

BOOK REVIEW

Schröter, Jens, *From Jesus to the New Testament: Early Christian Theology and the Origin of the New Testament Canon* (trans. Wayne Coppins; Baylor-Mohr Siebeck Studies in Early Christianity, 1; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013). xiv + 417. Hbk. USD59.95.

The studies in *From Jesus to the New Testament* are designed to offer a historical solution to the ongoing problem of ‘the diversity and theological unity of the New Testament’ (p. xiii). True to that task, Schröter’s goal is not merely to elucidate the task of critical history that has moved beyond historicism, but also to use this kind of historical criticism as a point of departure for discussing the contribution New Testament research must make towards theological discourse. If all New Testament research can offer is a history of early Christian religion, then it has not achieved its goal. Its goal, he claims, is to render comprehensible the process of development that ultimately led to the decision of early Christianity to bind itself to a specific set of documents.

The title is intended to suggest four *loci* of development, corresponding to parts I through IV: (I) methodological refocusing on how a distinct Christian view of history and reality emerged by the third century; (II) analysis of Luke’s *Doppelwerk* (‘two-volume work’), which meaningfully relates Jesus and Paul, Jews and Gentiles; (III) the emergence of a standard, the fourfold gospel, by which traditions were evaluated, as well as Acts, which not only marries the Jesus traditions with the Pauline letters, but thereby creates a trajectory for the inclusion and exclusion of other documents and traditions; and (IV) the prospects of assembling a unified New Testament theology from a variety of documents. Schröter advocates a methodology-of-history perspective throughout, wherein history is ‘the result of the past appropriated under the conditions of the respective present’ (pp. 47-48). The past cannot be appropriated on its terms due to our distance from it, nor can it be approached neutrally. Rather, a methodology-of-history perspective

seeks to reconstruct the past in as plausible a way as possible. Plausibility is a value judgment relative to the present conditions of knowledge. Critical engagement, then, should be oriented towards ‘the difference between past reality and its representation’ (p. 56).

In Part I, Schröter gives a methodological exploration of historical ‘constructivism’ as it pertains to New Testament research. Historicism explains the past positivistically, but reflects a methodological oversight: how can one derive history, not just data, from the sources? Rather than seeking to produce a purely factual account of the past, historical research must first engage critically to ascertain the facts, and then also point the way forward through interpretation, with the goal of rendering the sources coherent. The text is not open-ended, but neither does it explain itself to us. So while the present meaning of the text is relative, it is not given over to nihilistic chaos.

In Part II, Schröter reviews the progress towards the canon regarding Jesus, Paul and Luke. He claims that previous historical Jesus research has not been epistemologically reflective on its own relative plausibility. Rather than equating supposedly authentic sayings with what really happened, he says historical research ought to be an interactive process between past witnesses and present conditions of knowledge. The problem he perceives with the works of Strauss, Wrede and Bultmann is that they stretch plausibility: it goes unexplained how the early Christians could have come to the conclusions they documented.

The historical Jesus, argues Schröter, was not buried beneath the past-effacing interpretive categories of his followers, but rather was embedded within interpretive narratives. Event and interpretation must both be explained plausibly; historical Jesus research has, however, tended to explain the nature of the interpretation by eliminating the event. Schröter relativizes the value of historical Jesus accounts, claiming they must be viewed as abstract hypotheses that mediate between the Jesus of history and the present conception of him.

As an aside, some readers will be pleased (or dismayed) to find a challenge to the prevailing eclectic-text approach to textual criticism in this section: if various versions and translations of the New Testament writings existed alongside one another with equal validity, then the modern eclectic construct is merely a collapsed version of these texts.

Besides the Jesus tradition, the author claims in this section that Paul also made several significant moves that shaped the Christian tradition as it began the task of canon formation. Paul recognized multiple forms

of the one gospel in Galatians, and Schröter proposes that Paul universalized the Law by (1) claiming a similarly enslaved past for both Jews and Gentiles, and (2) presenting the Law as the ethical norm for the Christian community.

I believe that there is an incomplete application of Schröter's questioning of Paul here, retaining a twofold tension: (a) despite the disclaimer that Paul is not the ideal source for reconstructions of early Judaism, it is a specific (debated) reading of Paul that is at issue: if Paul does present Judaism negatively as a 'works-righteousness' religion, then it is hard to claim, as Schröter implies, that Christians should not construe it likewise, other, more even-handed sources notwithstanding; also, (b) if the pre-Christian state is universally idolatrous, as Schröter reads Paul, then the interpretive question of why the Law is re-appropriated at all must be addressed, not merely the descriptive question of how Paul does it. If Paul does relate the pre-Christian, Jewish orientation towards Torah as the cultural equivalent to the idolatry of the pagan Gentiles, as Schröter claims, then the question of why the Law should be re-appropriated becomes all the more important. The discussion lacks an explicit rationale for Paul's use of the Law, and readers are left to suspect it to be found in a submerged division of the Law, if not into three parts, then at least into 'boundary markers', on the one hand, and the ostensibly 'ethical' laws, on the other. The implication is that the 'ethical' laws need to provide the norms for the new community, while the 'boundary markers' must be set aside in pursuit of a higher goal. Appeal to the love command may provide a direction to Paul's use of the Law, but it does not explain its use in the first place—which is precisely the kind of further explanation Schröter's aforementioned methodology calls for.

In Part III, Schröter explains that the canon did not emerge through an arbitrary decision made in the fourth century, but through a long process of producing and redacting texts that represented the confession, and culling those that did not. These two types of writings, moreover, were not always easily distinguishable based on content, although in this process the Jesus tradition was always the central regulating feature. Churches' canonical lists were first of all descriptive, not prescriptive. The emergence of the canon was thus a dialectical interaction between the confession and the tradition. Thus, the tradition was ultimately fixed in writing according to the confession,

over against challenges that were raised by those who came to be known as heretics.

Whereas Part I focuses on methodology and Parts II and III describe the formation of the Christian identity as told by the biblical sources, Part IV seeks to provide a bridge between the disciplines of biblical studies and theology.

Schröter claims that the establishment of the canon, being a dialectical process and not the subjection of the writings to an *a priori* theological principle, does not remove diversity from the tradition, but only limits it. This observation is an ethical one, implying the resistance of the canon to facilitating premature exclusions and inclusions. Schröter thus provides a historical answer to the problem of unity and diversity in the New Testament.

Schröter concludes by explaining the theological significance of a canonical interpretation of the New Testament and early Christian religion. New Testament research must make its goal that of explaining precisely why each canonical text is part of the canon. In light of the generic and theological diversity within the canon, explaining the presence of each text is an extremely sensitive task, and any answer to the question would have to take the form of a narrative hypothesis, not only describing the sources, but also interpreting their connections. He claims that such explanation is a realistic goal because the canon was not an arbitrary decision. However, as the historian can only arrive at hypotheses about these connections, the project is incapable of final assessment.

In his conclusion, although relying on progressive methodological claims, Schröter's analysis of texts actually leads to some strikingly conservative conclusions about the canon, the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the early church and the prospects of a unifying New Testament theology.

Schröter's big-picture argument might be summarized in this way: New Testament research cannot revert to a pre-historicist state, and must therefore cope with historicism in a reflective and responsible way via a hermeneutics of history. Through this reflective coping with historicism, New Testament research, rather than simply furnishing a list of early Christian theologies, can play a decisive role in theological reflection on the unity of the New Testament. One implication of his argument is that it provides a potential stimulus for post-secular apologetics. This point deserves further thought.

While Schröter does not make much overt reference to Christian apologetics, he is optimistic that a methodology of history can provide a coherent explanation of the way the biblical sources present the past. While a coherent explanation of why the Gospel writers said what they did could never lead to ‘proof’ about the referentiality of the texts to the events themselves, it can provide a strongly plausible hypothesis about the connection between the two. In other words, though unable to establish positively the factual basis of the Gospels, Schröter claims his approach can demonstrate that what the Gospels say about the past makes sense. Historical truth, he claims, is an ideal that conceptions of meaning pursue. A conception of meaning is a way of understanding the events (as witnessed by the sources), and historical-critical study checks the ties between past and appropriation of past, and ‘historical truth is therefore a regulative idea’ (p. 47). Schröter points out that to doubt the historical referent of the Christian recollection does not get to the historical reality behind the texts any more than does the decision to trust in its facticity. The Christian recollection, however, exhibits strength in its ability to integrate the seemingly ‘bad’ events of the cross, which might have seemed better to forget, into its self-understanding. The Christian conception of history, he claims, is therefore an ethical interaction with the past, because it does not efface the past, but integrates it into the Christian self-understanding in a comprehensible way. Christians treat all texts according to the same standards of investigation, but do not assign meaning to them apart from the fundamental convictions of those texts. In the case of the Bible, the claim that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead shapes the way the text is understood to have meaning. The result of Schröter’s approach is that the Christian view of reality is given a coherent voice in the marketplace of ideas.

In this volume, Schröter demonstrates the possibility of integrating rigorous historical criticism into theological studies. Biblical theology in Germany has tended toward fragmentation, he claims, due to its interest in ‘purely historical’ study. The way beyond fragmentation, however, is not an uncritical investigation of sources via deference to dogmatics. Schröter paves the way forward for biblical theology to move beyond theologies in pursuit of a theology. Although such an idea rightly sends up warning flags for readers, as past attempts have proved incapable of offering a satisfying center of unity, Schröter is well aware

that both the ‘theological centre(s)’ approach, and the ‘canon-within-the-canon’ approach ‘could not be more unsuited’ for the task (p. 341).

Schröter’s work encourages greater self-reflection, especially concerning methodological considerations (which extends to exegetical work). He presents his view as a mediating perspective between two counter-movements: historical positivism and narrative criticism. Schröter provides an alternative that navigates the tensions of both, without premature dogmatic interference, liberal or conservative. Although theologically justified readings are common, they can reflect an uncritical interaction with the sources as historical sources. When such uncritical interaction happens, theological readings have a hard time adjudicating between the relative plausibility of historical constructions. Such readings can be guilty of sidestepping critical issues. Critical research should be able to weigh the coherence, not just the orthodoxy, of modern presentations of history.

As the book addresses unity and diversity in the New Testament, Schröter’s resistance to premature dichotomizing is congenial to the discussion. He claims that from a historical-critical perspective the issue need not be unity or diversity, theologies or theology, but, through a self-reflective methodology, the goal can be historical research that seeks plausible explanations of the sources. He considers the canonizing process as a source in need of explanation to make it comprehensible. Explaining the process of the canonical formation, he claims, should unearth those features of the documents that ultimately determined their inclusion or exclusion from the canon, and thus provide the foundational observations in constructing a unifying theology of the New Testament without mere abstraction.

Wayne Coppins deserves thanks and recognition for translating Schröter’s text; his goal of facilitating dialogue between German and Anglophone studies has been advanced by this significant work.

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