

Franz Overbeck's Inaugural Lecture in Basel (1870)

MARTIN HENRY

Former Lecturer in Dogmatic Theology
St. Patrick's College, Maynooth
Co. Kildare, Ireland

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXT

Franz Overbeck (1837–1905) was a professor of New Testament and Early Church History in Basel from 1870 until his early retirement in 1897. When his name is mentioned in general histories of theology or modern European (especially German) thought, it is almost invariably in connection with that of his friend, Friedrich Nietzsche, whom he came to know when both men began their university careers as professors in Basel. Yet Overbeck deserves to be known in his own right, outside the shadow of his more illustrious contemporary. His judgments on Christianity, marked by an irreproachable, critical honesty and a profoundly skeptical spirit, are more differentiated and arguably more subtle than Nietzsche's. As David Tracy has written: "Overbeck's friend Nietzsche used a hammer against theology; Overbeck himself used a scalpel. And Overbeck is finally the deeper challenge for theology itself."¹

That Overbeck was a searing critic of theology is, however, probably better known than his writings themselves. The present translation of one of his more general and perhaps more easily accessible shorter works seeks, in some small measure, to redress that situation and to let Overbeck's own thought speak as directly as possible to English-speaking readers.

The forces within Basel Protestantism that had led to the establishment of a new (liberal) chair of theology, of which Overbeck was the

1 In "Foreword" to Martin Henry, *Franz Overbeck: Theologian? Religion and History in the Thought of Franz Overbeck* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995), x.

first incumbent (though not the first choice of the appointment committee), should be borne in mind if an important aspect of his Inaugural Lecture is to be appreciated.² When Overbeck, as a critical theologian in the tradition of the Tübingen School of historical-critical theology, arrived to take up his teaching post in Basel in 1870, he was aware of the expectations bound up with his appointment, and he consequently felt a certain obligation to set out his understanding of theology early on in a public forum, which his Inaugural Lecture allowed him to do.³

In this short work, Overbeck traces the historical development of biblical interpretation, especially that of the New Testament, and touches on such vexed questions as the difficulties common to all shades of modern theology—whether “liberal” or “conservative” (“apologetic” being Overbeck’s own term for “conservative”)—in their claim to be authentic elucidations of Christianity. More pointedly, he implicitly acknowledges the related and existentially more inescapable and pressing question of Christianity’s own precarious relationship to the modern world.⁴ His independence of mind, his unwillingness to be annexed by any theological party, and his determination not to flinch from confronting seemingly intractable questions arising from a critical reading of the documents of early Christianity are hallmarks of his writings and evident in the 1870 address. But apart from the inherent significance of the 1870 address, the address’s interest also lies in the way it adumbrates some of the main themes of Overbeck’s programmatic tract titled *Über die Christlichkeit unserer heutigen Theologie* (1873), his best-known work that is now available in English translation under the title *How Christian is Our Present-Day Theology?*⁵

2 For the background on Overbeck’s appointment to the professorship in New Testament exegesis and Early Church History, see the pertinent introductory observations by Niklaus Peter in Franz Overbeck, *Werke und Nachlass in neun Bänden* (OWN) 1, *Schriften bis 1873*, ed. E. W. Stegemann and N. Peter, in collaboration with M. Stauffacher-Schaub (Stuttgart/Weimar: J. B. Metzler Verlag, 1994), 75–6.

3 See Peter, OWN 1, 75–8, especially his quotation (page 76) from a letter dated May 23, 1870, sent by Overbeck to his friend Heinrich von Treitschke, in which he mentions his desire to state clearly his theological position in his new environment.

4 For a more detailed introduction to Franz Overbeck that includes many (untranslated) extracts from his *Nachlass*, see Henry, *Franz Overbeck: Theologian?* For a more recent, penetrating study of Overbeck in the context of nineteenth-century Basel, see Lionel Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt: A Study in Unseasonable Ideas* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000); see also Lionel Gossman, “Anti-Modernism in Nineteenth-Century Basle: Franz Overbeck’s Antitheology and J.J. Bachofen’s Antiphilology,” in *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 16, no. 3 (Spring 1989), 359–89. Franz Overbeck, *How Christian is Our Present-Day Theology?* trans. and introduction by Martin Henry, “Foreword” by David Tracy (London/New York: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2005) also contains a general introduction to Overbeck’s thought.

5 Overbeck, *How Christian is Our Present-Day Theology?* trans. and introduction by

Overbeck was convinced that the Enlightenment and the rise of modern historical studies had changed, much more radically than the Reformation, the conditions in which all theology henceforth had to operate, irrespective of which stance any particular theologian might favor. For him, original Christianity was now historically inaccessible (as in Yeats's haunting image from *The Second Coming*: "The falcon cannot hear the falconer"), and what could be historically reconstructed from the first phase of the Christian movement provided no basis in the modern world for a viable religion or realistic continuation of the Christian tradition. Overbeck's preoccupation with Christianity and his anxious sense of its demise in the modern world are enduring themes in his writings. Both concerns, which were to be more trenchantly pursued in his tract of 1873, are clearly perceptible in the earlier address. However, not surprisingly given the specific subject Overbeck chose for his Inaugural Lecture, a vital element in his assessment of Christianity treated in the later work, namely Christianity's ascetic nature, is not.

The present translation is based on the second edition of the original German text.⁶ The German text itself, with helpful explanatory notes, can now be more readily consulted in the first volume⁷ of the new, nine-volume, critical edition of Overbeck's works, published between 1994 and 2010.⁸ The notes in this critical edition were gratefully used, as indicated in my own annotations, in the preparation of this translation. Footnotes in the translation that are preceded by an asterisk (*) are in Overbeck's original text. Material within such footnotes placed in square brackets ([...]) has been added by the translator. Scriptural quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*.⁹ Overbeck's custom of emphasizing proper names has not been followed here, but titles of books have been italicized in the translation, although this practice is not found in the original. Finally, I have taken the liberty of breaking up Overbeck's long

Martin Henry, "Foreword" by David Tracy (London/New York: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2005).

6 Overbeck, *Ueber Entstehung und Recht einer rein historischen Betrachtung der Neutestamentlichen Schriften in der Theologie*. Antritts-Vorlesung gehalten in der Aula zu Basel am 7. Juni 1870. Zweite Ausgabe (Basel: Schweighauserische Verlagsbuchhandlung [Hugo Richter], 1875 [first ed. 1871]). The original text is now available in OWN 1, 83–106.

7 See note 2 above.

8 For a review of this new critical edition of Overbeck's writings, see Henry, "Franz Overbeck: A Review of Recent Literature (Part 1)," *Irish Theological Quarterly* (ITQ) 72, (2007): 391–404; "Franz Overbeck: A Review of Recent Literature (Part 2)," *ITQ* 73, (2008): 174–91; and (for the final three volumes to be published in the series), *ITQ* 77, (2012): 305–11.

9 London: Catholic Truth Society, 1966.

sentences and paragraphs and have occasionally made short explanatory additions to the original text to try to make it more readily comprehensible to an English-speaking readership.

*On the Rise and Legitimacy within
Theology of a Purely Historical Approach
to the Writings of the New Testament*
Inaugural Lecture delivered in the Aula in
Basel on 7th June 1870 by

FRANZ OVERBECK, DR. THEOL. AND PHIL.

Distinguished guests,

Today, as the subject of the traditional public lecture marking the inauguration of the professorship I have been entrusted with in this city's university, I have chosen the question of the development—and legitimacy within theology—of a purely historical investigation of the origins of Christianity and its earliest documents. By “a purely historical investigation,” I mean an investigation based solely on the presuppositions universally accepted by critical historians.

Generally speaking, no one is unaware of the fact that what constitutes the most controversial—and indeed the most seemingly divisive—area in theology at the present time are questions of a primarily historical kind. It has, however, been chiefly the emergence of new critical views concerning the nature of the traditional New Testament account of Christianity's origins that has provoked often passionate disagreement within theology.¹⁰ Considering what is involved, this is

10 In the roughly 40 years preceding Overbeck's Inaugural Lecture, disputes about the legitimacy of biblical criticism had become more and more acrimonious in the world of German theology. Although the case of D. F. Strauss (see note 35 below) is well known (he had been unable to find any long-term university employment after the publication of his *Life of Jesus* [1835–36]), it was far from being exceptional. As Werner Kümmel commented: “[T]raditional theology made a real debate difficult by challenging the right of Baur [see note 27 below] and his pupils (as D. F. Strauss once was) to a place within the discipline of

only to be expected. These new views still appear to many theologians to be so extreme as to leave no possibility of any rational agreement being reached between proponents of the differing viewpoints. Now, given the nature of the issue at the heart of our dispute, it is up to the adherent of the new critical views more than anyone else to seek, nevertheless, a basis for such agreement, and certainly to give particular thought to the question of how the conflict arose in the first place.

Where religion—and anything connected with religion—is concerned, there will always be in people's minds a bias against anything new. This is truer of religion than of any other aspect of human existence. It will be assumed in the case of religion that whatever is new has come about as the result of some arbitrary cause; by contrast, what is old will be assumed to be intrinsically valuable. Nevertheless, if we wish to gain any insight into the nature of the present-day controversy in theology, and hence to be able to reach some kind of agreement on how it is to be settled, then the first thing we shall have to put out of our minds is the preconception that the controversy itself has been caused by the arbitrary notions of some individuals. With this in mind, it is my intention in this lecture to try to shed some light on the controversy in present-day theology about the origins of Christianity—to the extent that it is possible to think of illuminating such a complex issue on the occasion of an inaugural lecture, where all one can do is develop a few aspects of any question.

To begin with, I would like to give a quick summary of the history of the problem to try to show that the task of providing a purely historical interpretation of Christianity's origins and of its earliest documents—a task theology has recently been turning its attention to with such zeal—is not one that just happens to have been foisted on theology by the skepticism of a few individuals. Rather, this task is one that, over the course of the centuries, has come to land, as it were, at theology's door. It is a problem theology had no choice but to deal with, for although a solution to this problem is absolutely necessary, it is equally clear that no solution to it is to be found in the past. Then, secondly, I would like at least to suggest that the acutely sensitive aspects of the task now facing theology lie in the very nature of the task itself. And having to deal with this task has created a new situation for theology that no theologian at the present time can ignore.

In all ages of the history of the church, people have looked back with regret to the beginnings of Christianity, lamenting the loss of the church's initial simplicity and criticizing the corruption of their own age. At times, this regret for a lost past has been almost the only way in

theology and, accordingly, on the theological faculties." Werner G. Kümmel, *The New Testament. The History of the Investigation of its Problems* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 144.

which awareness of the historical essence of Christianity has survived. Nevertheless, even taking the word *historical* in a more precise sense, we cannot regard the task of understanding Christianity historically as one that is, from the most general point of view and in every conceivable sense, totally new or as a problem that has not been taken up in any form at all until modern times. Apart perhaps from certain periods in the Middle Ages, there has never been a time when there was a total lack of awareness—even critical awareness—of the historical nature of Christianity. There has always been an awareness of the fact that our knowledge of Christianity is based on a historical tradition, that this tradition itself has undergone changes in the course of time, and consequently has to be scrutinized in the light of its earliest elements. These, in turn, have to be understood in themselves and in terms of the cultural context that fundamentally shaped them.

All one can say with certainty is that, right up to the present time, awareness of the historical nature of Christianity has remained exceedingly obscure. It is certainly also true to say that, although the task of making a historical investigation of the earliest documents of Christianity is not in itself new, it is, nevertheless, a task whose full implications have only recently been clearly and distinctly appreciated. Today, it is a task that has to be pursued under greatly changed historical conditions. Hence, modern research on this subject may well produce novel results, but this in itself should not at all surprise anyone with any insight into these questions. Yet, at the present time, an objection still very frequently made—even in academic works—against the results of critical studies on the origin of individual books of the Bible is that these results contradict what, for almost two thousand years, has been an unshaken assumption.¹¹ And the only reason for such an objection is, as we have already mentioned, the fact that in this whole area, there is a prejudice in favor of whatever is traditional—a prejudice that is extremely powerful even in Protestantism. However, if we look more closely at the situation, we find that about nineteen hundred of these almost two thousand years prove nothing. That is to say that a priori they cannot predetermine in the slightest how we are to judge the questions at issue. And the remaining approximately one hundred years are precisely the period whose historical interpretation is, at the present time, a matter of so much dispute.

11 *Even the theological apologists of antiquity appealed, for example, to the three-thousand-year authority of their oracles. (Plutarch, *On the Prosaic Form of the Pythian Oracles at the Present Time* [*De Pythiae oraculis*], ch. 30.) [The passage Overbeck seems to have had in mind here would appear to be in section 29, not section 30, of this work: see Plutarch, *The Oracles at Delphi No Longer Given in Verse*, in: Plutarch, *Moralia*, Volume V (Loeb Classical Library 306), translated by Frank Cole Babbitt (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936; repr. 1993), 339.]

Let us now leave this controversial period to one side and move on to the end of the second century AD. At this point, the era begins that has now been so fully illuminated by historical research—at least as far as our contemporary Protestant world is concerned—that its most essential basic features are no longer in dispute. It is only at this time that church literature—which up until then had flowed in a narrow, and for the most part still subterranean, stream—emerges thoroughly formed into the full light of day. Henceforth, the chronological order in which works of church literature are produced is, in its main elements, perfectly clear. The start of this more luminous period is marked by not one but three Church Fathers, who were all highly regarded even by their contemporaries. All three were indeed significant and brilliant men. At the same time, very characteristically in terms of their places of origin and local spheres of influence, as well as in terms of their own individual careers and intellectual endowments, they differed sharply from one another. So many of their writings, too, have been preserved for posterity that, from the great wealth and variety of details they contain, we can actually discern with a fair amount of accuracy what the dominant ideas of the time were. The three writers we are referring to are: Irenaeus, who was born in Asia Minor, later became a bishop in Gaul, and was a mediator between East and West; the scholar Clement of Alexandria; and Tertullian, who was an ascetic and the greatest teacher in the Latin church before Augustine.

In the writings of these men, needless to say, we find already clearly defined all the basic elements of what, by their day, had become the traditional way of viewing the earliest history of the church. But at the same time, we can also see that their writings reveal an almost total absence of any historical awareness of what the primitive age of the church was really like, and, above all, an almost total absence of any historical awareness of the meaning of the canonical literature assumed to date from that period. In their writings, we can already find an unmistakable affirmation of the church's fundamental assumptions regarding the person of Christ—and, even at this stage, the claim that these views should alone be regarded as authentic church doctrine is prevalent. We also find in their writings an absence of any doubt about the essential doctrinal unity of the Old and New Testaments and an even greater certainty about the unbroken doctrinal unity of the apostolic era. In their writings a New Testament canon can also be found, which, though not yet closed, nevertheless contains all the main components of the canon that was later to gain general acceptance. But it is as if at the same time the key to the understanding of the canon that has now emerged had been lost.

Let us leave completely to one side what is generally acknowledged to be the very fanciful tradition about the apostolic era to be found in these Church Fathers (quite apart from their views on the canon), and let us restrict ourselves to a few examples of how they in fact interpret and treat the canon and its individual component parts. In the first place, they have no clear awareness at all of how the canon as such originated or of how it emerged as a collection of documents or of how it was compiled. They all agree on the need to be able to demonstrate either direct or indirect apostolic authorship of any writings to be included in the canon. Moreover, on the origin of individual writings in themselves, these Church Fathers have a good many other things to say that seem, at least on the surface, to be historically factual. And while there is still, as already mentioned, disagreement on how many works are in the canonical collection, there is no discussion anywhere about how the canon *emerged*. And when indeed anything is said on the subject, all that is revealed is simply the lack of any clear idea about it, as in the famous passage in Irenaeus, where the fourfold number of the Gospels is explained mystically in terms of the four regions of the world.¹²

Given that this was all that was known about the canon, it is easy to understand that when later—at the beginning of the fourth century—Eusebius in his *Church History* got interested in the question of the origin of the canon, he was unable to shed any new light on the question. He was only able to demonstrate the mere *existence* of the canon and the continuing uncertainty about how much it included, by quoting passages from earlier writers and reporting what they had to say about *individual* books of the canon. This lack of any clear historical awareness of the origin and nature of the collection of writings constituting the New Testament is reflected in the way the text itself was understood. The above-mentioned Church Fathers have to resort to the allegorical method of interpretation—which the church simply took over for the purpose of interpreting the Old Testament—even when they are interpreting the New Testament.

The parts of the New Testament that, because of their simplicity, seem to us today to be least open to misunderstanding—the parables in the Synoptic Gospels, or the sayings of the Sermon on the Mount—actually become in these writers vehicles for expressing the most abstruse mysteries of the most far-fetched doctrines. And if this is how

12 **Against Heresies*, III. 11, 8. [Cf. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975 [repr.]), 428. Curiously, almost one century later, F. L. Cross seems to find a passage of this kind in Irenaeus quite normal in comparison with the “esoteric and fantastic speculations of the Gnostic books.” F. L. Cross, *The Early Christian Fathers* (London: Duckworth, 1960), 112.]

the simple and immediately comprehensible parts of the canon get interpreted, things are no better when it comes to the New Testament writings that are more strictly doctrinal or theological in nature. This is especially true in the case of Paul. His whole mode of argumentation is deeply rooted in the religious thought of Judaism and is for these later interpreters a completely closed book. Even the immediately practical, live issues that particularly exercised the mind of the Apostle to the Gentiles have in a certain sense ceased for them to have any real meaning: the view that Christians were still obliged to observe the Mosaic Law is now simply the view of an obscure, remote sect that no longer needs to be addressed.

If, then, as we have just said, even some of the main teachings of Paul's letters have in practice ceased to be live issues, it is clear that any deeper appreciation of the profound connection between Paul's views and those of the Old Testament and the Judaism of his day has now been completely lost. Above all, with their purely moral worldview and their teaching on the freedom of the will, these Church Fathers are in a totally and utterly different world from Paul, whose outlook is based first and foremost on purely religious assumptions. They are, of course, entirely unaware of the difference between Paul and themselves. Law and the freedom of the gospel, righteousness, faith, and predestination, all these fundamental concepts of Paul's letters are either interpreted superficially or else given a completely alien meaning. The intellectual world of these Church Fathers is wholly different from that of the first Christians, and the concepts they read back into early Christianity belong to an entirely different cultural milieu.

The most numerous and glaring examples of where totally different teachings have been fused and confused are to be found in the writings of Clement of Alexandria. For Clement, Plato—"the friend of truth,"¹³ as he often calls him—is almost just as pure a source of knowledge and edification as the writings of the Old and New Testaments. Wherever he looks, he keeps finding Plato. And the fact that the Apostle Paul disdained the philosophy of the Greeks, that he even warned against it,¹⁴ is for Clement utterly inconceivable. When Paul nevertheless rejects

13 See *Stromateis* [Miscellanies or, literally, Carpet Bags], I, 8, 42; V, 10, 66; V, 12, 78 for references to "the truth-loving Plato." *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. II (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977 [repr.]), 309; 460; 462; see OWN 1, 87. A German translation of this work, found among Overbeck's papers, was published posthumously in 1936 by C. A. Bernoulli und Ludwig Früchtel (Titus Flavius Klemens von Alexandrien, *Die Teppiche [Stromateis]*. Deutscher Text nach der Übersetzung von Franz Overbeck, hg. und eingeleitet von C. A. Bernoulli und Ludwig Früchtel [Basel: Benno Schwabe, 1936]).

14 See Colossians 2: 8 (cf. OWN 1, 87) for example: "See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition . . ."

Greek philosophy, then he can only have in mind a certain *kind* of philosophy, certain *kinds* of reprehensible systems of philosophy, such as the Epicurean system, for example.¹⁵

It goes without saying that anyone adopting such a viewpoint is bound to regard the meaning of Scripture as indefinitely elastic. And very typically, it is precisely these earliest Church Fathers, in whose writings the main features of the church's doctrinal system can be clearly discerned, who are the most emphatic in declaring that Scripture cannot be used to decide disputes on points of doctrine. They explicitly cast doubt on any possibility of refuting heretics simply by appealing to Scripture, and they place the rule of faith—the earliest, embryonic form of the church's creeds—above Scripture by refusing to let anyone discuss the meaning of Scripture unless they first agree to accept the rule of faith.

Now, in a certain sense, it can be said—and this is a fact worth pondering—that precisely this first period of the early church's theological interpretation of Scripture is the worst one. Exegesis in this period is marked by such unbridled naïveté that, quite apart from any other considerations, the church had a practical interest in ensuring that the arbitrary nature of theological exegesis did not get completely out of control. This, in turn, was bound to lead to attempts on the church's part to impose some kind of restraints on the way Scripture was interpreted. Nor, in an age in which there was such a high level of general culture, could the fact be completely ignored that to understand a document from the distant past, one needed to have a certain amount of scholarly information at one's disposal. At least in some sense, it had to be accepted that a document from the past could only be understood if one had some understanding of the cultural milieu from which it stemmed. As early as the first half of the third century, both of the interests mentioned—the learned interest of scholars, on the one hand, and the practical interest of the church, on the other—led to the first attempt at a theory of Christian scriptural exegesis, which was undertaken by Origen.¹⁶ He tells us that he made inquiries from learned rabbis when interpreting the Old Testament. And furthermore, awareness of the necessity and specific importance of the historical understanding of Scripture occupies a very distinct place in his theory of scriptural exegesis.

If, however, we judge this attempt at a theory of scriptural exegesis by the most profound of the Greek Church Fathers from the particular critical viewpoint we have adopted (i.e., if we judge it not in terms of

¹⁵ **Strom.* I, 11, 50.

¹⁶ Cf. Origen, *De Principiis* [On first principles], Book IV (see OWN 1, 88).

the value it had for its own time, but in terms of the value it can be expected to have for the historical understanding of Scripture as such), then we can really only call Origen's theory of exegesis a systematic development of a totally wrong-headed approach. Before his time, a distinction had, of course, already been drawn between the *historical sense* of Scripture and what was called its *hidden sense*. But, as there was absolutely no interest in reflecting on this distinction, no one ever bothered to try to ascertain the historical sense of Scripture. Origen, for his part, distinguished more sharply between the historical, or, as he called it, the *simple* or *literal sense*, and the hidden sense of Scripture. For him, the historical sense had its own specific meaning, and he wanted, in the first instance, to see this meaning of Scripture ascertained in every case by using the proper means to establish it, namely by the grammatical interpretation of the scriptural text. But even he took it for granted that this literal sense of Scripture was inferior to the hidden sense.

He often expresses this in the clearest possible terms. And, as it were, to bring out vividly the inexhaustible richness of the hidden sense of Scripture as opposed to the barrenness and poverty of the literal sense, he would not only distinguish between the hidden and the literal sense of Scripture, stressing the latter's plainness and sterility, but would also go on to draw distinctions within the hidden sense itself. In the latter, he would find a plethora of hierarchically structured kinds of meaning by which one was to ascend to ever higher stages of knowledge. Thus sometimes, following Plato's psychology, he assumed a twofold structure within the hidden sense of Scripture, with the *psychic* or *soul sense* geared to the life of the lower part of the soul, and the *pneumatic* or *spiritual sense* intended to nourish the life of the spirit. Sometimes he even assumed a threefold structure. And in that case, he distinguished between the *moral*, the *allegorical*, and the *anagogical* sense of Scripture, the latter taking one right up to the highest spheres of the spiritual world.

On the basis of this theory, one can guess what will happen next to the fortunes of biblical exegesis. The two, to some extent, antithetical elements that are held together in this theory will again go their separate ways. But, in the main, it is really only the hidden sense of Scripture that will be sanctioned in the church, even if henceforth, in interpreting this hidden sense, exegetes were no longer to take off, on the wings of thought, on such flights of fancy. As for the investigation of the historical meaning of Scripture, it withdraws more and more into the shelter of a learned school. Here it attains such exclusive dominance that it leads to the complete rejection of any allegorical sense of

Scripture. But it also comes into conflict with the views then prevalent in the church.

The school I am here referring to is the so-called Antiochene School, whose heyday was in the fourth century before it collapsed completely in the fifth. The works produced by this school contain, to some extent, the beginnings of a genuinely scholarly biblical criticism, but they are also intrinsically limited. This is most evident in the way Antiochene scholars deal with the Pauline letters. For here it is particularly obvious that they share the early church's characteristic inability to understand these letters. And, in terms of the methodological procedure that characterizes their exegesis, the virtues one finds in the Antiochene School are purely formal in nature. By and large, the only thing the Antiochene exegetes manage to do is to follow a set of abstract rules and systematically misinterpret the subject of their texts.¹⁷

But, of course, the reason why the Antiochene School's achievements remain so narrowly circumscribed in the early church, is not to be found in such considerations. It is, above all, the predominantly doctrinal concerns of the church at that time that put constraints on Antiochene exegesis. Only in very specific circumstances, and where individual, particularly talented personalities such as Chrysostom or Jerome are involved, does what was taught in such schools of biblical scholarship occasionally reach wider circles. On the whole, the church's doctrinal system develops entirely independently of such scholarly activity, and the general preconception is that the more profound sense of Scripture is the one that enables people to rise most directly to the lofty heights of whatever constitutes the mind of the church at any particular time.

In these circumstances, the possibility of establishing the fundamental precondition for acquiring a historical understanding of the earliest, primitive period of Christianity becomes increasingly remote—namely the ability to distinguish between primitive Christianity and the contemporary situation of Christianity at any given time. Rather, the more the church's teaching and structures diverge from what they originally were, the more awareness of this development recedes into the background, and the less awareness there is of the fact that what now is the case, is so as the result of a process of development and was not originally so. When Jerome toward the end of the fourth century still recalls that the office of bishop in the original Christian community

17 *A perfect example of the way this school reinterprets the Pauline letters in such a way as to make them, judging by all the rules of the art of genuine exegesis, unrecognizable, is the "Commentary on the Letter to the Galatians," published under the name of Hilary of Poitiers (but actually a product of the Antiochene School) in the first volume of Cardinal Pitra's *Spicilegium Solesmense*.

was not yet superior to the office of presbyter, but was identical with it, such an item of historical information, corroborating what was characteristic of the earliest period of the church, is a kind of curiosity in the literature of the time.

Rather, the more directly a fact or an event from the apostolic era is attested in the documents that have survived from that period, the more complicated become the means to which patristic exegetes have to resort to bring it into harmony with current beliefs. Paul himself, for instance, in the second chapter of the Letter to the Galatians, relates how he once personally confronted Peter in Antioch after the latter had abandoned the table fellowship he had previously shared with Gentile Christians from Antioch. This occurred when stricter Jewish Christians, who had just come down from Jerusalem, made Peter waver on the question of the freedom he had affirmed in relation to the law. Now in the early church, as far back as the second century, the principle of the absolute doctrinal unity of the apostolic era, of the absolute doctrinal unity between Paul and the original apostles, had been fought for and established in the struggle against the Gnostics, and since that time, it had been an accepted presupposition of the church's dogmatic system.

The Church Fathers themselves certainly tried for a few centuries but failed to find any finally reassuring answer to the problem of how this story related to the dogma in question. But the Greek Church Fathers did produce a very comprehensive theory for dealing with the problem. Their mode of argumentation was extremely perceptive, and even today, anyone trying to understand current discussions of Paul's account of this event will find their theory very instructive. For by demonstrating that the dispute was a merely apparent dispute acted out by Peter and Paul for the edification of the Jewish and Gentile Christians present, they managed to extract, from what appeared to be a dispute, evidence, rather, for absolutely total agreement between the two parties. And when the West became acquainted through Jerome with this theory, elaborated by the Greek exegetes, Augustine protested indeed against it on moral grounds, but he nevertheless had to accept the implicit reproach of his astute and artful opponent, who pointed out to him, not without a certain irony, that he must not have examined the problem involved in sufficiently close detail.¹⁸

18 *Jerome, Letter 112. On another occasion, I propose to deal with the additional evidence for what was said on this dispute in the patristic period. Meyer, *Krit.-exeget. Handbuch zum Galaterbrief* [Critical-exegetical manual on the Letter to the Galatians] (4th ed.), 83, refers to this dispute, very mistakenly, as being "of merely historical curiosity." [In 1877, Overbeck published a study of this topic: *Über die Auffassung des Streits des Paulus mit Petrus in Antiochien* (Gal. 2, 11ff.) *bei den Kirchenvätern* (On the interpretation of the dispute between Paul and Peter in Antioch [Gal. 2, 11ff.] in the writings of the Church Fathers), Programm zur Rectoratsfeier der Universität Basel (Basel: C. Schultze, 1877 [repr.

However, even any discussions of this kind were soon to cease. And, in any case, the very mention of Jerome's name is bound to remind us that we are now on the threshold of the era when, for the time being, biblical exegesis will become completely atrophied and remain a purely fixed tradition. The, by this time, entirely murky historical perceptions of the church's past that had evolved in the first four or five centuries will be inherited and taken over blindly by the Middle Ages. Now, although it is true that even the Church Fathers were seriously lacking in knowledge of the biblical languages necessary for the historical interpretation of Scripture (the Greek Fathers often lacked knowledge of Old Testament Hebrew, and the Latin Fathers very soon usually also lacked knowledge of New Testament Greek), nevertheless they themselves were still in living contact with the ancient world. The Middle Ages, on the other hand, both in the East and in the West (though not in exactly the same way), lack the most elementary prerequisites for acquiring what we call a historical understanding of primitive Christianity.

In the Middle Ages, all sight of the ancient world is initially lost. And the only connection the medieval period has with the ancient world is in the now quite simply mysterious form of the church. The Middle Ages' attitude to the church is like that of a child listening to an oriental fairy tale. The medievals hear the wonderful message and marvel at the pictures it conjures up before their eyes. But in no sense at all can it occur to them to scrutinize what they are actually being told. The medieval age is usually content just to keep copying the commentaries of the Fathers. When it goes any further, it inevitably produces exegetical monstrosities, as, for example, when justification for the curial teaching on the two swords, the spiritual and the temporal, held together in the Pope's hand, is found in the words of Luke's Gospel: "And they said: 'Look, Lord, here are two swords.' And he said to them, 'It is enough.'"¹⁹ Or, to take another example, when it

Darmstadt, 1968]). The original text is now reprinted in OWN 2: *Schriften bis 1880*, ed. E. W. Stegemann and R. Brändle, in collaboration with M. Stauffacher-Schaub (Stuttgart/Weimar: J. B. Metzler Verlag, 1994), 231–320. Overbeck also published an article on the Augustine–Jerome correspondence in 1879: "Aus dem Briefwechsel des Augustin mit Hieronymus," *Historische Zeitschrift* 42, Neue Folge 6 (1879), 222–59; now in OWN 2, 343–377.

19 Luke 22: 38. See OWN 1, 92, where it is stated that, "according to U. Duchrow, *Christenheit und Weltverantwortung. Traditionsgeschichte und systematische Struktur der Zweireichelehre* (Stuttgart, 1970), 345f., it was Peter Damian (died 1072) who, with reference to Luke 22: 38, formulated the Two-Sword theory." According to Walter Ullmann, a variation on the Two-Sword theory can be found as early as Alcuin (c. 740–804). It was later invoked by the German King and Emperor, Henry IV (1050–1106), and, in a radically different sense, the one Overbeck has in mind in the passage above, by St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) (see W. Ullmann, *A History of Political Thought: The Middle Ages* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970], 110f., 137f.)

is asserted that the Pope is the supreme judge of peoples and kings, for Paul says that the spiritual man is able to judge the value of everything.²⁰

Everyone nowadays is fully aware of the disastrous consequences that resulted from this religious development, a development based on a history, transmitted in poorly edited texts, that no one understood. Finally came the hour of deliverance, when the heroes of the Reformation bade farewell to centuries of error and took their stand on Scripture alone. In so doing, they took the first step toward making it at all possible again for Scripture to be understood, after this possibility had completely disappeared over the course of time. But, obviously, the vast, dense undergrowth—produced by previous theology—that surrounded the true meaning of Scripture could not be cleared away at one fell swoop. And, hence, no matter how quickly a critical debate with the tradition could have been conducted, to a very considerable extent, the tradition was initially still going to continue to exercise a decisive influence on biblical exegesis.

There is, however, one other significant additional factor that helps us see why the Reformation was unable to make more than a relatively insignificant start to the actual task of interpreting the New Testament historically. The fact that the practice of critical scholarship was re-established at the same time as the Reformation occurred certainly meant that the possibility of making a scholarly investigation of Scripture was open to the Reformers from the very start. The Reformation is, in fact, inseparably bound up with the re-establishment of the scholarly preconditions for the investigation of Scripture, and the achievements of the Reformation era are new and important, even in the area of scholarly exegesis. But given that it was, in the first place, a mainly religious impulse that lay behind the whole Reformation movement, it is obvious that the exegetical achievements of this period cannot be evaluated from the point of view of critical scholarship alone.

Indeed, with the exception of Calvin's commentaries, it would be utterly absurd even to think of judging the Reformers' exegetical works by the criterion of pure scholarship. The specifically Protestant religious drive that gave birth to this exegetical literature can be seen particularly in the latter's one-sided concentration on the Apostle Paul. In this sense, the main importance of even Melancthon's commentaries is not to be found in the area of the historical interpretation of Scripture. And as for Luther himself...! His commentary, for example,

²⁰ An allusion to I Corinthians 2: 15: "The spiritual man judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one."

on the Letter to the Galatians²¹ (I am thinking mainly of his longer commentary²²) is one of the most powerful books ever written. But what reader would dream of calling it a historical commentary! The book is itself much too important to be of any use as a commentary. In his interpretation of the Letter to the Galatians, Luther writes like a poet, consumed by one idea. Over and over again, in interpreting Galatians, he shows that he has ears only for the basic, central dogma of Protestantism: justification by faith. Taking his cue from the words of his text, he keeps expounding in ever-new ways the content of this, for him, inexhaustible, profound, and endlessly significant dogma. But he has precious little interest in the various other things that, it must be said, we can also find today in the Letter to the Galatians.

Nevertheless, Luther's complete indifference toward other aspects of Galatians makes his work still interesting as a commentary, even today. It contains many a bold formulation that some contemporary exegetes, despite emphasizing more than anyone else their agreement with the Reformers, would scarcely venture to use, because they are normally hampered in their exegesis by critical considerations. There is, for example, no better relief, after wading through the various petty details that the more recent art of exegesis has come up with in its treatment of the above-mentioned dispute between Paul and Peter in Antioch, than to hear Luther speaking about it. His judgment on Peter lacks, of course, as it must, *the* element that modern exegetes strive for: historical objectivity.

Now, while it is true that the Reformation era failed to find the right balance in its theology between the scholarly and the religious element, nevertheless the Reformers' exegetical works far outshine those of the following period. Initially, there were two kinds of difficulty hindering the development of the interpretation of the New Testament: the dogmatism of Protestant orthodoxy²³ in the post-Reformation period and rationalism. In turn, these new obstacles just delayed even further the finding of a solution to the problem of understanding Christianity's historical origins. Protestant orthodoxy, for its part, produced

21 "In epistolam Pauli ad Galatas commentarius" (1519), in *Weimarer Ausgabe* (Weimar, 1883ff.), vol. 2, 443–618 (see OWN 1, 93); English Translation: "Lectures on Galatians" (1519), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 27, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen, tr. Richard Jungkuntz (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 151–410.

22 "In epistolam S. Pauli ad Galatas commentarius" (1535), in WA 40, I/II (see OWN 1, 93); English Translation: "Lectures on Galatians" (1535), Chapters 1–4, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 26, and Chapters 5–6, in vol. 27, 1–149, tr. J. Pelikan (1963/1964).

23 On post-Reformation Protestant orthodoxy or "scholasticism," see, for example, James C. Livingston's brief remarks in his *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century* 1 (2nd ed.) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 14–15.

the Protestant doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, whereas rationalism developed the so-called “natural” explanation of Christianity. In their interpretation of Scripture, both simply misunderstood, although in opposite ways, the nature of the subject they were dealing with.

As regards Protestant orthodoxy’s dogmatism first of all, one must appreciate that Protestantism was essentially a new and very controversial movement, facing severe difficulties in its early years. As a result, in Protestantism, the purely scholarly interest in Scripture and in its interpretation initially receded completely into the background, and for a long time, Calvin’s commentaries remained Protestant theology’s unrivaled exegetical masterpiece. After Protestantism challenged the authority of the church by asserting that of Scripture, it was impossible, particularly for a generation of theological epigones (which is what the generation of the post-Reformation period was), to consider its next task to be anything other than to identify the external signs of the authority of Scripture. A theory had to be devised directly guaranteeing Scripture the characteristics of complete inerrancy, internal consistency, and the sufficiency of its revelatory content, to which nothing further could be added. These requirements were met by the theory of the direct, divine inspiration of the canon of Scripture. The fundamental idea behind this theory was not, of course, new. But it is, of course, just as true to say that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the theory was developed by Protestant theology with a hitherto unknown rigor and logical consistency.

Now, obviously, any theory about the *origin* of Scripture is by its very nature bound to be a historical theory. And the more such a theory has developed in isolation from the consideration of any historical facts, the greater the danger is that it will eventually come into conflict with the most elementary ones. And this is what happened in the case of the Protestant theory of the inspiration of Scripture. For when it had developed to the point where, by its own inner logic, it was forced to assert the verbal inspiration of Scripture, it then found itself in the awkward position of having to disregard as far as it could—or at least suppress—the fact that there were textual differences in the individual biblical manuscripts. It also had to deny that New Testament Greek had evolved historically, by affirming its classical character.

These and other delusions within Protestant scholasticism led to an intellectual reaction in the form of rationalism. In rationalism, we can see the analytical mind in a state of indignation, that is to say, asserting itself so vehemently that it does as much violence as Protestant scholasticism to the historical subject it seeks to explore. Nor does it get any closer than did Protestant scholasticism to its aim of reaching a

historical understanding of Scripture, except to the extent that, as the more recent movement, it has the advantage of having a greater wealth of historical knowledge at its disposal.

The struggle between rationalism and Protestant scholasticism began at once in its most acute form with the emergence of deism, whose main theses were then adopted by German rationalism. Now, although German rationalism may not have completely and explicitly disregarded, as the deists did, the historical dimension of Christianity and its earliest documents, nevertheless, its approach to the subject it was investigating was hardly any less wide of the mark than deism's. Rationalism was not so much concerned with establishing a rational view of the question, based on a profound engagement with the actual historical evidence for primitive Christianity, but rather with establishing a view of the question in harmony with the general principles of rationality.

Rationalist exegesis is, of course, concerned with the numerous things that interest the historical interpreter of any document from the distant past: its sources, the time and place of its composition, biographical details about its author, and so on. But for rationalism all these questions are abstract in character. It applies them to the biblical writings in a purely external way, like a template, but does not allow the answers to these questions to emerge from any deeper consideration of the writings themselves and the period in which they were written. Hence the naïve way rationalism attributes to the biblical authors its own most characteristic concepts and views; and hence also rationalism's predilection for explaining historical facts in terms of factors that are—in the extreme—subjective, of secondary importance, personal in a trivial sense and arbitrary, and, by their very nature, quite particularly inaccessible to serious historical research.

Just to take an example, the Gospel ascribed to Luke and the same author's Acts of the Apostles are dedicated to a man named Theophilus, about whom we know absolutely nothing, except that it might perhaps be inferred from the way he is addressed that he was a distinguished man. But the rationalist interpreter will then waste a disproportionate amount of time speculating about the possible personal connections that could have existed between Theophilus and Luke—about whom we do not know much more—before examining more closely the actual *writings* attributed to the latter. Indeed, were he even to learn that Luke had been a physician—which happens to be mentioned once, very incidentally, in one of Paul's letters²⁴—the rationalist could be so delighted at discovering this piece of information and

24 Colossians 4: 14 (cf. OWN 1, 96).

so convinced that it gave him the most reliable hermeneutical key to Luke's writings, that he might almost neglect to scrutinize these writings from any other angle.

Furthermore, the natural explanation of miracles is characteristic of rationalist exegetes. Without first thinking of asking how biblical miracle narratives might have acquired their present form, they unhesitatingly appeal to the natural explanation of miracles to interpret the content of the biblical writings in a way that suits their own preconceptions.

Finally, closely connected with rationalism's basic principles is the way its exegetical literature has produced an endless tangle of hypotheses, thriving and blossoming luxuriantly, especially in an area of such complexity as the question of the mutual affinities and interrelationships between our canonical Gospels. Rationalism was always more interested in the general feasibility of its hypotheses than in the specific, case-related, and inherent feasibility of any particular hypothesis. Not surprisingly, then, in the precise area of the exegesis of the Gospels, rationalism produced with truly effortless ease its most artificial creations. In the process, one might add, all it managed to do was to provide a mirror image of the 'Harmonies of the Gospels' spawned by its predecessors and adversaries.

More recent historical surveys of the fortunes of scriptural exegesis tend very emphatically to dismiss rationalism. "It is," we are confidently assured, "now obsolete." Yet precisely where scriptural exegesis is concerned, such a judgment would need to be taken with a grain of salt. Quite apart from the fact that certain aspects of the rationalist exegesis of Scripture should never be regarded as obsolete in any scholarly treatment of the Bible, many of the individual weaknesses of rationalist exegesis still live on in contemporary exegetical literature. Indeed it would be very interesting to study the various ways in which present-day schools of exegesis reflect both the general, fundamental idea underlying rationalist exegesis and the individual means by which it was implemented.²⁵ However, although individual aspects of rationalism have retained a very significant influence on our way of thinking, they are no longer, as they originally were, part of a living rationalist tradition. Hence, there can then be no doubt that rationalism as a whole must today probably be regarded as obsolete.

25 *In my revision of de Wette's *Erklärung der Apostelgeschichte* [Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles], XXVI, I compiled a list of rationalist ideas that, for the conservative interpreters of this New Testament book, still provide the refuge, as it were, their rationalism requires. Recently, the Hippocratic art of Luke has, in these quarters, even been detected in the Letter to the Hebrews (see Delitzsch, *Commentar zum Brief an die Hebräer* [Commentary on the Letter to the Hebrews] [Leipzig, 1857], 705f.).

A deeper sense of feeling in the area of religious faith; an enormously extended knowledge of the world and of history; and the tremendous, general advance in the historical sciences—all of this has, of course, meant some progress for historical theology as well. Historical theology has now—but only now—finally reached a position where it can actually raise the question of the historical origins of Christianity and its earliest documents. It has only now become at all possible for historical theology to answer this question by looking more deeply at the concrete issues involved rather than by examining them purely externally through the lens of a rational or irrational system of dogmatics.

We cannot delay here over the individual phases of this momentous development. Not over Schleiermacher, whose influence even in this area is important and far-reaching, although everything to do with the study of history reminds us of the weakest aspects of his theology. Nor over de Wette,²⁶ who once adorned this university and whose merits in breaking new ground on the question of a genuinely historical exegesis of the biblical writings are here much more pertinent than Schleiermacher's. His own labors only failed to yield a richer harvest because of the excessively cautious and skeptical nature of his approach. But there is *one* man, however, to whom we must devote some time, because he is the one who injected the vital ideas into the current debate on New Testament literature. It is certainly thanks to his brilliant works alone that theology has in our day come to be so predominantly concerned with historical questions about the nature of primitive Christianity. It is due to his efforts, more than anyone else's, that the progress made in the modern approach to history has had such a profound impact on theology, and its results applied, above all, to the historical question—that was for so long ignored—of the origins of Christianity. We are referring to Baur of Tübingen.²⁷

He himself frequently declared that in his studies on primitive Christianity, his only aim was to prepare the groundwork for answering a purely historical question purely by means of historical scholarship. That is to say, his only aim was to explain Christianity, in so far as it

26 Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette (1780–1849), a German theologian and one of the founding fathers of modern biblical criticism, was professor in Basel from 1822. De Wette, according to Werner Kümmel, “was the first to distinguish the proclamation of Jesus from the apostolic teaching and to differentiate within the latter various subgroups.” Kümmel, *The New Testament. The History of the Investigation of its Problems*, 106.

27 On F. C. Baur (1792–1860), the founder of the Tübingen School, see Peter C. Hodgson, *The Formation of Historical Theology. A Study of Ferdinand Christian Baur* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966); Kümmel, *The New Testament*, 120–43; Robert Morgan, “Ferdinand Christian Baur,” in Ninian Smart et al. (eds.), *Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West I* (Cambridge: CUP, 1985), 261–89.

could ever be done, in terms of the historical circumstances surrounding its appearance, in terms of what first brought it into existence and what prepared the way for it, and in terms of the causes that contributed to its emergence.²⁸ These baldly stated principles, of course, do not signify all that much. It is only by seeing how they are implemented that one recognizes the master. To put it in a nutshell, Baur's merit in illuminating the origins of Christianity consists above all in the way he identified the nature of the first vital question Christianity had to face—namely, its relationship to Judaism and its transition from Judaism to the world of the Gentiles—and in the way he made a start in demonstrating how Christianity was transformed in the course of this transition. As is well known, Baur came to see the New Testament canon as being a fully explicable part of this process, viewing it as a product of roughly the first one hundred and twenty years of the church's history.

Baur's academic fame rests on two fundamental pillars. The first is his monograph on the Gospel of John.²⁹ This appeared in 1844, and even those who disagree with its conclusions will not deny that it has provided a deeper insight than absolutely any other work into the actual conceptual structure of this Gospel. And the second is the great scholar's own favorite work, his book on Paul.³⁰ This work taught us, on the basis of a study of Paul's letters, to recognize the unique significance of the Apostle to the Gentiles in the development of primitive Christianity—at the price, admittedly, of having to sacrifice the credibility of the Acts of the Apostles.

Since the publication of these studies by Baur, no scholarly work has appeared in this area that does not show traces of their influence. Baur's interpretation of the Gospel of John as a post-apostolic idealization of the Gospel history, transmitted in a more spontaneous form in the first three Gospels, is still very largely contested—but it is now clear to everyone that the form of the Gospel history in the fourth Gospel

28 *Cf., e.g., *Die Tübinger Schule* (1st ed.), 13. [*Die Tübinger Schule und ihre Stellung zur Gegenwart* (Tübingen: L. F. Fues, 1859 [1st ed.], 1860 [2nd ed.]); now reprinted in F. C. Baur, *Ausgewählte Werke in Einzelausgaben* 5, ed. Klaus Scholder (Stuttgart–Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag [Günther Holzboog], 1975).]

29 F. C. Baur, "Über die Composition und den Charakter des johanneischen Evangeliums," in *Theologische Jahrbücher* (Tübingen: Ludwig Friedrich Fues, 1844), 1–191, 397–475, 615–700 (see OWN 1, 98).

30 *Paulus, der Apostel Jesu Christi. Sein Leben und Wirken, seine Briefe und seine Lehre. Ein Beitrag zu einer kritischen Geschichte des Urchristenthums* (1st ed.) (Stuttgart: Becher und Müller, 1845); 2nd ed., ed. Eduard Zeller, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Fues's Verlag [L. W. Reissland], 1866–7). English Translation: *Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ, His Life and Work, His Epistles and His Doctrine. A Contribution to a Critical History of Primitive Christianity*, tr. from the 2nd German edition by the Reverend A. Menzies, 2 vols. (London and Edinburgh: Williams & Norgate, 1875 [1st ed.], 1876 [2nd identical ed.]).

cannot easily be harmonized in the traditional way with the form it has in the three earlier ones. Baur's view of the clash between Paul and the original Apostles is, for the most part, also rejected. But at least it is now clear to everyone that the unity between them is not immediately obvious and has, in some sense, to be argued for.

A lengthy commentary on the New Testament has recently appeared whose theological standpoint is diametrically opposed to Baur's. Its whole view of the New Testament rests on the slim basis of there being perfect harmony between the second chapter of the Letter to the Galatians and the fifteenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles.³¹ This is the antithesis of Baur's assertion that there is a conflict between these two chapters. However it must be said that, in a certain sense, Baur's own critical standpoint has here in fact been given an exaggerated significance, for Baur was much too perceptive a historian to make his whole view of the New Testament hang on such a slender thread.

One could adduce countless such examples of where Baur has had a profoundly far-reaching influence on theological literature right across the board. But even were it permitted to list them all here, they would be of only secondary interest for us. Nor do we wish to lay any kind of stress on the general approval individual scholarly discoveries of Baur's have met with. The main point to note is that thanks to Baur, theology has actually begun to treat the earliest documents of Christianity historically. The general willingness to undertake this task has changed the face of historical theology as such and not simply the face of an individual theological school. Hence, the theology that wishes to look critically at what were the previously accepted historical foundations of Christianity no longer adopts the standpoint of rationalism, although this is frequently asserted; nor does the theology opposed to it adopt the standpoint of early Protestant orthodoxy. And by the same token, neither kind of theology can claim to have gone back to the standpoint of the Reformers.

The theology that nowadays is mainly termed *critical* is by no means concerned with how rational, in abstract terms, our views of the earliest history of Christianity are. This was the main concern of the older kind of rationalism. Nor is it concerned at all, in the first instance, with the general question of whether this history contained miracles or not. It is concerned with how this history happened. That is why the question of miracles occupies an incredibly important place in the history of critical thought. And it is also absolutely right that it should. So, it is not my intention at all to deny this in any general sense.

31 *See Hofmann, *Die Heilige Schrift Neuen Testaments zusammenhängend untersucht* [A systematic investigation of the Holy Scripture of the New Testament] (2nd ed.), vol. I, 59ff.

However, at the moment, that is to say in terms of the investigations currently occupying historical theology's attention, the significance of this question is incredibly small. This is true, no matter how often it is denied by those who maintain that at the root of present-day, so-called negative criticism of the Bible, there lies merely a subjective prejudice against miracles, typical of modernity.

Historical criticism is no more *exclusively* concerned with miracles in the case of the books of the Bible than in the case of any other historical accounts. Miracle stories, by their very nature, were the most problematic aspects of the historical books of the Bible, and so they were bound to be the first problems that critical reflection on the Bible would run up against. But critical reflection on the Bible did not by any means get bogged down in this issue. Rather, in the process scholars' eyes were opened to a whole range of completely different characteristics of the biblical books, preventing them, just as much as the miracle stories did, from interpreting these books as giving utterly direct and simple historical accounts of things that had actually happened. If we focus our attention for a moment on the historical books of the New Testament, we can see that these characteristics are so striking that nowadays, it is basically unthinkable for any scholar to entertain the notion that these books could be viewed as historical in any such straightforward sense.

All the more serious investigations in the modern period have shown that in not a single historical book of the New Testament are the historical facts of the Gospel history and the history of the Apostles conveyed directly and unambiguously. Rather, the author of every single book has, in each case, presented the facts from a particular point of view. Hence, on closer inspection, what is at issue *today* is not whether or not scholars hold fundamentally divergent views of the books of the Bible, depending on the different stances they adopt on the question of miracles. Rather, what is at issue is the *extent* to which one is willing to concede that the facts recounted in the Bible have been modified by the influence of the personality of the biblical narrators.

Hence, in the discussions on the Gospel of John and the Acts of the Apostles, the two canonical books whose historical credibility critical scholarship is bound to deny most categorically, it is easy to understand that the role played by the question of miracles is at times a—one would have to say—subordinate, and at times a totally negligible one. Were one to consider the Gospel of John simply from the point of view of the individual miracles as such that it contains, it would have just as much claim to historical credibility as the other Gospels in the eyes of present-day, so-called negative critical scholarship. What really lies and continues to lie behind the current debate about the fourth Gospel, is

mainly the question of its relationship to the other three Gospels, and the question of its own specific narrative structure.

In the case, however, of a work in which the miraculous element is so pronounced as it is in the case of the fourth Gospel, there may be a certain plausibility in suggesting that any really profound agreement on the kind of work it is, is only to be reached on the basis of commonly accepted assumptions on the nature of miracles. But in the case of the critical debate on the Acts of the Apostles, the question of miracles is quite secondary. Today one could reach a judgment about the general nature of this book by merely examining its narrative sections dealing with Paul, looking at their structure and their relationship to the Pauline letters, and in the process simply ignoring the miracle stories in Acts. At any rate, were such an examination of Acts not to convince people of its non-historical character, it would be positively foolish to concentrate on the miracle stories in Acts to get them to change their minds. Certainly no one has shown that critical exegesis has concentrated exclusively on the question of miracles to prove the validity of its approach to Acts.

Were indeed critical exegesis to devote any special attention today to these miracle stories, it would be not so much for the sake of these stories in themselves; rather it would be because, in the Acts of the Apostles, there is a parallelism between the miracles associated with Peter and those associated with Paul. And it is self-evident that this fact—assuming its accuracy—sheds much more light on the essential meaning of the Acts of the Apostles than can be shed by casting general doubt on the miracle stories it contains. This latter approach in itself would in no way advance our understanding of the book. In general, the biblical research that is nowadays mainly called critical does not at all direct its skepticism in the first instance at the question of the credibility or lack of credibility of the biblical books, but at the positive question, “*In what sense* are they credible?”

The deist biblical criticism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries declared the biblical writings to be partly the products of obscure, uneducated writers who, from a position of crude ignorance, handed on information about the circumstances of the time that was pure fantasy. It was then entirely appropriate for an Anglican theologian, Lardner,³² to have taken the trouble of showing from parallels with the contemporary, so-called profane literature that the writings under attack were historical writings like any others, and also

32 Nathaniel Lardner (1684–1768) was actually a Nonconformist theologian, whose best-known work is *The Credibility of the Gospel History* (17 volumes, 1727–57: see OWN 1, 101).

that their historical background reflected circumstances known from other sources. Today this method of defending the narratives in the biblical books still makes sense in particular cases. But, when employed in the quite general way in which it is still often invoked against critical exegesis, it makes no sense at all, because what it is defending is, generally speaking, not at all what is being called into question.

Indeed no one maintains more resolutely than historical criticism that the books of the Bible must be interpreted, in the first instance at any rate, in terms of the living historical context out of which they arose. The Acts of the Apostles, for instance, in its final chapters, recounts with much juridical detail Paul's trial before the Roman authorities in Palestine. Now it would obviously be a decisive blow against the accuracy of the account in Acts if the juridical forms of this trial were found to be impossible from a historical point of view. In the account given in the Acts of the Apostles, however, errors of this kind would only ever count as accidental errors. They might just as easily not have been committed by the author. For there is no reason to suppose that he was unacquainted with the Roman criminal trial system, nor is it clear what reason he could have had for not making proper use of his knowledge of it.

Hence, it is in any case important to verify the accuracy of the legal forms used in Paul's trial, and no commentary can omit to do so, if only out of antiquarian historical interest. But as positive proof of the credibility of the story, such an investigation is a matter of complete indifference. For the doubts raised by critical exegesis do not concern these peripheral issues at all. They go deeper. They are concerned with the behavior above all of Paul in the course of this trial. And even had this trial not taken place as recounted in Acts or even had it not taken place at all, it could, of course, still have been described in a formally correct way. These examples, however, suffice to indicate how far the attitude of skeptical biblical criticism toward its subject has also changed when compared with that of its rationalist predecessor. It is completely different.

And what is equally certain is that the modern *opponents* of skeptical biblical criticism do not share the same standpoint as post-Reformation Protestant orthodoxy either. Whatever remnants of the old doctrine of inspiration may still have survived up to our own times, no one taking a scholarly view of primitive Christianity today would dream of anticipating the final results of any historical investigation of the subject by appealing to what is left of the doctrine of inspiration. But even apart from that, the fact is that the historical investigations into New Testament literature that are of such absorbing and conspicuous interest to present-day theology were of no interest at all

to Protestant orthodoxy. Since the latter's starting-point was that the biblical authors were, as Protestant orthodoxy expressed it, merely the hands writing what the one Spirit inspired them to write, this meant that the importance of such investigations was, in fact, greatly reduced. And the early Lutheran dogmaticians, for instance, had no hesitation in explicitly declaring the personality of the biblical authors to be, in principle at least, a matter of indifference.

In that period, on the other hand, historical questions concerning the specific origins of biblical literature were of particular interest to the ill-famed rationalist sects of the Socinians³³ and the Arminians.³⁴ Indeed, considering the zeal with which the so-called authenticity of the biblical books (i.e., the belief that they were composed by the authors traditionally assumed to have written them) is often defended today, one could imagine, were one to judge superficially, that the thesis of a distinguished Arminian theologian of the first half of the seventeenth century still held sway. The latter declared, without mincing his words: "In order to know for sure that the biblical books are of divine origin, it suffices to know if it is certain that they were written by the authors whose names are mentioned in the title."³⁵ I say, were one to judge superficially, one could be reminded of this today. For the Socinians and the Arminians, as they themselves acknowledged, wanted to base the religious value (*fides divina*) of the biblical books on their historical credibility (*fides humana*). This is precisely what the orthodox dogmaticians for very good reasons did *not* want to do. And neither, of course, is it what the theologians, who nowadays oppose the so-called negative critical study of the canon, want to do. But in any case, as we have just seen, given the various specific kinds of interest displayed in the historical questions connected with the biblical writings, it would

33 Socinianism was a form of Unitarianism, deriving from the ideas of two Italian theologians, Lelio Sozini (1525–62) and his nephew Fausto Sozzini (1539–1604).

34 Arminianism, developing from the teachings of Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609), was a reaction against strict Calvinism. It represented a more liberal understanding of Reformed Christianity.

35 *Episcopus, in Strauss, *Christliche Glaubenslehre* I, 159. [Episcopus, the Latinized name of the Dutch theologian Simon Bisschop [1583–1643], was a significant figure in the development of Arminianism. David Friedrich Strauss [1808–74], famous initially for his *Life of Jesus* (*Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* [1st ed.], 1835–36, repr. 1969; English Translation of the 4th edition of Strauss's *Life of Jesus* by George Eliot in 1846), followed it up with the work Overbeck refers to here: *Die christliche Glaubenslehre in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung und im Kampfe mit der modernen Wissenschaft dargestellt*, 2 vols. [1st ed. 1840/41, repr. 1973; no English Translation]. In the latter work, Strauss quotes Episcopus, "Institutiones theologicae," in *Opera theologica*, ed. S. Curcellaeus and Poelenburgh (Amsterdam, 1650), vol. I, 235: "ad hoc, ut certo sciamus, libros hos divinos esse, sufficit si certum sit, eos scriptos esse ab iis auctoribus, quorum nomina prae se ferunt" (quoted in OWN 1, 103).]

be completely unthinkable to make a direct identification between any theological viewpoint found on these issues today and those found in the earlier period.

If, therefore, neither early Protestant orthodoxy nor the rationalism of an earlier period held positions that correspond to the positions held today by academic theologians in their debate about the nature of primitive Christianity, can we possibly detect the positions adopted by these modern theologians in the age of the Reformation? This is just as unlikely. What today is mainly called *biblical criticism* is not Luther's audacious biblical criticism. And the view of Scripture held by the opponents of modern biblical criticism—to the extent that they seek to justify it theologically (which obviously is all that concerns us here)—does not have the same unbroken simplicity that marked the Reformers' view of Scripture. In any case, there exists a momentous difference between the Reformers and all of us contemporary theologians who are involved in the study of the origins of Christianity and its earliest documents. In a way, that is true for all of us, and was quite certainly not the case for the Reformers, the origins of Christianity have, from a scholarly point of view, become a historical problem. Or, to make the very same point in another way, the earliest history of Christianity in a certain sense belongs for us—as it did not for the Reformers—to the past.

The way in which the question of the historical origins of Christianity is posed today had not yet appeared at all within the Reformers' intellectual horizon. Everyone who today investigates the much discussed questions of when and where the biblical texts were written, of their aim, their sources, their mode of composition, their interrelationships, the earliest traces of their existence, and so forth claims, in doing so, to be proceeding purely historically. And there is, in fact, no telling which presuppositions, anticipating the outcome of such investigations, might help clarify these questions, and which would not rather confuse them. All of us, however, who deal with these questions today cannot but be aware of the changed times we now live in. And even if we do not all feel this to the same extent, we all nevertheless feel it to some extent. None of us can completely escape the sense that, given the views we now hold in the academy, we find ourselves in a new house and we have to come to terms with this new situation. But if I say this on this occasion, it certainly cannot be because I think that the so-called critical treatment of the origins of Christianity, as it is mainly termed, is the only rigorous one and hence the only one that should be granted right of citizenship within Protestantism. But it is equally certain that neither do I think the critical approach to the

question of the origins of Christianity should be put completely beyond the pale of Protestantism.

As regards the first of the two views just mentioned, I wished rather to stress that the problems facing theologians today are problems they all have in common. This is something that unites theologians, even if in other respects they have very different starting-points. As such, it is a unifying factor in theology, a unifying factor that at the present time is by no means to be disdained, even if the various theological parties, in their polemical zeal, are very inclined to do just that. All we wish to say on this score is that even the interests of pure scholarship stand to benefit very much from the sharp control that the theological parties, currently at loggerheads over the interpretation of primitive Christianity, tend to exercise over each another's investigations. For such sharp control is doubly necessary in an area where the basis for scholarly judgment is such a relatively narrow one, requiring for its clarification such subtle and elaborate studies. It is an area, in short, where the possibility of error is extremely high. Simply being aware of this would in itself, of course, never constitute the basis on which theological parties could accept one another's positions. But it is a different matter when it comes to the actual problems they deal with. And the fact that they all deal with the same problems does, after all, go deeper than the other considerations mentioned.

It is, of course, in the nature of theology—which, as you know, is not a pure science—that, although its problems are common to all its practitioners, this does not give them the kind of reassurance the practitioners of any other science find perfectly satisfactory. Theology serves neither purely religious nor purely scholarly interests. Its job is the moral task of establishing inner harmony between our faith and our critical sense. And it is simply in the nature of this extremely volatile task—a task that, in the most manifold way, reflects the richness of life itself—that theologians will be inclined to disagree even over the very results of scholarly research. Similarly, such disagreement, where it arises seriously, will be seen as simply tantamount to the admission that theology has failed in its task. At the present time, it cannot be denied that theologians are deeply divided in terms of their differing general views, especially on the question of religion's relationship to history. At a time like the present, therefore, so long as we are not to despair of theology's task, it will be necessary to pay all the more careful attention to the fact that its problems are ones we all have in common.

As regards, however, the relationship of modern biblical criticism to Protestantism, we do not wish to labor the point that whatever results it may have in the long run, modern biblical criticism is simply

fulfilling a task that was bound to flow automatically from the Protestant principle of the free investigation of Scripture.³⁶ There is just one question we still want to answer: whether a critical approach to Scripture that puts a question mark over the historical presuppositions of the earliest form of Protestantism must necessarily also be suspected of being hostile to Protestantism. This, however, is a question that is not being raised here in the sense of the utterly sterile debate about whether modern rationalism or its adversary is the true representative of Protestantism. It is not, to repeat therefore, in any sense concerned with trying to identify modern biblical criticism with Protestantism.

With this proviso in mind, therefore, we would answer the question raised as follows: it is certain that in its early years, Protestantism was in the happy position of knowing it could appeal to the freest scholarship of the time to seek support precisely for the historical presuppositions it was itself based on. A theology that was unable to ensure that Protestantism would always be in such a position, would have simply failed to do justice to its specific task within Protestantism. Indeed, its conflict with Protestantism would, willy-nilly, very soon be fatally revealed. It would in any case bear some of the blame for the situation Protestantism would then end up in. This would be the same situation Protestantism itself has driven the Catholic Church into, and because of which the Catholic Church must regard Protestantism in particular as its deadly enemy. Protestantism must be considered as such an enemy by the Catholic Church far less on account of its heterodox teachings in themselves, as because it has forced the Catholic Church to turn in upon itself and cut itself off from the rest of the world. Protestantism has forced the Catholic Church, in the Tridentine Confession of Faith, to erect an insurmountable wall between itself and the fulfillment of the endless task, embracing all earthly life, that it has set itself. Since Trent, Catholicism has simply been living from its own inflexible, dogmatic logic, and has finally withered away, ending in a series of dogmas such as the one that is to be produced today before our very eyes.³⁷

36 On this question, see Martin Henry, Appendix 2, "Freedom of Thought and the Spirit of Protestantism," *Franz Overbeck: Theologian? Religion and History in the Thought of Franz Overbeck*, 292f.

37 Overbeck is no doubt alluding here to the dogma of the primacy and infallible teaching authority of the Pope, defined at the First Vatican Council (1869–70), in *Pastor Aeternus*, the "First dogmatic constitution on the church of Christ," on 18 July 1870, at the fourth and final session of the Council. Overbeck's Inaugural Lecture was held somewhat earlier (7 June 1870), but presumably the sense that papal infallibility was about to be defined was "in the air" at the time, as the dogma had already been publicly debated for some considerable time and its promulgation was regarded as inevitable by the ultramontanians. See Alec R. Vidler, *The Pelican History of the Church: 5. The Church in an Age of Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 155f.

To preserve Protestantism from such a fate is the best outcome Protestantism can strive for in pursuing modern biblical criticism, even if such biblical criticism abolishes to some extent the authority of the past. Hence, whatever the legitimacy and necessity of modern biblical criticism in other respects may be, whoever works with the intention of fulfilling its goals will be least assailed by doubts in his labors, so long as he still has a moral relationship to Protestantism, and so long as he still has a lively sense of the inestimable benefits of purer faith and deeper insight that we owe to Protestantism and its first intrepid champions.