end of the axis, with his refusal to ground his theology of the NT in more than a mere “dass” regarding the historical Jesus. He is largely followed by Joachim Gnilka¹⁵ and Georg Strecker.¹⁶ But the majority of recent writers tilt strongly in the opposite direction. Wilckens, for example, insists that if one’s view of reality does not disown the resurrection *a priori*, then not only do we have the right but the obligation to examine the connec-

⁶ *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001, 2005).

⁷ So far: *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (4 vols.; Neukirchene-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2002–2005).

⁸ *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (BThdNT; 2 vols.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991–1999).

⁹ *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004).

¹⁰ *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

¹¹ *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

¹² *New Testament Theology: Exploring Diversity and Unity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

¹³ *Theologie* 1:1.2: “That in the Old as in the New Testament one and the same God is borne witness to, is the fundamental presupposition of every theology of the New Testament whose content is rightly construed.”

¹⁴ *Biblische Theologie* 1:5.

¹⁵ *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Freiburg: Herder, 1994).

¹⁶ *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996); *ET Theology of the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

tions between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus: indeed, this theologically-discerned *historical* continuity, critiquing modern reductionisms, is for Wilckens the very stuff of NTT.¹⁷ In his recent survey article, C. Kevin Rowe¹⁸ takes a slightly different line. He argues that it is essential to distinguish between the “historical Jesus” as “a critically reconstructed figure behind the Gospels, on the one hand, and in the sense of the figure presented by the Gospels, on the other.”¹⁹ He goes on to argue that if by the “historical Jesus” or the “earthly Jesus” one means “in practice the figure presented by the Gospel narratives, then it is of little wonder—and also of little historical, argumentative value—that this figure is basically continuous with the theology of the NT.”²⁰ One must, rather, attempt “to trace a historical continuity between the life of the Jesus who gave rise to the Gospels and the theology of the NT itself”: one must work with “a historically reconstructed Jesus—the ‘historian’s Jesus’ [the category is drawn from Joachim Jeremias].”²¹ Rowe concludes, “In my judgment, current research has not demonstrated that this particular task belongs properly to the discipline of NTT. Bultmann’s methodological manifesto is thus still on the table.”²²

By contrast, Professor Schnelle devotes many pages to his argument that history is itself “meaning-formation” (*Sinnbildung*). He argues:

An event attains historical quality only when narrated . . . ; facts or events of the past become a part of history only when they can be appropriated through processes of historical meaning-formations. . . . *The identity of Jesus of Nazareth can therefore be grasped in no other way than in his literary contexts.* We can still quest after authenticity and facts on the basis of a critical evaluation of the sources, but we will not find an answer that gets behind or goes beyond the narrative—and so always also fictional—character of the presentation of the Jesus-Christ-history in the gospels as we have them. The “historical Jesus” cannot be presented on the basis of a reproduction of sources or a reconstruction of given historical connections, nor as an attempt to get back to an uninterpreted Jesus, but only as a construction of the effects of Jesus in history, a construction that is aware of and respects the conditioned nature of understanding, the data of the tradition, a construction that is guided by a clear methodology.²³

Since every responsible portrayal of Jesus “is necessarily and unavoidably a *construction*”²⁴ composed on the basis of the biblical tradition that has come down to us, and based on specific criteria, Professor Schnelle then devotes many pages to discussing those criteria. Probably Rowe would not dispute most if not all of Professor Schnelle’s criteria. The difference is that Professor Schnelle sees not only that the construction of the “historical Jesus” cannot

¹⁷ *Theologie* 1:1.21–35.

¹⁸ “New Testament Theology: The Revival of a Discipline. A Review of Recent Contributions to the Field,” *JBL* 125 (2006): 393–419.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 406.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.* 407.

²² *Ibid.*; similarly Frank Matera, both in his *Theology* and in his “New Testament Theology: History, Method, and Identity,” *CBQ* 67 (2005) 1–21.

²³ Schnelle, *Theology*, 66.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 71.

be divorced from the Gospel narratives (we have no other access to Jesus)—a point that Rowe would probably not dispute—but also that this historical Jesus so leaves his remains in the meaning-formation of the Gospels that it is impossible to wrestle with the theology of the Gospels *without* wrestling with the historical Jesus: Rowe's view that questions about the historical Jesus do not belong to the discipline of NTT is decisively set aside by Professor Schnelle. There is some irony here: Professor Schnelle has a place for the historical Jesus in his NTT, precisely by incorporating any reflection on him into the documents themselves—a step I approve—and then heartily minimizing the impact of the historical Jesus on that same NTT, because the criteria he defends for uncovering the historical Jesus *within* the NT documents leave us with a thoroughly minimalist historical Jesus. But the issue is complicated. It is possible to defend Rowe's conclusion that NTT should not wrestle with questions relating to the historical Jesus on the exclusive ground that NTT is a *literary* discipline committed to reflecting on the *literature* that makes up the NT. Well and good; the decision is arbitrary, but not wrong for that reason, merely one option in the possible definitions of NTT. But Rowe himself connects his stance with his assertion that "Bultmann's methodological manifesto is . . . still on the table";²⁵ that is far more troubling because Bultmann connects his methodological stance with his insistence that we *cannot* know anything about the historical Jesus save for the ill-defined and essentially contentless "dass" (a step Rowe, of course, does not take). The problem is substantially alleviated if (a) one simultaneously recognizes that we have little access to the historical Jesus apart from the NT documents, and that these documents, for all their varied emphases and perspectives, preserve faithful portraits of Jesus; if (b) we recall how the Gospel writers, though they are writing from a perspective *after* Jesus' resurrection, find a rich variety of ways to distinguish between what the disciples understood of Jesus *before* the resurrection and what they understood only *after* the resurrection, making them far less anachronistic in their depictions of the historical Jesus than many critics think; and if (c) we resolutely refuse to restrict the label "historical Jesus" to Jesus before his resurrection, as if the resurrected Jesus were not historical.²⁶

(3) *Diversity and unity.* I do not know of any NTT written during the past few decades that does not respect the diversity and uniqueness of each NT document. The relationship of such diversity to the potential unity of the NT is extraordinarily diverse. In the tradition of Bultmann, Georg Strecker fastens his attention on the epistemological structures of religious experience, and argues that the NT documents have their own respective experiential and theological structures, such that theological unity cannot be presupposed. By contrast, Hahn argues that it is part of the responsibility of NTT to identify and expound its unity, even while insisting that there are fundamental

²⁵ "New Testament Theology" 407.

²⁶ The nest of issues this overly long sentence raises is large and complicated, but discussion at the SBL session showed that these are regularly the unarticulated issues behind the issues that drive the conversation.

mutual contradictions among the documents (e.g. over their respective understandings of eschatology). François Vouga, *Une théologie du Nouveau Testament*,²⁷ takes a rather different course. He arranges his work thematically, and for each theme lets the NT documents speak for themselves without pressing them toward any unity. (One cannot help but recall George Caird's approach.) Indeed, Vouga concludes that this way of careful reading excludes the kind of doctrinal unity that Hahn and many others defend. Rather, the NT diversity generates dialog, debate, even conflict of interpretations—and this theological conflict is a fine reflection of early Christianity itself, which defines itself as a conflict of interpretations of the historical revelation of God in Jesus Christ, such that this open dialog is in fact the appropriated form of Christianity's unity. In short, Vouga argues for “la diversité des théologies comme principe d'unité du christianisme [‘the diversity of theologies as a principle of the unity of Christianity’].” Philip Esler's entry, *New Testament Theology: Communion and Community*,²⁸ betrays unyielding commitment to historical-critical and social-scientific approaches to the NT documents, but he thinks we can enter into genuine communion with, say, Paul through his writings, and this grounds Esler's probing of a unified theological account of personhood. Frank Matera makes the exploration of the NT's diversity and unity the controlling question of his work. Marshall's approach is essentially book-by-book and corpus-by-corpus descriptive exegesis that identifies synthetic theological structures along the way; similarly, with variations, Tom Schreiner's work.

It would become tedious to keep plotting points along this unity-and-diversity axis. Without further ado we simply ask, “Where does Professor Schnelle locate himself?” Professor Schnelle thinks there is no one central idea that holds the NT documents together (e.g. Luther's grasp of justification); equally, he thinks the broader pursuit of theological unity pursued by, say, Hahn, results in theological abstractions that do not do justice to the individual documents. Professor Schnelle holds that “*variety clearly has the precedence*, and there can be no such thing as *the* New Testament theology in the singular.”²⁹ Still, this does not warrant “boundless plurality”³⁰; the NT canon itself imposes strict limitations. Within this boundary there are stages of organic development (I could not help thinking of C. F. D. Moule)—and that brings us to the next point:

(4) *Basic organization*. Limitations of time and space forbid me from surveying the extraordinarily diverse approaches one finds in the presentation of each recent NTT. One need only compare, say, the respective contributions of, say, Klaus Berger,³¹ Frank Matera, and Ferdinand Hahn, to leave one's mouth agape that such diverse structures could all be labeled one thing, “New Testament theology.” Professor Schnelle develops his own structure,

²⁷ MDB 43; Genève: Labor et Fides, 2001.

²⁸ Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005.

²⁹ *Theology* 52.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 53.

³¹ *Theologiegeschichte des Urchristentums: Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Tübingen: Francke, 1994).

which is an interesting amalgam of corpus-theology and inner-NT historical development. He provides thirteen chapters. The first outlines his approach, in particular what he means by “meaning-formation”; the second wrestles with history and meaning. The third focuses on “Jesus of Nazareth: The Near God.” Then begins a series of “transformations.” The “first transformation” is the emergence of Christology (chap. 4). The second transformation is “the early Christian mission without the precondition of circumcision” (chap. 5) along with a consideration of the role of Paul as missionary and thinker (chap. 6). The third transformation is the composition of the gospels as innovative responses to crises (chap. 7), followed by a survey of Q studies, the Synoptic Gospels, and Acts—i.e. meaning through narration (chap. 8). The fourth transformation is the gospel in the world (chap. 9), which leads to the deutero-Pauline letters (“Paul’s thought extended”; chap. 10), the catholic epistles (chap. 11), the Johannine theology (“Introduction to the Christian Faith”; chap. 12), and “Revelation: Seeing and Understanding” (chap. 13). Of course it would be possible to unpack an organic or developmental understanding of the rise of the NT documents without being as averse to talking about their unity as Professor Schnelle is, but one sees from this outline how for Professor Schnelle these “transformations” function to make easy talk of unity pretty challenging.

There is another element to Professor Schnelle’s organization that I have not addressed, and that brings me to my fifth point.

(5) *Relation to systematic theology.* Quite unlike any other recent NTT, Professor Schnelle’s work in three different chapters—on Paul, the Johannine theology, and Revelation—breaks down into more-or-less standard systematic-theology categories, viz. theology (proper), Christology, pneumatology, soteriology, anthropology, ethics, ecclesiology, eschatology, and setting in the history of early Christian theology.³² In some ways this is extraordinary. It is not that the three corpora in question do not make important contributions to each of these domains drawn from systematic theology; rather, the outline of topics chosen, the same topics for each corpus, gives no hint of the diversity of emphases and themes found in the respective documents. Historically, one of the differentiations between systematic theology and biblical theology (of which NTT is a subset) is that the former orders its study of biblical material in largely atemporal, logical, and systemic ways, while the latter stands closer to the language, categories, and priorities of each biblical book or corpus, while carefully noting the document’s place in the unfolding *temporal* development of what would become the Christian Bible. Both ways of organizing one’s study of Scripture, I maintain, are legitimate, but I remain unconvinced that blurring the distinction is helpful.

³² Even Donald Guthrie (*New Testament Theology: History, Method, and Identity* [Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1981]), for all that he utilized a thematic approach, sought out themes and word-groups that were found in the text, rather than drawing his themes from the categories of systematic theology.

(6) *Connection with Theologiegeschichte*. This is another trajectory of interpretation I have so far carefully avoided. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Wilhelm Wrede insisted on a narrowly historical approach to what he called NTT, and he was followed at the end of the same century by Heikki Räisänen. One of the moves in this line of thought was to insist that demarcations between canonical books and non-canonical books are artificial and historically unreasonable, and must therefore be abandoned. Stuhlmacher's critique of the latter is devastating: such does not deserve to be called NTT, because rejecting the demarcation of the NT as the canon that has been passed down to us is nothing other than engaging in something other than NTT. Otherwise put, to commit oneself to the 27-book NT canon is already to adopt a theological stance. On the other hand, precisely because biblical theology has since Gabler been interested in historical development, one cannot abandon such questions (say, in the fashion of Barth). Opposition to Wrede's *Religionsgeschichte* does not warrant an atemporal *Theologie*; indeed, *Theologiegeschichte* appears to be part and parcel of responsible NTT.

To such matters, Professor Schnelle has shown himself very sensitive. He is sharply critical of what he calls "some streams of North American Jesus research" where there is

a clear tendency to promote real or postulated extracanonical tradition to a rank prior or parallel to the Jesus tradition of the Synoptics and the Johannine writings (H. Koester; J. M. Robinson; J. D. Crossan; B. L. Mack). The goal of such constructions is clearly to break the hold of the canonical gospels and to establish an alternative picture of Jesus based on other interpretations of the tradition. To do this, frequent use is made of the lust for sensationalism. . . . Such constructions do not stand up to historical criticism, for neither the existence of a *Secret Gospel of Mark* nor a Signs Source can be made probable, and the *Gospel of Thomas* belongs to the second century!³³

At the same time, Professor Schnelle is careful not to retreat to a Barthian disdain for the particularities of history.

(7) *Connection with recent agendas*. For the sake of completeness, I should mention that Professor Schnelle is equally scathing of "theological" readings of the NT that are driven by contemporary agendas but not demonstrably by the concerns of the writers of the NT documents themselves. His large volume is therefore thin on post-colonial theology, feminist theology, and alternative lifestyle theology. That seems to me to be in line with what, historically, NTT, and indeed, biblical theology, has been—a discipline driven by the categories, vocabulary, and themes of the biblical texts themselves, however unacceptable that way of putting it might be to the more radical of postmodern critics. But by the same token, that is why Professor Schnelle's deployment of *systematic* categories at several junctures in his book, as opposed to biblical-theological categories, is somewhat baffling, except as an affirmation of his own interests.

³³ *Theology* 65.

At the risk of asking Professor Udo Schnelle for a book that he did not intend to write, I conclude with three final reflections that will simultaneously emphasize criticisms that have so far been largely implicit, and betray some of my own interests.

(1) Will it be thought churlish of me if I point out that Professor Schnelle offers little serious engagement with relevant English and French scholarship?

(2) At one point, Professor Schnelle asserts: "A 'biblical theology' is not possible, because (1) the Old Testament is *silent* about Jesus Christ; (2) the resurrection from the dead of *one who was crucified* cannot be integrated into any ancient system of meaning-formation (cf. 1 Cor 1:23); and (3) while the Old Testament can well be thought of as the most important cultural and theological context for understanding the New Testament, it is by no means the only one."³⁴ I find these assertions extraordinary, even though the beginning of a response would double the length of this paper. Few questions are raised by Professor Schnelle about the possible ways in which we might connect the OT and the NT; about the ways in which Paul, for instance, understands the gospel to be, simultaneously, (a) that which has been predicted in the past and fulfilled in the present, and (b) that which has been hidden in the past and revealed in the present. How those two trajectories come together in the apostle's thinking has a great deal to say³⁵ about the possibility of "eine ganz biblische Theologie." In a work full of subtle discussion on many points, I found this cavalier dismissal of biblical theology more than a little surprising.

(3) Any NTT, let alone a NTT that will allow itself, whether on canonical or other grounds, to be part of a broader biblical theology, would be greatly enriched by close exegetical examination of how the different corpora of the NT cite and allude to the OT. The NT writers variously insist that Jesus' body is the temple of God, that he is the lamb of God, the good shepherd, the true vine, the Passover sacrificed for us, that he is the ultimate David, the ultimate (Melchizedekian) priest, that the church is the royal priesthood, that Jesus in some way recapitulates Israel's history, that the exodus is in some ways paradigmatic, and so on and so on. What were their *warrants* for making these connections? Of course, one might side with Barnabas Lindars and conclude that this is nothing but irresponsible proof-texting that cannot and should not be replicated in Christian exegesis of the OT today.³⁶ Yet I have come to the conclusion that many of the warrants taught or presupposed in the pages of the NT are subtle, careful, thoughtful, and in some cases distinguishable from Jewish appropriation techniques (e.g. the *middoth* of Hillel). One must ask what *hermeneutical* changes took place in Paul's mind

³⁴ *Theology* 52.

³⁵ Cf. D. A. Carson, "Mystery and Fulfillment: Toward a More Comprehensive Paradigm of Paul's Understanding of the Old and the New," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, Vol. 2: *The Paradoxes of Paul* (ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid; WUNT 181; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) 393–436.

³⁶ *New Testament Apologetic: The Doctrinal Significance of the Old Testament Quotations* (London: SCM, 1961).

between the time he went to Damascus and when he returned—not just what *theological conclusions* changed in his mind (for they are largely obvious), but what *hermeneutical approaches* shifted in his thinking that enabled him to warrant, in his own biblical exegesis, his newfound Christian convictions, while he appealed to the same (OT) biblical texts he had appealed to before his encounter with Christ on the Damascus Road. For instance, while the pre-conversion Paul would have elevated the Torah to the point of hermeneutical control in his reading of *Tanakh*, the Christian Paul displays deep interest in what might be called the salvation-historical sequence of events in the OT (see, for instance, his arguments in Romans 4 and Galatians 3). That salvation-historical interest is duplicated in Hebrews (Heb 3:7–4:13; 7:1–25) and elsewhere. New Testament writers point out in the strongest terms that these distinctions *are there in the OT text*. They do not think they are imposing extraneous or anachronistic material onto the text. Out of such observation and reflection springs the possibility of “eine ganz biblische Theologie [‘a truly biblical theology,’ ‘a whole-Bible biblical theology’].” Professor Schnelle’s inability to find Jesus in the OT was not shared by the NT writers whose theology he is trying to write up. Unpacking that line of thought is, of course, beyond the scope of these few reflections. And in any case it is far better to end by expressing my thanks to Professor Schnelle for his extraordinary achievement.