

**A commemoration of the legacy of
Rudolf Bultmann, born 130 years ago**

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Abstract

The article commemorates Rudolf Bultmann's legacy and the date of his birth 130 years ago. It demonstrates Bultmann's historical critical exegesis of the New Testament and his theological hermeneutics. The article explains Bultmann's use of the concept "kerygma" and the influence of existential philosophy on his hermeneutical programme of demythologisation and humankind's critical dialectical relatedness to creation. It also discusses Bultmann's understanding of the significance of the person and history of Jesus and God's otherness by means of the expression "mythological rest". From these fundamental perspectives as points of departure, the article focuses on three dimensions in his works, namely his Jesus book, his book about the history of early Christianity and his reconstruction of the plot of the Gospel of John.

The question

On 20 August 2014 we will celebrate Rudolf Bultmann's birth 130 years ago. He was born in 1884 in Wiefelstede (Großherzogtum Oldenburg) and died on 30 July 1976 in Marburg, Germany.² This contribution focuses on *one* question: Which of Rudolf Bultmann's works should be regarded as his most influential as far as theology and biblical exegesis during the 20th century is concerned? Could it be Bultmann's 259-page book on the history of earliest

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² My own theological thought and exegetical approach have been fundamentally influenced by this giant among exegetes and theologians. To me, Bultmann is a role model of a "scholar of faith" (cf. Edwards 1976, 728–730). On 20 August 2010 the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Theology organized a "Bultmann celebration". At the Faculty's request, I gave a lecture, the expanded version of which is now presented here, in Chicago on 17 November 2012, on the occasion of the Westar Institute's launch of Konrad Hammann's biography of Bultmann, which was translated by Philip E. Devenish and published in English by Polebridge Press. My references are from the original German version.

Christianity amidst the other ancient religions (written in 1949)? Is it perhaps his 160-page book on the historical Jesus (written in 1926), or is it his 744-page commentary on the Gospel of John (written in 1937, with the 7th edition published in 1941 and the 10th edition published in 1968 in Göttingen)?

The answer is not that obvious – not even in view of the fact that the recent Bultmann biographer, Konrad Hammann (2009:386, n. 170), is of the opinion that the ranking (*Wirkungsgrad*) of *Urchristentum* ([1949] 1992) is lower because, as far as he is aware, only four reviews have been published about it. The published book reviews of the John commentary total 63 (Bultmann [1964] [1966] 1971).³ Bultmann's (1926) *Jesus* book, with slight amendments in its second edition published in Berlin in 1929, had already been translated into Danish, Swedish, English and Japanese by the time the third edition was printed in Tübingen in 1951 – the first German version having become available after the end of the Nazi regime. Therefore, the reference to National Socialism is relevant. In this article, I will briefly refer to it when referring to Bultmann's cautionary advice not to build one's hope on "flesh and blood", a caution that stems from Bultmann's understanding of Jesus.

However, the impact of citations, just like the number of pages of a specific work or the number of translations thereof, cannot be the sole factor when it comes to establishing the ranking of a publication. The impact factor should be measured by means of the content of the work, expressed by either the spirit of its time (*Zeitgeist*) in critical solidarity or whether its quality has surpassed the weaknesses of the *Zeitgeist*.

For this reason, other works by Bultmann should not be considered, in my view. These include, for example, his *Theology of the New Testament* (*Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (written between 1948 and 1953). This work (the English version was published in two volumes) represents a compendium of thoughts shaped over a matter of decades. His *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (*Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*), written in 1921, had as its purpose to serve as a "workbook for the Jesus tradition" from which "form criticism" (*Formgeschichte*) could be further contemplated. For this reason, this epoch-making work cannot be considered. Similarly phenomenal is Bultmann's commentary on 2 Corinthians, written between 1940 and 1952 (republished in 1976 by Erich Dinkler), but it was the product of and not the trigger for his theo-anthropological thinking. Bultmann had already developed his dialectics "anthropology-theology" in his earlier works on Paul, which reached its climax in his *Theology of the New Testament* (*Theologie des Neuen Testaments*). He is indeed famous for the dictum that

³ The English Basil Blackwell version was translated by G.R. Beasley-Murray and was published in Oxford in 1971, based on the 1964 German edition, supplemented in 1966.

all of Paul's speaking of or about God at the same time also pertains to anthropology (cf. Hammann 2009:404). Similarly, although Bultmann's ([1967] 1969) commentary on the three Johannine letters is impressive, it too, is the result of his understanding of the Johannine theology. Bultmann was convinced that the author of 1 John had known the Gospel of John and that 1 John had served as the source for the author of 2 John. According to him, the origin of 3 John is totally unknown. Bultmann really considered Paul and John to be counted among the earliest Christian theologians. Not only did the writings of Paul and John form part of the memoirs of collective faith communities, such as the synoptic gospels, which evolved into literary works, but, according to Bultmann, Paul and John are indeed the only individual authors in the New Testament in whose writings a "systematic theology" is recognisable – if one were to consider Plato's ([circa 30 B.C.E.] 1992:54) understanding of "theologia" as a systemising, coherent reflection on the God–human relationship as a point of departure.

Bultmann was of the opinion that in the case of Paul, one could *deduce theology* from his seven letters, and in the case of John, one encounters something at an even higher level, namely that *theology* is modelled on an existing theological coherent systematic ideology/mythology, namely "Gnosticism" (cf. Boers 1979:75–80). And, by the way, Bultmann knew that the concept 'Gnosticism' is an extremely complicated notion with many variations – an insight for which many of his critics didn't give him credit.⁴ Bultmann did not, anachronistically, overestimate the role of Gnosticism, but kept the possibility of a pre-Christian "Gnosticism" in mind. It was also *his* viewpoint that the "gnostic" trends encountered in Paul and John are not the same as those we encounter later during the second century among the "true Gnostics".⁵

But, let us revert to the relevant question about Bultmann's most influential work. A number of essays, which appeared in *Religion past and recent (Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart)*, published by Mohr Siebeck in Tübingen, are individually of a very high quality per se. In this regard, I specifically single out Bultmann's contributions on, among other topics, "truth", "earliest Christianity",⁶ on "Paul" and those on "John".⁷ However,

⁴ 'On the other hand, such a thing, that Bultmann characterizes as "a religious movement of pre-Christian origin", has developed within Gnosticism' (my translation of Hammann 2009, 384).

⁵ Any attempt at defining what "Gnosticism" could have meant during the first two centuries, is highly problematic. The literature of the Church Fathers does not assist by providing an unambiguous description of what resorts under "Gnosticism" – even in the culmination thereof in the fourth century Manichaeism as the "conclusion" of that which was known as "gnosis" (cf. Marksches 2003:101–108).

⁶ I am using the term "earliest Christianity" for the German "*Urchristentum*" because I really do not like the translated title *Primitive Christianity*, translated by R.H. Fuller and published

these too are the fruits of earlier thinking, developed in his books *Urchristentum*, *Jesus* and *Johannes*.

Is there any reason why I should mention the *Jesus* book in the second place, while it was published *before Urchristentum*? Even the *John* commentary had appeared *before Urchristentum* had. My answer is “yes”, as I shall now attempt to explain. That which was developed in the *Jesus* book and expanded on in the *John* commentary, namely a particular cultural-historical, socio-religious, economic-political and philosophical world view, Bultmann placed in his *Urchristentum* within context.

But let us first deal with an overview of what I consider to be Bultmann’s hermeneutic-theological contribution.

Bultmann’s theological hermeneutics

I will summarise Bultmann’s contribution by means of a few questions:⁸

- Why did Bultmann not have a problem with a radical and consequent *historical* inquiry into the Bible, with specific reference to the distinction he makes between *historisch* and *geschichtlich*?
- What, according to Bultmann, would have been the authentic historical question about the Bible?
- What did Bultmann call the non-objectifying proclamation of the biblical kerygma, and what is the theological implication thereof?⁹
- What is the difference between Bultmann and the existential philosophy with regard to human beings’ self-realization?

in 1967 by World Publishing Company (Cleveland, OH): Bultmann, R., [1949], *Primitive Christianity In Its Contemporary Setting*. See review article by T. W. Manson (1951), ‘Primitive Christianity Rudolf Bultmann: Das Urchristentum im Rahmen der Antiken Religionen, Zurich: Artemis-Verlag, 1949’, *The Classical Review* 1(2), 103-104.

⁷ See Bultmann (1913; 1930; 1959).

⁸ See the following works: Bultmann ([1933a] 1993:114–133; [1933b] 1993:188–213; [1933c] 1993:245–267; [1933e] 1993:1–25; [1933f] 1993:26–37; [1941] 1988; 1952:179–208; [1961a] 1993:268–293; [1961b] 1993:142–150; 1967a:47–71, 1967b:72–92, [1968] 1993:211–235, 1971:297, [1984] 1993:141–189. Compare also *inter alia* F. Hohmeier (1964), *Das Schriftverständnis in der Theologie Rudolf Bultmanns*; W. Schmithals (1967), *Die Theologie Rudolf Bultmanns: Eine Einführung*; W. Stegemann (1978), *Der Denkweg Rudolf Bultmanns: Darstellung der Entwicklung und der Grundlagen seiner Theologie*; J. Painter (1987), *Theology as Hermeneutics: Rudolf Bultmann’s Interpretation of Jesus*; M. Evang (1988) *Rudolf Bultmann in seiner Frühzeit*; T. Labron (2011).

⁹ See, for example, the following remark regarding a quotation of Bultmann in Hammann (2009:212): “Of course, the problem that manifests itself here is that God as the Omnipotent cannot possibly be the object of knowledge of positivist scholarship: for as a Being that quite simply transcends existence as such ‘God [cannot] be made the object of our endeavors’” (my translation; emphasis in Hammann).

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- What does Bultmann mean by the expression “mythological rest”?
- What, according to Bultmann, is the significance of the person and history of Jesus?
- What does Bultmann’s program of “demythologization” encompass with a view to valuing his view that history had come to an end with Jesus, and for us, present-day Jesus followers, to understand this remark by (1) withdrawing from the world (*Entweltlichkeit*)¹⁰, (2) living radically with love and not taking revenge (*Entapokalyptisierung*), and (3) not fusing faith with ethnic or national ideals (*Entnazifizierung*)¹¹?

As a theologian, Rudolf Bultmann learnt the essence of his typically dialectic language from the philosopher Martin Heidegger. There was, however, a fundamental difference in the opinions of Heidegger and Bultmann (cf. Perrin 1969:24; Ogden 1957:162; 1961:62). Heidegger focused on the authentic human existence (*Dasein*) and defined “to understand” as the ability to gain insight into one’s own existential potentialities. Bultmann was of the opinion that authentic understanding not only pertains to the situation people find themselves in at a given moment in life. The believer’s authentic existence opens a door to the future. For this reason, Bultmann chooses the significant title of *Faith and understanding (Glauben und Verstehen)* for a compilation of his most important essays.¹² To understand is to believe. To believe is to understand. Bultmann compared Heidegger’s option to “dispair”; Christian *hope* is the product of *faith*.¹³

As Bultmann came to realise as a result of Dilthey’s insights (cf. Dennison 2008:145), he, too, was convinced that historical reconstruction, unlike what historicism held, did not consist of a version of the past that is without presupposition. An encounter with history pertains to a comprehending decisiveness. However, this is not a one-off choice and then over and done with. An existential decision (*Entscheidung*) evolves into another one and yet another, again and again (cf. Martin 1976). That is how history reaches an end each time by yet another decision made. A decision with such

¹⁰ See Hammann (2009:302, 304, 311, 382–384, 407, 469–470, 487).

¹¹ See Hammann (2009:357–358, 360–361, 363); Standhartinger (2011:16–34).

¹² Bultmann [1933] 1987 *Faith and understanding*, edited by R.W. Funk and translated by L.P. Smith, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA.

¹³ “In this regard, Bultmann emphatically disputes that in this situation ‘a human being could achieve his/her authenticity [*seine Eigentlichkeit*] by a decision which accepts death.’ The objection, in this case patently directed at Heidegger in particular, wants to preserve faith against philosophy, not to even enter into a discussion with philosophy. He sees the ‘choice of philosophical existence only as an act which sprouts from human being’s self established freedom and [actually] betrays one’s dependance on God” [my rephrasing from Hammann 2009:213; my gender inclusive language; citation originally from Bultmann).

an existential impact entails a choice for God's righteousness and against self-righteousness (cf. Thompson 2001:100) – a choice to be made again and again (cf. Batforf 1994:188–189).

Because the results of historical research can never be regarded as complete, historical research cannot yield results proclaiming absolute validity. This is why Bultmann distinguishes between the concepts of *historisch* and *geschichtlich* (cf. Labron 2011:28).

When history is expounded as a possibility for an understanding of the own existence, then authentic existence (i.e. to believe) is independent of a commitment to the world view of a given period, and more specifically, the ancient theist world view of three levels – heaven above and hell beneath the earth. Under *historisch*, Bultmann understands the usual *historical factualness* of an event, while *geschichtlich* refers to the *existential consequence* of such an event.

In view of this distinction between *historisch* and *geschichtlich*, Bultmann has no problem whatsoever that the Bible is being subjected to the most severe and probing historical criticism. This is so because he holds the view that the *matter* that is at stake in the kerygma cannot be verified or falsified by historical textual inquiry. What the Bible says about the human existence is not validated or invalidated by verification or falsification. Therefore, the matter really at stake is not the *historische*, but the *geschichtliche*.

Bultmann did not yield to the philosophy of existentialism (see Ogden 1957; 1961). According to him, an authentic understanding of the self (the *pneumatic*, that is, the “spiritual”, over the *sarkikos* existence, i.e. the “fleshly” transient human) cannot be realised by humankind itself. It happens through an act of mercy by God and comes from outside, namely by means of proclaiming the Word, the *kerygma*. God's act of mercy is experienced in the Word that is being proclaimed right now. And the faith of the hearer is nothing but the answer to this Word of appeal. God's calling occurs by means of a historical event, in the person Jesus who is being proclaimed to us as the *Christ* and the *Kyrios*. That God has encountered humankind through the human Jesus, Bultmann calls the *mythological rest*, namely that God *extra nos* (from outside) turns to the human *pro nobis* (to us). This act of mercy happens in and through the historical human being, Jesus of Nazareth. Bultmann therefore adheres to the *extra nos* of God's interaction with humans. The kerygmatic proclamation can, however, only be heard existentially. It is not objectified in nature, and for this reason, believers should be cautious not to lend security to their life by building faith on a set of clichéd propositional dogmas.

According to Bultmann, the person and history of Jesus are of no consequence to the kerygmatic proclamation [*Anspruch*]. The quest for the

historical Jesus behind the kerygma does not intend to evoke faith. It is, however, an experienced given, and it is only with great endeavor that the gospel of Christ Jesus can be internalised and lived out in faith in our world of time and space. That is what was meant above when it was said that *history ends* again and again each time a decision [*Entscheidung*] is made to embrace God's righteousness that demands a choice against self-righteousness.

The "cause of Jesus" (*Sache Jesu*)¹⁴ remains a "skandalon" (*Anstoß*), "an 'offense', or even discredit (*skandalon*) against traditional religion" (Smith 2011:229), not because we are unfaithful but because our faith is so small or so little – or as the resurrected Jesus says in both Matthew and John's gospels: time and again we tend to abandon our first love to rather resort to conventional culture which is a false and futile security. Authentic life demands demythologising – that is, life communicated through the kerygma, which comes to us in myth [*Intention des Mythos*]; in other words, by means of God-talk objectified through analogical language (cf. Dorien 1997:188).¹⁵

The radical de-objectifying of the kerygma by means of existential interpretation is only penetrated at one point: It continues to pertain to the deed of God in the *that* of the coming of Jesus. In order to understand that Christ Jesus is the redeeming act of God, it is only necessary to proclaim the *that* of his coming. The *that* of his coming becomes a historical point without corporeality (cf. Pelser & Van Aarde 2007:1386).¹⁶

¹⁴ See Marxsen, W., 1976, 'Jesus-Bringer oder Inhalt des Evangeliums?', in *Die Sache Jesu geht weiter*, pp. 45-62; Devenish, P.E., 1992, 'Introduction: The Jesus-kerygma and the Christian theology' in Marxsen, W., *Jesus and the church: The beginnings of Christianity*, p. xii; cf. Van Aarde, A.G., 2001 'The "cause of Jesus" (*Sache Jesu*) as the Canon behind the Canon.

¹⁵ See Pelser and Van Aarde (2007, 1390): "Demythologising envisages nothing else than to clarify the *intention* of the myth or the mythical manner of speaking, in other words, its intention to say something about human existence. Clarifying the mythical manner of speaking also applies to the pronouncements about God's actions with humankind. Like Kant and Schleiermacher, Bultmann does not want to objectify and humanise or reify God. But no one (including the writers of the Bible) can speak about God in anything but 'objectifying language'. A mythical manner of speaking about God is therefore speaking objectifyingly about the actions of God (who is not an object) with people. All speaking about the actions of God is therefore a mythical manner of speaking. The actions of God cannot be objectively proven. They can only be experienced and seen in the effects these actions have on the existential involvement of human beings."

¹⁶ Bultmann's (1965 ,9) well-known observation that it is the *that* (*Daß*) of Jesus which is important for faith and not the *what* (*Was*), deals with precisely this type of dialectic between "spirit" and "flesh". According to this stance, stories about Jesus's work and life (in other words the "whatness" of his life) are assertions of faith in which the kerygma is expressed. The kerygma is the "thatness" of God's becoming event in Jesus, the "ground of Christian faith".

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We can now return to the actual question: What is the greatest theological work of the 20th century?

Urchristentum? Jesus? John commentary?

Towards the end the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, Eurocentric Christendom fell into the rut of treating the chaff as the wheat. This is evident in, among others, the national, ethnic and cultural theologies of the time.¹⁷

The pursuit of values such as development, progression and outstanding personality enticed people. The Christian faith was regarded as a product of a civilisation that was “better” developed than, that is, “superior” to so-called primitive religions. The perfect revelation of God in and through Jesus was regarded as an advance on ethical monotheism put forward by the Old Testament prophets.

Role models and, in particular, Jesus Christ’s outstanding moral personality had to be emulated. The result, however, was that the cultural propaganda of “Christian” colonial empires had a toxic effect on the world. National idealism and progressive social ideologies plunged the world into world wars, with ripple effects in Vietnam, the Middle East, the terrorist attack on the US on 11 September 2001, and the neocolonialism of the dictatorships in countries in the Second and Third Worlds.

Towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the height of biblical scholarship was to recognise that Christendom developed, firstly, from a Jewish stratum and, secondly, from influences of the syncretic Greco-Roman mystery and emperor cult. Subsequently, Jesus was no longer considered to be only a “Jewish Messiah”, but also “Lord” (*Kyrios*) of the gentiles. In terms of modern historical philosophy, according to Hegelian idealism, such a synthesis was the result of the hellinisation of Israelite monotheism and it implied so-called progression. Wilhelm Bousset’s ([1913] 1926) *Kyrios versus Jesus* was the product of such idealistic reconstruction which, however, does not pass the test of present-day exegesis. Today, we know that such a progression from Judaism to Hellenism quite simply did not take place, because such a dichotomy did not exist (see Hengel 1973; 1976).¹⁸ Hellenisation presupposes indigenisation. “Jewish-

¹⁷ Halvor Moxnes (2012:2) puts it as follows: “Many of the most important issues of the nineteenth century converge around the ideas and politics of nations and nationalism. Politically this was a period characterized by the establishment and developments of nation states combined with and supported by the expansion of colonialism and imperialism. Socially and economically the period was characterized by the Industrial Revolution and dramatic changes in the areas of work, social distinction, families and gender.”

¹⁸ Lester Grabbe (2002:47): “Hengel’s dictum is becoming more and more accepted: one can no longer talk of Judaism versus Hellenism, nor of Palestinian versus Hellenistic Judaism.

ness” was under the influence of Hellenisation, just as today’s nationalisms cannot be totally free from globalisation. During the 19th and 20th centuries, the West’s alleged progressiveness did not bring about progression and the addition of values to social ethics.

What materialised during the first century CE, when Jesus proclaimed and lived the values of God’s kingdom, was the institutionalisation of the church, which manifested itself in some or other form of civil religion. Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) – and after Sartre (see Santoni 1995:201), especially Peter Berger (1967:87) – called this phenomenon “bad faith”. According to Bultmann, such “bad faith” is about an existential failure (*Erscheitern*) already witnessed in the Old Testament. In his work “Adam, where are you? On the concept ‘human’ in the Bible” (*Adam, wo bist du? Über das Menschenbild der Bibel*), Bultmann refers to this failure as Israel’s tragedy. It occurred in Germany’s National Socialist period too, and also in South Africa’s apartheid era – and, perhaps, also in “America’s Empire” of the present day (cf. Horsley 2003; Crossan 2004). Bultmann’s biographer, Konrad Hammann (2009:365), summarises “Adam, where are you?” as follows (my English rephrasing; citations originally from Bultmann):

Broadly speaking “the tragedy of the story [*Geschichte*] of Israel and of Judaism” lies in “the inherent contradiction of equating the people of God with the historical Israelite people – which caused Israel to be a failure in its very existence” [Bultmann, p. 111]. In its reflection on the Christ event which results in a relationship between God and human beings, the New Testament makes the “relation between being a believer and belonging to a specific historical people [*Volk*], obsolete [Bultmann, p. 114]. The “constitution” [*Gründungsurkunde*] of Christianity makes all individual features and differences among people in the tangible world fundamentally obsolete. With this the New Testament does not promote the illusion of equality in political or social policies, but urges a critical stance towards any form of asymmetry [*Ungleichheiten*]. Despite all existing inequalities, faith succeeds in recognising “the fundamental inherent equal value [*die letzte innere Gleichheit*]

To do so is to create an artificial binary opposition and to reduce an enormously complex picture to stark, unshaded black and white. It is also to treat a lengthy process as if it were a single undifferentiated event – as if conception, pregnancy, birth, childhood, and adulthood could be simultaneous ... A more thorough ‘Hellenization’, which also included the lower classes, only became a complete reality in Syria and Palestine under the protection of Rome ... It was Rome which first helped ‘Hellenism’ to its real victory in the East.” Feldman (1986, 83-111; 1997, 371-382) criticised Hengel’s impact, but Borgen (1994, 30-59) held a different view.

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that is irreversibly grounded in the human calling to be *imago Dei* [Bultmann, p. 116], to which any reference to primordial essentials such as race and nationality remain subordinate. The call: “Adam, where are you?” essentially asks: are you the kind of human being God intended humanity to be? (Hammann 2009:365).

But also, where we have been able to part with civil religion, it simply reappeared in the form of “ecclesial theology”. The latter occurs where “God”, “Bible” and “church” are intermingled and even equated with each other within the circles of fundamentalism, orthodoxy, and evangelicalism. With regard to “Judaism versus Hellenism”, too, Bultmann sticks to the beaten path of his teacher, Bousset. He also thinks in terms of a transition between two spiritual trends, Judaism first, followed by Hellenism.

Bultmann’s contribution lies in the fact that in his *Urchristentum*, he has illustrated the “uniqueness” of the Jesus followers amidst Israelite and gentile religions. In and through the life of Jesus of Nazareth, the *kairos* has come. The time for making history is up. What is important is the fact that Jesus of Nazareth has been; the *what* of this historical given is the *geschichtliche* impact thereof on the Jesus followers. To them, it existentially means *the end of history*. After his conversion, Paul began to believe this “that” and “what” (two-in-one).

It is for this reason that Bultmann (1965:190–198), in his *Antwort an Käsemann*, during one of the dramatic meetings of the “Marburg Circle”, borders on despondency when Käsemann again wanted to promote his “new quest” as opposed to Bultmann’s so-called “no quest”. Rudolf Bultmann, the professor, reacts as follows to his student, Ernst Käsemann: “Oh Absalom, my son, my son!” [“O Absalom, mein Sohn, mein Sohn!”] (see Schmithals 1968:262; in Boshoff 2011:14 of 15). Walter Schmithals (1988:149–158) describes Käsemann’s understanding of Bultmann as a “huge misconception” (“*ein groteskes Mißverständnis*” – Schmithals 1988:149). This misconception puts a huge question mark over the stereotyped manner of speaking by describing Käsemann’s Jesus study as the “new quest” and by describing Bultmann as the proponent of a “no quest”. In my view, Eberhard Jüngel ([1990] 1995:82–119) is spot on when he describes Paul’s statement about life only through faith as one of the most compact descriptions of Jesus’s message.

When Bultmann refers to a “discontinuity with regard to content” (*inhältliche Diskontinuität*) between Jesus and Paul,¹⁹ he does not exclude the

¹⁹ In his “Antwort an Ernst Käsemann” (1965, 191) Bultmann uses the phrase: “*Unterschied zwischen ‘historischer Kontinuität’ und ‘sachlichem Verhältnis’*” (my emphasis; cf. Bultmann 1965, 9). According to him, there exists a continuity between Jesus and the

material relation (*materielle Relation*) between Jesus and Paul (see Bultmann [1928] 1969:230). To my knowledge, there is no other place in Bultmann's writings where we find such a concentrated glimpse of his historical reconstruction of Jesus than in the following sketch:

Characteristic for him are exorcisms, the breach of the Sabbath commandment, the abandonment of ritual purifications, polemic against Jewish legalism, fellowship with outcasts [*deklassierten Personen*] such as publicans and harlots, sympathy for women and children; it can also be seen that Jesus was not an ascetic like John the Baptist, but gladly ate and drank a glass of wine. Perhaps we may add that he called disciples and assembled about himself a small company of followers – men and women.²⁰

Walter Schmithals was Bultmann's student assistant in Marburg in 1951 at the time of his retirement. He was also the only one of Bultmann's doctoral students, who as a professor himself, continued Bultmann's type of inquiry into Jesus, although in a direction that Bultmann probably could not have foreseen, nor would have approved of.²¹ According to Schmithals, in his "Epilogue" [*Nachwort*] to the 1988 edition of the third "new revision" of Bultmann's Jesus book, Bultmann's recording of Jesus's history was "highly

kerygma of the early church. It seems that with the expressions "historical continuity" and "material relation" he meant that a continuity clearly exists between Jesus and Christ (the two names "Jesus" and "Christ" after all, refer to the same historical person) but that there is no historical continuity between the *kerygma* which takes the death of Christ Jesus as a redemptive event, and the *historical Jesus* himself who did not call on people to believe in him, but to depend like him, on the presence of God. However, there is a material relation between the message of Jesus and the ecclesiastical kerygma: both announce that life in God's kingdom is qualitatively and radically different from the meaning that people find in cultural arrangements – life in the Kingdom of God is *life according to the Spirit* and not a *life according to the flesh* (see Bultmann 1969, 'The Significance of the Historical Jesus for the Theology of Paul', pp. 223-235). Paul, therefore, did not need to ground his kerygma in Jesus, the Jew, because then he would have grounded faith in the Christ who, as a human, came from the cultural context of the Israelites (Rm 9:5).

²⁰ Original German is to be found in Bultmann [1960] 1965, 11). However, in his work on Bultmann's interpretation of the history of Jesus, John Painter (1987, 102) says that Bultmann was convinced that much more could be said on the teaching of Jesus. He refers to Bultmann's own words in his Jesus book: "we know enough of his [Jesus's] message to paint a consistent picture for ourselves." In his "Epilogue" [*Nachwort*] to Bultmann's Jesus book, Walter Schmithals (1988, 149) emphasises the same point.

²¹ Bultmann's emphasis on "Jesus" "Jewishness" let Schmithals establish a continuation in the "Ebionite" Jesus followers, who had ascribed salvific value to categories such as nature, nation, biology and family. Schmithals himself did not ascribe a similar value to these (see Boshoff 2011, 7 of 11).

personal”: *only* from Bultmann’s perspective *and* intended to be *only* of significance to Bultmann, and only interpretable in Bultmann’s early 20th century context and times.

Be that as it may, Bultmann’s insights into the Gospel of John attest to a depth in literary-theological-ethical thinking. He masterfully applies historical criticism to his understanding of the Gospel of John. This can specifically be seen in his reconstruction of the Johannine Gospel as a page-corrupted codex.

It is obvious (*prima facie*) to Bultmann that the author of the Gospel of John was not a witness – neither an eyewitness, nor a hearing witness. On the contrary, the author relied on traditions (sources). To Bultmann (1957:369), sections such as John 19:35 and John 21:24 constitute the work of a later redactor, which he refers to as the “ecclesial redaction” (*kirchliche Redaktion*). According to him, John’s Gospel should be read against a late first-century Palestinian and Syrian background (Bultmann 1971:3-4). The author, as well as the early ecclesial circle he came from, must therefore be seen against the same background, particularly against the presence of the so-called John the Baptist group. The evidence of the existence of such a group, and particularly of the continued existence of the group after the death of John the Baptist, is evident from passages such as John 1:6-8; 1:15; 1:19-51 and 3:22-30 (cf. Acts 18:25 and 19:1-7). Indications of polemic and apologetic motives against the John the Baptist group appear in the Gospel of John (as well as in other literature such as the Acts of the Apostles 18:25; 19:1-7 and in *Homilia* II.23 in the Pseudo-Clementine Literature, Book II, Chapter 8.)²² It would appear as if at least part of this group moved to an early “Christian” community of which the author of the Gospel of John was a member. This can be seen in, among others, the Johannine version of the calling of the disciples (which differs completely from the version in the synoptic gospels) and according to which the first two disciples had earlier been disciples of John the Baptist. The Johannine emphasis that John the Baptist himself said that Jesus is more than he is, must then also be read against the background of the said concurrency.

According to Bultmann’s (1971:6) literary theory, three sources can be distinguished in the Gospel of John: a *pre-Markan passion narrative*; a *miracle source* (Bultmann 1971:6); and a *source for [John’s] discourses* (Bultmann 1971:7). There are concerns with regard to the literary integrity in particular with regard to three sections in the Gospel of John, namely chapters 5-7, chapters 13-17, and chapter 21. It would appear as if originally chapters five and six had appeared in the reverse order. Thus seen, the episodes in these chapters show the following order:

²² From Roberts and Donaldson (1995); cf. Ehrman (2003, 182-185).

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The Revelation as crisis

- 4:1-42 Jesus in conversation with the Samaritan woman²³
- 4:43-54 The healing of Herodian's son
- 6:1-15 The multiplication of bread
- 6:16-21 Walking on the water
- 6:22-59 The Bread of Life
- 6:60-71 Reaction of the disciples
- 5:1-47 The healing of the sick man on the sabbath
- 7:1-8:59 The Festival of Tabernacles episode

Three arguments serve as motivation for the change in order: (1) geographic considerations – chapters 4 and 6 belong together because they occurred mainly in Galilean territory, and chapters 5 and 7, because these take place in Jerusalem; (2) chronologic considerations – in John 6:4 it is mentioned that the Passover was imminent, in John 5:1 that it had commenced, and in John 7:2 that Jesus was back in Galilee and that the Festival of Tabernacles was imminent; (3) material considerations – in view of the opposition from Jewish leaders, chapters 5 and 7 belong together; in John 5:18 it is mentioned for the first time that the Jewish leaders were planning to kill Jesus, which is repeated in John 7.

For the sake of a more logical and fluent composition, Bultmann also reorganises the episodes in chapters 13-17 as “The Revelation of the DOXA before the Community” (Bultmann 1971: 455-696). His literary theory with regard to these chapters thus reads as follows:

- 13:1-30 Feet washing, and Judas Iscariot as Jesus's traitor
- 17:1-26 Jesus's prayer
- 13:31-35 Discipleship as love
- 15:1-17 Discipleship as love and the imagery of the vine and the branches
- 15:18-16:24 The Paraclete and the hatred of the world
- 16:25-33 The disciples' belief: Jesus is from the Father “above”
- 13:36-38 The announcement of Peter's imminent betrayal

²³ Bultmann refers to the conversation with the Samaritan woman as the “Revelation of the DOXA to the world.” Actually, this section in John 4:1-42 forms the prelude to the “Revelation as CRISIS” (Bultmann 1971, 203-284), while the episode on the “Festival of the Tabernacles” (Jn 7:1-8:59) is simultaneously the conclusion of the previous section and the introduction to the next section, referred to as “The hiddenness and contingency of the revelation” (Bultmann 1971, 285-328).

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14:1-11	Thomas's and Philip's inability to understand Jesus's leaving
14:12-14	Discipleship as love and obedience
14:15-31	The Paraclete and the disciples' mission amidst the hatred of the world
18:1-20:29	The death, resurrection and appearances of Jesus

According to Bultmann, this page corruption must have occurred very early on in the text transmission of the Gospel of John, definitely before the appearance of P⁵² soon after 100 CE (about 125 CE). The latter manuscript is the oldest text transmission of the Gospel of John (and the New Testament) and it contains the order of episodes in John 13-17 as it appears in its present form.²⁴

John 21:1-25 must have been added to the rest of John's Gospel at a very early stage, because it has been transmitted in all of the available textual witnesses. According to Bultmann, the addition can probably be attributed to the work of an "ecclesial redactor". The obvious reason why John 21:1-25 should be regarded as an appendix lies in the fact that it appears *after* the formal conclusion (Bultmann 1971: 697-699). Firstly, the episode in which the risen Jesus appears to the unbelieving Thomas is narrated, and after that follows the formal conclusion, namely John 20:30-31.

Basically, Bultmann's theory that the narration of the miracles reverts to the so-called "semeia source" is based on these arguments. Firstly, the reference in John 2:11 and 4:54 to a numbering of miracles, that of the first and second respectively, does not correspond with the details in the context, because John 2:23, as well as John 3:2, also alludes to miracles. According to Bultmann, the numbering emanates from the source.²⁵ Secondly, according to Bultmann, the keyword (*Stichwort*) *semeion*, which repeatedly appears, is not "Johannine language", for the very reason that John's Gospel did not want to understand the miracles as "signs", and as such only leads to misunderstanding. Therefore, according to him, the use of the term *semeion* points to the use of a source.²⁶ According to Bultmann, the conclusion (Jn 20:30-31)

²⁴ Conzelmann and Lindemann (1977, 285), therefore, do not accept Bultmann's literary theory with regard to Chapters 13-17: "It can indeed not be disputed that the text Bultmann created is more fluent and logically constructed than the transmitted version of John; in most instances, an absolute necessity to rearrange the texts, however, does not exist" (my translation).

²⁵ Conzelmann and Lindemann (1977, 282), however, do not concur with this, because the numbering does indeed concur with the first and second miracle narration respectively, which appear in this way in the Gospel of John, and also because of the fact that the latter (the healing of the Herodian's son) re-assimilates the former (wine made from water).

²⁶ Again, Conzelmann and Lindemann (1977, 282) do not concur, because the evangelist indeed wanted to understand Jesus's miracles as "sign" – nothing more and nothing less. In

was also the conclusion of the semeia source.²⁷ Thirdly, as far as the “source for the [revelation] discourses” in John’s Gospel is concerned, Bultmann holds that they come from a collection of pre-Christian gnostic material which the “ecclesiastical redactor” had revised and edited with the help of glosses. Among these, the well-known prologue (John 1:1-14[18]) is one of the most important.²⁸

According to Bultmann (1951:178), the kerygma that God is love reaches a climax in John (cf. Thompson 2001:100). The faraway God becomes the Word (*logos*), to the extent that if you are cut off from the Jesus matter, you will, like a pruned branch that is cut off the vine, degenerate (Bultmann 1951:4). The author’s personality becomes the kerygmatic commemorative figure, called the “Beloved Disciple” (cf. Smith 1965; 1979:60–71; Waetjen 2005:397 n. 58).

In the character of the “Beloved Disciple” (that personifies faith) one finds the internalisation that crucifixion paradoxically is “glory” (*doxa*) (cf. Blank 1964:267); that death and resurrection and Pentecost coincide paradoxically (Bultmann 1951:178); that believers of the future are eschatologically saved (*makarios*), because they put their faith in this kerygma (cf. Bultmann 1951:168; Reynolds 2007:193), although one cannot

particular, it is denotable in John 4:48. Here, the term “miracle” (*teras*) is closely linked to the term “sign” (*semeion*); moreover, this logion is a Johannine addition to the narration about the Herodian’s son, because without taking the Johannine coherence and theological trend, it would have been intrusive in the context. The fact that it is an addition is indicative of the particular connection which the evangelist as “redactor” established between “miracles” and the concept “sign”.

²⁷ Conzelmann and Lindemann (1977, 283), however, indicate that John 20:30-31 indeed reveals Johannine stylistic characteristics. Yet, the narration of the miracles must have belonged to a pre-Johannine, written source. Three arguments attest to it: (1) the simple Greek with a Semitic nuance which is non-translation Greek; (2) the way in which, among others, the following sections in which the typical Johannine style is not apparent have been redactionally edited, indicates that Johannine motifs have been assimilated into an existing written source: wine from water (Jn 2:1-11), the healing of the Herodian’s son (Jn 4:46-52; excluding verse 48 which is the product of the said redactor), the anointment at Bethany (Jn 12:1-8), and the entry into Jerusalem (Jn 12:11-15); (3). Unlike the miracle narrations in the synoptic gospels, those in John’s Gospel have a typical characteristic, namely a climax line (see in particular the raising of Lazarus, the multiplication of the loaves and the walking on water).

²⁸ Conzelmann and Lindemann (1977, 284) hold the view, that although the prologue is pre-Johannine, the argument with regard to the existence of “revelation source” does not hold water. They show that the characteristics typical of the prologue are not present in the other sermons in John. Conzelmann and Lindemann argue that the author probably composed these sermons himself, obviously with the help of transmitted traditions, and that the characteristic style elements should be attributed to activity of a “Johannine school”.

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offer any historical evidence that Jesus had lived after his death, except that the historical Jesus rose in the kerygma (Bultmann 1951:36).²⁹

The ethical essence of John's Gospel can be summarised by the question: How will we know that we are followers of Jesus? It is through our love that we *and* others will know.

Which of Rudolf Bultmann's works should be regarded as his most influential as far as theology and biblical exegesis during the 20th century is concerned? Need I argue any further – except to substitute twenty-first for the twentieth century?

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²⁹ However, see Charlesworth's (2006, 629) evaluation of Bultmann: “The historical Jesus gave rise to the Easter faith expressed in the kerygma. There is a material connection between the two, but they are not the same thing ... It is this element that distinguishes the historical Jesus from the Christ of faith in Bultmann's thought. From this point of view it becomes clear why the historical Jesus is essential to Bultmann's theology but is not the same as his Christology ... Perhaps Bultmann paid too little attention to the role of historical research with its potential to falsify the basis of belief in Jesus, not by finding the bones of Jesus in the tomb but, for example, by showing that he was immoral and evil, a deceiver of his followers and so on.” To me, Charlesworth clearly misses the strength of Bultmann's point, and does not credit him for meticulous historical solemnity.

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