

Forgetting the power of leaven: The historical method in recent New Testament theology

Seth Heringer

Fuller Theological Seminary, 135 N. Oakland Avenue, Pasadena, CA 91182, USA

sethheringe@fuller.edu

Abstract

Ernst Troeltsch and Heikki Räisänen have raised significant challenges to the way New Testament theology handles the relation of history and theology. Troeltsch pushed Christian scholars to apply the historical method's three principles of criticism, analogy and correlation consistently to their work and thus embrace empiricism. Räisänen continues this trajectory by splitting New Testament theology into its descriptive and reflective tasks, resulting in a programme which questions the unity of the canon, the appropriateness of prescription and the role of church authority in New Testament theology. With these challenges in mind, this article examines four recent New Testament theologies to see how they use the historical method. It finds that these works exhibit different *ad hoc* ways of using the historical method, picking it up and setting it down at will. Peter Balla accepts New Testament theology as descriptive and historical while claiming it can also be theological by studying the content in the New Testament. Despite this embrace of the historical method, Balla remains uncomfortable with bare empiricism and pushes back on its naturalism. Georg Strecker splits the world into two: one part which can be investigated by the historical method and another part which lies outside its normal subject matter. The result is that he uses the historical method everywhere except where his main theological concern lies – Jesus' resurrection. I. Howard Marshall similarly holds the historical method to be necessary for New Testament theology but largely ignores it in light of narrative-theological concerns. Frank Matera takes a purposefully literary approach to New Testament theology and generally ignores the historical method. He does invoke it, however, when the text becomes difficult and alternative readings must be found. The methodological inconsistency demonstrated by these New Testament theologies leads the article to conclude that this type of historical New Testament theology is a failed enterprise. A theological understanding of history based on work by Murray Rae is then proposed as an alternative which allows for methodological consistency in synthetic work on the New Testament.

Keywords: Ernst Troeltsch, historical method, history, methodology, New Testament theology, theology.

Once applied to the scientific study of the Bible and church history, the historical method acts as a leaven, transforming everything and ultimately exploding the very form of earlier theological methods.¹

Heikki Räisänen has taken up Troeltsch's clarion call, criticising New Testament theology (NTT) for ignoring the clear separation between history and theology.² This call for separation has been inadequately addressed by recent New Testament theologies, which do not account for the depth of Troeltsch's and Räisänen's criticisms. Desiring to make claims about history and faith, devout New Testament theologies use the historical method³ in an *ad hoc* manner, overlooking the internal necessity of pursuing its principles to the end no matter the destruction wrought to theology.⁴ With little argumentation, they have simply rewritten the terms of the historical method in order to produce a mixture of history and theology, failing to recognise that, according to the historical method, history and theology, like oil and water, do not mix. Consequently, NTT has failed as a historical discipline. Since the historical method entails conclusions which are incompatible with Christian theology, the fix to this failure is not a reversion to the pure historical method. Rather, any synthetic approach to the New Testament must shift from mere description to theological discourse, from an *ad hoc* approach to history to a fully integrated theological understanding of history.

Ernst Troeltsch's 'Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology'

Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923), one of the first scholars to perceive the ramifications of the historical method for theology, believed that the historical method entailed a revolution in the foundation and reasoning of historical inquiry in theology.⁵ This understanding brought him into conflict with

¹ Ernst Troeltsch, 'Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology', in *Religion in History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), p. 12.

² Heikki Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme*, 2nd edn (London: SCM, 2000). Although both authors focus on the academic study of history, neither believes that anything else deserves the name 'history'. Both consider history influenced by ecclesial concerns not to be history but something else altogether – namely, theology.

³ I use the term 'historical method' to describe Troeltsch's method below. Today this type of method might more accurately be called the historical-critical method, a term Troeltsch uses less often.

⁴ 'Once employed, the inner logic of the method drives us forward; and all the counter-measures essayed by theologians to neutralize its effects or to confine them to some limited area have failed, despite eager efforts to demonstrate their validity' (Troeltsch, 'Historical and Dogmatic Method', p. 18).

⁵ Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), Troeltsch's historiographical forefather, is considered to be one of the first to have given a thorough description of modern scientific

Friedrich Niebergall, an evangelical German theologian who criticised Troeltsch's new methodology.⁶ In response, Troeltsch wrote the article 'Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology' to clarify the methodological differences between his 'historical method' and Niebergall's 'dogmatic method'.

To make this distinction, Troeltsch looks primarily to foundations. The dogmatic method, he argues, is founded on a supernaturalism which leads to methodological dualism:

Only the proof for the supernatural character of its authority or for the miraculous provides the decisive metaphysical foundation for the dogmatic method, without which it could be regarded as a knife lacking both handle and blade. The division of the domain of history into one area devoid of miracles and subject to the normal working of historical criticism and another area permeated by miracles and accessible to study only through methods based on inner experiences and the humble subjection of reason is the primary theoretical basis of the dogmatic method.⁷

For Troeltsch, the dogmatic method creates a 'history of salvation' (*Heilsgeschichte*) which stands apart from normal history. The motivation for this move, Troeltsch believes, comes from the dogmatic method's fear of being forced to change its doctrines by the powerful critique of the historical method. It protects doctrines by moving its supernatural parts outside normal history and beyond the reach of the historical method. Instead of dealing with an entire system, the dogmatic method considers 'only particular problems raised by historical criticism . . . ; one by one, they are then either rejected or designated as harmless, as the case may be. When Christianity is treated systematically, the historical-critical approach is abandoned'.⁸ Thus the dogmatic method fails, according to Troeltsch, because its supernatural foundation forces it into methodological inconsistency. It uses the historical method up to the point of discomfort and abandons it for supernaturalism when salutary. For Troeltsch, this *ad hoc* method is untenable.

historiography. See, however, Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 10, who cites the work of Arnaldo Momigliano as tracing the beginning of scientific history earlier than Ranke.

⁶ For more on the rivalry between Troeltsch and Niebergall, see Hans-Georg Drescher, *Ernst Troeltsch: His Life and Work*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), pp. 93–7.

⁷ Troeltsch, 'Historical and Dogmatic Method', p. 22.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

The historical method, on the other hand, is based on ‘the total historical reality in order to derive its standards of value from this totality’.⁹ This ‘total historical reality’ is the combination of Troeltsch’s three principles of the historical method.¹⁰ The first principle, *criticism*, states the necessity to apply the historical method to all events, resulting in the reduction of historical knowledge to mere probabilities. Every event falls equally under its gaze, disallowing any privileged position of safety for the historical claims of religion. Church tradition and authority are sidelined in order to allow for the non-preferential treatment of all evidence. The principle of *analogy* posits that contemporary human experience determines the probability of historical events having happened. Therefore religious claims about history must adhere to broadly accepted probability structures. *Correlation* is another name for cause and effect through time which knits together ‘all historical happening’ into a ‘permanent relation of correlation’.¹¹ Thus, Jewish and Christian histories are not special injections of the divine into history but the natural development of the historical context by way of cause and effect.¹² The net effect of these principles is empiricism, for the only things which can be known are those things which can be seen, repeated, and known to be possible from experience.¹³

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁰ The importance of Troeltsch’s three principles should not be overlooked. John J. Collins calls them the ‘classic formulation’ of nineteenth-century critical historiography (*Encounters with Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), p. 12). Collins argues that Troeltsch’s formulation of these principles influenced William Wrede to consider their implications for biblical theology. Since Wrede has strongly influenced Räsänen, it is reasonable to assume Räsänen also embraces these principles. For example, he describes his basic concern as simply showing that ‘a “historical” account of early Christianity is not to appeal to supernatural or “metaempirical” entities (gods, revelation, inspiration) as explanatory factors nor should it make prescriptive claims’ (‘What I Meant and What it Might Mean: An Attempt at Responding’, in Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele (eds), *Moving Beyond New Testament Theology? Essays in Conversation with Heikki Räsänen* (Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society, 2005), p. 425). The empiricism of this statement clearly has its roots in the principles of analogy and correlation. The principle of criticism is apparent throughout his work, which doubts the unity, authority and claims of the New Testament.

¹¹ Troeltsch, ‘Historical and Dogmatic Method’, p. 14.

¹² For Troeltsch, however, Jesus himself does not fit his own context. Rather, he has ‘broken’ the ‘limitation’ of his context with a personality which was ‘superior to nature with eternally transcendent goals’ (*ibid.*, p. 27). Troeltsch is never clear how he can hold Jesus as outside the total context of history and still remain consistent with the historical method.

¹³ When Troeltsch’s entire corpus is considered, he is clearly not an empiricist. Nevertheless, the only place these three principles can lead is empiricism. Thus, even

For Troeltsch these three principles do not stand alone but together form an irresistibly strong method which describes all reality: 'Now, all these necessities were entailed by the historical method itself, which, once admitted at any one point, necessarily draws everything into its train and weaves together all events into one great web of correlated effects and changes'.¹⁴ The three principles together revolutionise methodology to such an extent that 'we are no longer able to think without this method or contrary to it'.¹⁵ This method is revolutionary because it attacks the old dogmatic method by destroying its foundation of miracles and revelation through criticism. Once that base is gone and all historical events stand on the same plain, analogy and correlation lift up to historical validity those events which can withstand empiricism. Like leaven, the historical method seeps into and irreversibly changes everything. It pursues its three interwoven principles to their conclusion no matter the consequences. It cannot stop the application of the principles *ad hoc*, for it is exactly their interrelation and universal applicability which makes them so powerful.¹⁶

Räisänen's proposal: moving beyond New Testament theology

Continuing in the tradition of Troeltsch, Räisänen shows that NTT becomes primarily descriptive when the historical method is used. Accordingly, he thinks that NTT can be replaced by two tasks: (1) 'the "history of early Christian thought" (or theology, if you like), evolving in the context of early Judaism' and (2) 'critical philosophical, ethical and/or theological "reflection on the New Testament", as well as on its influence on our history and its significance for contemporary life'.¹⁷ Done separately, these two tasks replace ecclesial projects, which uncritically mix history and theology.¹⁸ Räisänen considers the church with its dogmatic requirements, unwavering

though these principles do not represent his entire work, they show his early solution to the problem of dogmatism in Christian historiography.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁶ An important vindication of the historical method is its success in many and various fields: 'No one can deny that wherever the historical method has been applied it has produced surprisingly illuminating results, and that confidence in its ability to illuminate previously obscure areas has been consistently vindicated. Such success is its sole – but wholly sufficient – validation' (*ibid.*, p. 16).

¹⁷ Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology*, p. 8.

¹⁸ The separation of the two tasks is important to Räisänen. Although he allows literary intermixing, he wants it to be clear at what 'level' one is working. He suggests putting theological work 'in a concluding section of the historical work, or in an appendix following the historical account'. No matter how these two tasks are juxtaposed, one must 'clearly indicate what one is doing' (*Beyond New Testament Theology*, p. 204).

truth claims and desire to make canonical texts unified and relevant to be a problem for the historical study of early Christianity. His solution is to reject its influence in the service of objectivity.¹⁹ This rejection leads to a NTT which has no canon, shuns prescription while focusing on description and is undertaken for society at large (and not for religious communities *per se*).

Räisänen gives the canon no special treatment because it is a theological creation which cannot be justified historically: 'In the framework of an ecclesial interpretation of the Bible for kerygmatic and catechetical purposes such a limitation is quite meaningful. In historical work it is, by contrast, arbitrary'. Not only does the canon fail a historical test, it actively works against a critical study of history because it 'divorces things that have belonged together historically, and it also joins together things that have had no historical connection'.²⁰ No mystical unity connects the individual books of the canon; rather, they are discrete parts of the historical context within which the Christian religion developed. The inverse of this principle is also true for Räisänen: non-canonical documents are equally valid witnesses to the early Christian religion. Any limitation of the study of NTT to the canon therefore distorts the historical picture of Christianity.

Räisänen's programme also requires that NTT be descriptive, ruling out proclamation. Proclamation is problematic because it restricts the audience of NTT, pushes the interpreter to deny historical data and prevents interreligious dialogue. If NTT proclaims rather than describes, Räisänen believes it loses a larger hearing because society is only interested in description. Any preaching causes the 'scope' of NTT to be 'hopelessly narrowed down'.²¹ Another problem is that proclamation causes the accurate results of historical criticism to be overlooked by requiring certain historical outcomes and forcing false scholarship. To stop the ecclesial rule of scholarship, historical work must be separated from preaching: 'If we stop artificially maintaining the bond between exegesis and preaching, there is no reason why there should be a problem in presenting "negative" results'.²² Proclamation not only forces false history but also hurts interreligious dialogue by making universal claims. For Räisänen, the world is 'post-Christian' and therefore unfit for universal claims: 'The global perspective, too, demands that the task be conceived in terms of critical information . . . rather than proclamation. In our situation

¹⁹ Although Räisänen objects to being seen as arguing for 'objectivity' or 'neutrality', his protests do not fit with his system. For his more postmodern moments, see his *Beyond New Testament Theology*, pp. 34, 166; idem, 'What I Meant', pp. 420–5.

²⁰ *Beyond New Testament Theology*, p. 160.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 157.

it would be irresponsible for experts on the study of religion to concentrate on propagating their respective traditions'.²³ Scholars should recognise their responsibility to promote the 'tolerance and ability to engage in a dialogue'.²⁴ Any normative religious claim works against tolerance and therefore does not cohere with contemporary academic responsibility.

This stance does not mean people with religious commitments cannot do historical scholarship. Rather, Räsänen argues that a descriptive NTT can be done by anybody regardless of faith commitments, as long as that scholarship is done without outside influence. All that is needed is 'the will to take the material seriously'.²⁵ Although faithful people can do NTT, they should not be influenced by religious concerns: 'It is perfectly possible that it [research] will be vitiated by political or commercial or even by ideologically anti-religious influences and that these influences will be *even more harmful* than church ones would have been. Whatever his frame of reference, the scholar must be on his guard to preserve his independence'.²⁶ Religious influence is harmful because it prods scholarship to procure religiously acceptable answers; thus it must be rejected. Only scholars free from institutional or ecclesial concerns can arrive at tolerant conclusions which challenge established religions.

Challenges to New Testament theology

Troeltsch and Räsänen challenge traditional NTT in at least five ways, all of which centre on the task of doing NTT while being both historical and theological – the exact mix Räsänen attacks. The question is how scholars might address each.

1. *The problem of method*: Troeltsch sets up the option of either using the dogmatic or historical method in NTT. If Troeltsch is correct, the answer to this challenge should determine the answer to the other four. It does so because each method responds to the following challenges differently.
2. *The problem of the canon*: Räsänen argues that any identification of, or limitation to, the canon cannot be justified historically and does not belong in NTT. To make such a move, he argues, is strictly theological.
3. *The problem of theological unity and diversity*: NTT, according to Räsänen, should not concern itself with the theological unity of the canon for two reasons. First, grouping books together into the Christian canon cannot be justified historically. Second, even if such a grouping is assumed, claims for unity

²³ Ibid., p. 158.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 168.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 176.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 154; italics mine.

happen at a 'high level of abstraction' and are theological, not historical, assertions.²⁷ Any claims for a theological unity are untenable.²⁸

4. *The problem of authority*: Räsänen argues that church authority can only harm historical investigation and must be excluded from NTT. For many scholars with strong Christian convictions, however, any requirement that the Rule of Faith simply be set aside would be problematic.
5. *The problem of proclamation*: The danger of proclamation, according to Räsänen, is that it assumes theological and universal truth. Assumptions of normativity have no place in a historical NTT. If someone wants to contemporise these documents to be relevant to a modern audience, that is fine, but such teachings are not historical.²⁹

Examples from recent New Testament theologies

With the recent resurgence in NTT, many works could be surveyed to see how these challenges have been addressed.³⁰ This section will examine four recent works in NTT which offer a variety of responses to these challenges, albeit not always directly.³¹ It will not only be concerned with methodological issues but also with how those issues are resolved in practice. Here the pressure of Troeltsch's plea for consistency will be felt, for each of the four authors is representative of different approaches to an *ad hoc* use of the historical method. These examples can be placed on a continuum from those who stick closer to history (Balla and Strecker), to those who overlook history to focus on the narrative of the texts (Matera). Between these two positions lie those who freely mix history and theology (Marshall). The purpose here is to assess the claims of each of these New Testament theologians regarding the historical nature of their theological study.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

²⁸ See Räsänen, 'What I Meant', p. 417, where he criticises Peter Balla's defence of a theological unified canon by saying, 'I do not see how one could uphold these assumptions today'. For more on Balla's work, see below.

²⁹ Räsänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology*, p. 154. Räsänen's willingness to allow for an ecclesial NTT, as long as it realises that it is not historical, mirrors an earlier move by Troeltsch when he admits that an ecclesial system and a historical system are 'consistent within' themselves but 'incompatible' with each other ('Historical and Dogmatic Method', p. 25). In short, both allow for theological scholarship as long as it recognises that it is something other than historical.

³⁰ For reviews of recent literature see Frank J. Matera, 'New Testament Theology: History, Method, and Identity', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67 (2005), pp. 1–21; C. Kavin Rowe, 'New Testament Theology: The Revival of a Discipline', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125 (2006), pp. 393–419.

³¹ That is, the aforementioned five challenges will not be enumerated for each author but will be conversation partners throughout.

Peter Balla's *Challenges to New Testament Theology*

According to I. Howard Marshall, the challenges levelled by Räsänen have already been 'subjected to detailed and largely convincing criticism by Peter Balla'.³² Marshall is referring to Balla's *Challenges to New Testament Theology: An Attempt to Justify the Enterprise*, where Balla embarks on a project which, although interesting in some of its historical arguments, reflects an unsatisfying mixture of agreement and disagreement with Räsänen.³³

Balla agrees with Räsänen about the underlying method of NTT: 'New Testament theology is a historical enterprise'.³⁴ The obvious conclusion which 'springs out of this decision' is that NTT 'should be a descriptive enterprise'.³⁵ Despite this methodological agreement, he challenges Räsänen's arguments against the validity of NTT: 'We only disagree about whether or not such arguments would succeed: whether or not the enterprise is justified'.³⁶ An important development in Balla's approach is his separation of method and content: 'The Christian character of theology should not be measured on the basis of the method of theology, but on the basis of its content.' As long as NTT describes the theological content in the New Testament, it can still be labelled as theological regardless of method. Thus, NTT does not stop being theology even if 'it makes use of scientific methods which are non-Christian by definition'.³⁷ In this manner, Balla accepts the historical method while attempting to remain theologically relevant.

But this desire for theological relevance forces him to waffle on the historical nature of NTT. This characteristic can be seen in the following quotation which upholds historical criticism while questioning its theological ramifications:

I hold that New Testament theology has to make use of the method(s) of historical criticism. . . . [F]or those who engage in New Testament theology, a definition of history is preferable which leaves room for discussing reports about God's acts in human history. However, New Testament theology can be maintained as a historical enterprise even if one retains the definition of history as it was expressed by Troeltsch. In

³² I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), p. 18.

³³ Peter Balla, *Challenges to New Testament Theology: An Attempt to Justify the Enterprise* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

this case, too, the historian can report what the biblical author or figures believed about God's intervention in history, although the historian may choose not to accept their claim to be true.³⁸

This hesitancy to accept all of Troeltsch's historical method appears in two other places. First, Balla circuitously challenges the principle of analogy by doubting the claim that 'a religion that cannot perform miracles in the present should acknowledge that there are no miracles in general so there were no miracles in the past either'.³⁹ His opposition to this statement clearly goes against Troeltsch's principle of analogy by opening the world to a reality beyond empiricism. Second, he argues against a 'narrow' view of history which excludes God's acting in the world and in favour of a 'wider' view of history which allows a religious historian to believe that the content of his study could be true. Thus, the historian can 'find things to be historically likely, or not likely, which are not discussed under a narrow view of history by definition'.⁴⁰ These three moves should be recognised as attempts to maintain the historical method while pushing back on some of its more theologically problematic assertions. One wonders, though, whether this is a historical method which is any longer worthy of the name, or whether Balla has simply begun the process of shifting the ground in favour of an altogether different approach to NTT, one which no longer belongs under the rubrics set forth by Troeltsch.

Setting aside this question for the moment, let us return to Balla and a place where he and Räsänen disagree, specifically whether NTT should be limited to the canon based on historical reasoning. Balla's defence of the historical canon is wide-ranging, but three points stick out: the 'orthodox' canon was one of many early canons, it was unified theologically, and its authors wrote with 'canonical awareness'. Pointing to the existence of a Marcionite canon, he argues that there were various canons circulating in early Christianity. Therefore, for Balla, 'just as there may be a valid historical distinction between orthodox and heretical ideas, there may be a valid distinction between the writings, or group of writings, of the orthodox and heretics'.⁴¹ Balla merely

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16. Balla's desire to discuss God's action is incongruent with the purpose of his book to defend NTT within the context of Räsänen's historical method. Despite the possibility of a new definition of history, his argument proceeds along historical-critical lines.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46. The problem with this type of openness is that the historical method will never allow such claims to rise to the level of possibility. Even if supernatural acts are not ruled out by definition, analogy and correlation will prove them false before the inquiry has really begun.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

chooses to study the ‘orthodox’ canon and call that NTT. A ramification of this position is that the canon must have a unifying and organising principle. Balla posits such a theological unity within the canon based on the early creeds of the church.⁴² Finally, Balla claims that the authors of the New Testament materials ‘wrote with a canonical awareness; they wrote, what we may term as, a “second canon”’.⁴³ This canonical awareness influenced the church’s decision to recognise these books as authoritative at an early date. For these three reasons, Balla urges that a descriptive, historical study can justifiably be limited to the New Testament canon.

Have these points overcome Räsänen’s challenges to the traditional practice of NTT? On the contrary, Balla’s project fails to answer Räsänen’s criticisms in any substantial way. To begin, his agreement with Räsänen that NTT should be historical and descriptive shows a failure to understand the historical method and its power. He invokes the name of the historical method but immediately questions its principles of analogy and correlation by requesting a world where miracles can happen and God acts freely. In addition, by limiting his discussion to the theology of New Testament authors, to return to Troeltsch’s analogy, he attempts to control leaven. But the historical method is not content merely to describe theology; instead, it pushes on to consider whether the textual events happened. In his desire for wider respectability, Balla embraces the historical method in name while beginning its redefinition, a task that he fails to complete, thus undercutting the validity of New Testament claims and forcing questions of historical reality off the agenda of NTT.

Even in the places where Balla disagrees with Räsänen his protests are unhelpful. Although a full examination of the merits of his historical arguments is beyond the scope of this article, a few problematic points are apparent. The first is his opaque notion of ‘canonical awareness’. His proof for this concept is the OT quotations in the NT, which he believes show the writers’ intention to write a second canon.⁴⁴ If this intention sounds odd, he offers a textual example from Fourth Ezra where the creation of ‘secret books’ signifies the need for an apocalyptic second canon.⁴⁵ Even if these arguments are accepted (despite Gnostic overtones), and even if his ideas concerning apostolic authority are included, none of it adds up to the self-realisation of

⁴² ‘I would argue that reconstructed creedal elements may have formed parts of the “basic theology” of the early Christians’ (ibid., p. 205). See, however, p. 208 where he seemingly contradicts this point by wondering if a theological unity will ever be found for the NT, leaving only ‘theologies’ of the NT.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 101.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 100–1.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 112–14.

the New Testament authors that they were writing canonical documents. The second problem is Balla's limitation of his study to the 'orthodox' canon based on history. He argues for this limitation by saying that 'there is a legitimate historical distinction between canons of different religious groups. . . . The historian may choose to study the orthodox Christians' theology.'⁴⁶ There are two problems with this argument. First, although I agree that NTT should be limited to the New Testament documents, this limitation derives from a theological judgment, not a historical one. The canon developed historically based on theological decisions of the church, thus theology is intertwined in its formation.⁴⁷ The historical method cannot accept these theological decisions and thus cannot agree with the canonical limitation. Second, the historical method takes the total context of the historical world, including all the contemporary documents, as part of a historical inquiry into a text. Balla, however, limits the context of the New Testament documents to the canon. Hermeneutics tells us that interpretation of the part depends on the whole and vice versa; thus, by changing the context of the documents, he has changed their meaning. He is no longer studying the theology of the New Testament authors but the theology created by the decisions of orthodox theologians in the second and third centuries. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it has nothing to do with the historical method.

Balla's third disagreement with Räsänen comes when he insists that the New Testament exhibits a unified theology in its creedal statements. Although I am sympathetic to his desire to find a unity among the New Testament documents, I doubt it can be seen through the lens of the inherent prejudices of the historical method. The problem with this disagreement, however, is that it changes little. It is merely a disagreement over evidence, not method. Balla posits that the historical method can find enough unity in the New Testament writings to justify the canonical grouping; Räsänen disagrees and sees only diversity. The method of testing their hypotheses is the same. Both compare the New Testament canon against other relevant literature in a purely descriptive manner. In the end, the disagreement is more about whether to focus on unity or diversity than about the nature of NTT.

Throughout this book Balla aims too low. Even if all of his arguments are correct, very little has been accomplished. NTT is still historical, descriptive and utterly untheological. At least superficially, it accepts the worldview and

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁴⁷ For more on the connection between canon and theology, see Robert W. Jenson, *Canon and Creed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010).

prejudices of the historical method without challenge. Theology remains unimportant, an intruder upon the descriptive and objective task of NTT.⁴⁸

Georg Strecker's Theology of the New Testament

Georg Strecker (1929–94), former New Testament chair at the University of Göttingen and student of Rudolf Bultmann, continues the methodological divorce of history and theology. Bultmann's influence on him shows from the opening pages, where he gives theology the 'task of illuminating the meaning of the myth that expresses transcendent reality in the language of the world', to his claim that 'the essential nature of faith is not a matter of researching its historical basis, for faith bears its evidence within itself'.⁴⁹ Strecker bases the latter quotation on the kerygma's necessary connection with the resurrection – an event which lies beyond the boundaries of history. Thus, faith is not contingent on historical confirmation but on an existential encounter with the 'Risen One'. Any historical inquiry into what 'lies behind' the early kerygma is 'inappropriate in terms of its own subject matter'.⁵⁰ The world is split in two. On the one side is the historical world which can be investigated by the historical method; on the other is the realm of faith, the supernatural and the kerygma.

Despite his claims for the irrelevance of historical inquiry on faith, Strecker thinks that exegetes 'interested in history' cannot limit themselves to 'naïve' views of the resurrection but must press on to 'investigate what really happened'.⁵¹ He admits, however, that the historical method shapes what is historically possible. What the historian sees is determined by 'historical categories' which use a 'system of coordinates'. What kind of vision is possible within these coordinates? Strecker explains: 'Thus what does the historian see? He does not see the resurrection. . . . It is only narrated that the disciples saw the Risen One. But neither does the historian see the Risen One. Neither the resurrection event as such, nor the person of the Risen One are phenomena that can be grasped by the methods available to the historian.' If no claims can be made about the Risen One, what do historical categories allow? Historians only see 'the testimony to the

⁴⁸ Balla would argue that 'theology' is maintained insofar as one is concerned with the task of describing early church theology, but this is only historical description by another name.

⁴⁹ Georg Strecker and Friedrich Wilhelm Horn, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000), pp. 1, 252. Strecker's NTT was finished posthumously by Friedrich Wilhelm Horn and first published in German under the title *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* in 1996.

⁵⁰ *Theology of the New Testament*, p. 252.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

resurrection as it has precipitated out into our documents; it is possible for the historian to investigate this deposit on the basis of the categories and methods with which historians work, and to sort it out into the available historical categories'.⁵² Historians cannot investigate if the resurrection happened or if its interpretations by the disciples were correct; they can only describe the testimony which was deposited in the documents.

On one level, what Strecker says is undeniably true: historians only have access to documents. On another level, however, historians working with the rubric provided by Troeltsch would not be satisfied merely to relate documentary testimony. Instead, they ask whether the events actually happened, then reconstruct a narrative interpretation of both the events and their original interpretations.⁵³ This is also, in fact, what Strecker does throughout this book. As an example, he 'reconstructs' a 'historical sketch' of the beginnings of the resurrection accounts, focusing on the appearances of Jesus to his disciples. Rather than merely relating the testimony of the documents, he rejects accounts of the empty tomb because of their 'secondary, legendary origin'.⁵⁴ The inconsistency of Strecker's method is that it willingly follows the historical method to deny the empty tomb but abandons it for the resurrection appearances. He draws the method to a standstill *ad hoc* when it impinges on his theological concerns.

By setting aside the method *ad hoc*, Strecker masks the empiricism which resides within the historical method. It is not, as Strecker claims, that the historical method is unable to judge the supernatural claims of testimonies; on the contrary, it rejects them outright. The historical method cannot see

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 269–70.

⁵³ Paul Veyne describes history as 'an account of events . . . it is a narration' which 'simplifies, organizes, fits a century into a page'. But narration alone is not enough, for narration must use 'true events': 'A fact fulfills a single condition to be worthy of history: it must really have taken place' and thus 'history is the relating of true events' (*Writing History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), pp. 4, 11–12). Hayden White also shows the importance of real events narrated properly when he writes that 'it is not enough that an historical account deal in real, rather than merely imaginary, events. . . . The events must not be not only registered within the chronological framework of their original occurrence but narrated as well' (*The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 5).

⁵⁴ Strecker and Horn, *Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 268–9. One could reply that the empty tomb has nothing supernatural about it and falls within the ken of historical inquiry, thereby proving him consistent. In the context of Strecker's book, however, the empty tomb narratives were created to show 'the earthly reality of the resurrection in a manner that can be demonstrated' (p. 267) – a definitely supernatural reality, thus a reality which should lie beyond historical inquiry.

the Risen One, not because of methodological blindness, but because it has already denied the possibility of the resurrection.⁵⁵ After supernatural claims have been vitiated, all that remains is the fact that testimonies were made. Here the language of ‘myth’ and ‘vision’ rules, for the historical truth of these accounts has already been rejected. The pressure which split reality for Strecker is now apparent. A world ruled by the historical method leaves no room for the kerygma, forcing it to exist somewhere else – a parallel universe in which the historical method does not apply.

I. Howard Marshall’s *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel*

I. Howard Marshall, Emeritus Professor of New Testament Exegesis at the University of Aberdeen, writes a NTT which follows Balla’s method in theory. Like Balla, he believes a historical NTT can be limited to the canon because the canon was recognised early by the church, was almost the only Christian literature from the period, was written by the earliest of Jesus’ followers and has a unity of theme which focuses on Jesus and Christianity.⁵⁶ By constructing a historically defensible canon, Marshall shields NTT both from ecclesial concerns (systematic and prescriptive) and from having to investigate every document related to the early Christian religion (Räisänen). It stops ecclesial concerns by not letting theology overcome history; it stops a history-of-religion approach by lifting the canon above other documents and relegating the rest to background material.

He also follows Balla in limiting the task of NTT to the investigation of the theologies of the individual authors of the New Testament, after which he explores the possibility of finding a unity among them.⁵⁷ This goal of describing the New Testament authors’ theology is far more than a ‘sympathetic and nuanced’ summary of their teaching ‘in their context and in the light of their history’. Instead, he wants to penetrate the inner workings of the authors’ minds. Marshall believes the New Testament records not only teachings but also the religious experiences of the authors. Thus, his task is

⁵⁵ Hume gives the clearest statement of this argument in section 10 ‘Of Miracles’ in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. There Hume argues that when natural laws based on experience are assumed, the evidence for miracles can never overcome the evidence for natural laws, thus making it impossible to argue for a miracle. The historical method certainly uses natural laws and experience similarly to Hume.

⁵⁶ Although these arguments are not identical to Balla’s, they demonstrate a similar trajectory.

⁵⁷ There is a logical circle in how Marshall discovers a unity in the canon. He uses the criterion of theological unity to defend the historical canon, then ‘discovers’ a unity in the canon after examining the individual documents – a unity which had already served as a canonical criterion.

‘to get at the contents of the mind that produced the literary deposit’ so that he can ‘grasp the understanding of God and his relationship to the world reflected in the various documents’.⁵⁸ Once he has understood the individual authors, the next step is chronologically to compare them to see how the theology of the early church developed. By understanding the process of development, he is able to investigate whether there are common beliefs which signal that these documents belong to an ‘essentially harmonious collection’.⁵⁹

With this strong historical bent, one would expect Marshall to use the historical method throughout his work, yet he does the opposite by mostly ignoring historical questions and focusing on narrative concerns.⁶⁰ For instance, Marshall argues that some people find the Lukan birth narrative hard to accept as historical ‘in the strictest sense’ but that ‘this is not the place to assess the historicity of the material; our concern is with what Luke was conveying in his account of it’.⁶¹ Similarly, on Matthew’s account of the earthquake and mass resurrection after Jesus’ death, he writes, ‘Whether this is historical or not, it is theological testimony to the fact that the death and resurrection of Jesus had decisive consequences for the fate of the dead’.⁶² Finally, even though he points to the different narrative locations of Jesus’ temple cleansing (Matt 21:12–14; Mark 11:15–18; Luke 19:45–6; John 2:13–25), he passes over the historical question of when it happened because ‘it is emphatically not the aim or intention of this present discussion to iron out the differences between John and the Synoptic Gospels or to trivialize them’. Nor is he interested in a ‘historical explanation’ of how the differences arose but instead focuses on whether there is agreement among the authors which points to an underlying theological unity.⁶³

These are narrative-theological concerns, not historical. If he were doing history, he would push beyond reconstructing the authors’ narrative worlds to ask whether the events happened as the stories relate. Marshall apparently believes he is doing historical NTT, but the above statements show he is taking the first steps of rethinking the definition of ‘historical’ and the ‘historical method’. As we have seen, the historical method casts aside theological

⁵⁸ Marshall, *New Testament Theology*, p. 28.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁶⁰ It is problematic to contrast narrative and history as I am doing here, especially in the wake of Hayden White’s argument that narrative is the form of history (e.g. *Content of the Form*). Nevertheless, the word fits because Marshall is interested in the narrative world of the authors, which he believes can be historically reconstructed.

⁶¹ Marshall, *New Testament Theology*, p. 130.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 497, 593.

concerns to find historical truth, but here, narrative casts aside history in order to find theological truth. Narrative in this context is merely history which fails to complete its task. Where Marshall decides to stop the historical method, however, is a theological decision, and he introduces this change into his definition of 'history' without any argumentation.

Marshall's mixing of methods causes two tensions in his work. First, he wants to claim that these Christian narratives are historical, despite his avoiding historical questions. For example, he has no doubt that Luke 'as a whole fits broadly into the historical category and is not, for example, to be seen as historical fiction'.⁶⁴ This fits with his overall assessment of the Gospels as a 'faithful representation of how Jesus appeared to his earliest followers'. He knows this because 'their memory of him stands up well to the tests for authenticity and inauthenticity that have been developed by critical scholars'.⁶⁵ Not only does he believe that the Gospels are true according to the standards of historical inquiry, he also wants to look at what 'lies behind' the New Testament documents so that the 'historical processes' of the development of ideas 'can be properly reconstructed'.⁶⁶ He desires all of this but in this work he repeatedly sidesteps historical questions. A second tension is between prescription and description. On the one hand, he distinguishes between 'a book on New Testament theology' and 'New Testament theology itself'.⁶⁷ Thus, a book about NTT (like the one Marshall is writing) can only be descriptive, while the theologies of the authors of the New Testament documents can be prescriptive. Having taken this position, he is nevertheless open to scholars letting their faith affect their scholarship. Since the church no longer holds dogmatic control over what scholars can say, there is 'no need for scholars to keep their scholarship and their faith in separate compartments and never let either influence the other'.⁶⁸ A faith-influenced NTT, however, is fundamentally different from a descriptive and historical NTT. It is not lesser or inadequate, but as Troeltsch and Räsänen have shown, it is surely different.

Frank J. Matera's *New Testament Theology: Exploring Diversity and Unity*

Frank Matera, a biblical studies professor at the Catholic University of America, comes last in our examination of New Testament theologies because he is the most explicitly theological, less historical, and 'more literary in

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 141.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 54. What these tests are, he does not mention in this work.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 26.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 43.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 46.

nature'.⁶⁹ This characteristic does not mean that he is uninterested in history, however. For him, 'the history of early Christian religion or thought' is of 'immense value to New Testament theology, but it is not New Testament theology'.⁷⁰ Letting Räsänen have his way, he agrees to call the historical task 'the history of early Christian religion' and acknowledges that 'the discipline called New Testament theology has a specifically theological task'.⁷¹ This admission of theological concerns lets him argue for a unity underlying the canon and focus on canonical texts.

Even with his narrative focus, Matera nevertheless uses the historical method when the text appears problematic. For instance, Matera has problems with John 8:44 saying that the father of 'the Jews' is the devil. Matera rightly sees that these words are not to be taken literally and offers up a historical-critical solution to make the text easier. This is an instance, he argues, of an 'unfortunate' influence of the Johannine community's debates with the Jewish community over the person of Jesus. Thus it is clear that 'Christianity . . . can no longer engage in this first-century polemic'.⁷² Another example is his disagreement with Luke's portrayal of the Jews: 'Luke-Acts places a heavy burden of responsibility on the inhabitants of Jerusalem and their leaders for the death of Jesus . . . that goes beyond the historical evidence. . . . Luke claims too much'.⁷³ Whereas previous authors have shied away from the historical method when it becomes theologically uncomfortable, Matera uses it when the text proves to be uncomfortable. His default is to explore the literary nature of the text, bringing in the historical method when the literary method alone is unsatisfactory. This is the inverse of the *ad hoc* mixing of methods which we have seen previously. NTT is pressing the historical method from all sides – it is used, contrary to its normal formulation, both as a means to lend credibility to literary interpretations and to make the text palatable when otherwise unappealing. Such misuse of the method points to a need which consistently reappears: the need for a reformulation of what is thought of as 'history' and the 'historical method'.

This examination of four approaches to NTT has shown that New Testament theologians have involved themselves in the mixing of the history and theology with insufficient critical reflection. None of these approaches follows the historical method to its necessary conclusion. None seems to

⁶⁹ Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Theology: Exploring Diversity and Unity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007) p. 2, fn 2.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xxvii.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. xxvii.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 279.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

recognise the need for a genuine, viable alternative. To varying degrees, all practise historical inquiry on an *ad hoc* basis, taking it up and setting it aside at will.

Conclusion: two pressing tasks

We have seen that this kind of historical NTT is a failed enterprise. This failure need not negate the useful theological insights of the books we have described. Rather, the project of a historical NTT is itself incoherent. As Troeltsch and Räsänen have successfully argued, theology and the historical method do not mix. Any method which tries to unite them fails to recognise the competing commitments and interests inherent to each; accordingly, any attempt to unite theology and the historical method must fail.

For scholars doing synthetic work on the New Testament, two necessary tasks have become apparent. The proximate task is to develop a fully integrated theological account of history which does not straddle the line between history and theology. This account cannot be afraid of prejudices, realising that scripture itself is biased and is best read in relation to that bias. Thus, scripture is best read with a theological bias and in a Christian community. Murray Rae's *History and Hermeneutics* offers a helpful way forward here, using scripture as the controlling factor for a theological account of history. History is seen as taking place in a world created by God where the possibilities of history are broadened by the reality of the resurrection. Testimony and tradition are upheld as an important part of any historical account, pointing to the importance of reading scripture ecclesially.⁷⁴ Although this theological understanding broadens and changes the definition of history, limits must be placed on how far prejudices can lead one away from the text. Limits such as grammar, linguistics and context must have a role in limiting biases. This explicitly theological reading should also be guided by the theology of the church, specifically and most ecumenically, the Rule of Faith.

The second task is both harder and further off, but also necessary to keep the first task from reverting to the dogmatic method. It is to make this theological understanding of history relevant beyond the interpretation of scripture. Although at first this part of the task remains limited to Christians, it should not be limited only to a section of their intellectual pursuits. Thus, it would develop fresh accounts of history which could be used to judge historical probability for things outside the religious tradition. It would develop a way to see history, not objectively, but truly. A major challenge would be distinguishing between the historical claims of different religions. How Jesus' resurrection is different from the Greek gods' involvement in the

⁷⁴ Murray A. Rae, *History and Hermeneutics* (London: T&T Clark, 2005).

Trojan War or Moroni's appearance to Joseph Smith may prove difficult to answer. If this part of the task can be accomplished, then a second aspect of this task can also be pursued. This aspect would be to broaden the relevancy of this task to those outside Christianity. It would explore whether a theological understanding of history could also be relevant to non-Christians. It would ask whether people are locked into local contexts and prejudices, or if a Christian understanding of the world could speak truth beyond its own community. Whether either aspect of this task is possible requires further work by New Testament scholars and theologians alike.