

BOOK REVIEW

Udo Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament* (trans. M. Eugene Boring; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009). 910 pp. Hbk. US\$59.99.

Udo Schnelle has crafted a masterful New Testament theology, characterized by scrupulous detail, engaging assessments of the biblical books and their authors, and a promising (if occasionally incomplete) emphasis on the significance of Gospel narratives as experiments in theological meaning-making for early Christian communities. Eugene Boring displays skill and sensitivity as a translator, offering additional resources in footnotes, providing concise explanations of problematic translational questions, and making Schnelle's work accessible as an English textbook suitable for intermediate and advanced seminars. That said, the size and sophisticated layout of the book make it a daunting read, less inviting to students new to biblical theology.

The first two of the book's thirteen chapters are devoted to prolegomena, articulating Schnelle's approach to the theology of the New Testament *as meaning-formation*. Chapter 1 presents New Testament theology as a historical discipline that spans from the significant event of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection to the situation of the hearing/reading audience. The concepts that emerge from such hermeneutics were intended by the authors to apply to life's pressing questions, thus 'bridging temporal gaps', helping to construct meaning for the texts' original and contemporary audiences; but they also raise the issue of accessing and appropriating the earliest Christian traditions without violating their meaning-making power (pp. 26-27). Schnelle focuses on narrative as the method and form through which the evangelists made theological sense of the 'chaotic contingency' (p. 37) of the cross. Narratives 'open and close possible courses of action', providing structure for ethical decision-making and communal formation (p. 38). The canonical Gospels illustrate that this origin of Christianity as a meaning-making enterprise began with the advent of Jesus, rather than in

post-Easter kerygma, Schnelle argues. That narrational reconstruction is socially and theopolitically conditioned, however. For instance, the Roman Empire's 'many-sided complexity' (p. 56) informed and challenged Christian authors' adaptive capacities. Here Boring notes helpfully (p. 55) that he has rendered *Anschlussfähigkeit* as 'capacity for openness and integration' and 'integrative capacity'. Boring goes on to say, 'Schnelle uses this term to indicate early Christianity's openness to ideas in its culture that had hermeneutical potential, and its capacity to integrate them into its developing theology without losing or compromising itself'. The relationship between narrative, context and hermeneutics is thus foundational to Schnelle's analysis, though the dynamics could be elaborated more consistently.

To complement Schnelle's focus on narrational meaning-making, Chapter 3 introduces his thematic locus: 'Jesus of Nazareth: The Near God'. As the book unfolds, this locus requires some collaboration on the part of the reader, for the theme of nearness often recedes, ironically enough, into the background, but it is clear and convincing here and at occasional, summational points. In the person of Jesus, asserts Schnelle, the quality of nearness inheres in both God and his kingdom: the experience '*of a new nearness of God and the formulation of a new image of God* are the elements that characterize Jesus's own symbolic universe', while God's reign is an 'acting subject', coming near and being present among believers (pp. 81, 109, italics his). What Schnelle later summarizes as the kingdom's 'saving nearness' (p. 401) comprises a challenge that invites readers toward repentance and trust; the proximity of God's presence resurfaces again with relation to such topics as the expression of faith in God's nearness through prayer (p. 423, citing Mk 11.22-25) and Revelation's redefinition of the coming of God (over against Jewish and Roman cultic perspectives, p. 754), but otherwise the theme remains implicit, to be uncovered by Schnelle's readers. This third chapter also explores Jesus traditions, both in the sense of narrational constituents, such as John the Baptist's sacramental/eschatological role, as well as the distinction between narrational and 'sayings' traditions. As Schnelle rightly says, these cannot be distinguished as neatly or schematically as previous scholarship has claimed, as each stream attempts to remember important characteristics of Jesus.

Chapters 4, 5, 7 and 9 chronicle significant 'transformations' in New Testament theology: the emergence of Christology, the Hellenization of

early Christian missions, the composition of Gospel accounts in response to multiple crises, and the stabilization of the church against growing internal and external pressures. Christology is treated as a ‘conceptual and narrative development of the salvific meaning of the Christ event’ (p. 163), setting the stage for Schnelle’s later forays into the Christologies of the Gospels themselves. He gives special attention to the church’s earliest attempts at deriving christological imagery from the Scriptures, as well as to the diversity of its Christologies and the meta-communicative, ‘*text-pragmatic function*’ of christological titles (p. 185, italics his). The Hellenization of the church’s mission highlights the growth of that movement as increasingly independent of Jerusalem’s Christian communities; it also prefaces Schnelle’s chapter on Paul, whom he later describes as early Christianity’s greatest martyr and missional hero, fulfilling Jesus’ commission to the disciples in Acts 1.8. In the third transformational stage, Schnelle views the sociological factor, such as the propaganda of miracles attributed to Vespasian, as a key stimulus to the creation of the Gospel genre, but not the only catalyst; by contrast, he argues that consensus-building amid crises was an essential task of Gospel composition. The fourth transformation applies the same thesis to the ecclesiological/literary phenomenon of pseudepigraphy, or *deuteronimity*: in developing the legacies of Peter, Paul and John, later authors made diverse but *collaborative* efforts to stabilize the church against internal discord and pressure from Rome’s political religion.

Schnelle’s consideration of Paul is nearly a book unto itself. It opens with a brief section on ‘The Presence of Salvation as the Center of Pauline Theology’ (pp. 204-205), but again, the presence of God/the kingdom/salvation is only the author’s *thematic* locus. The conceptualization of the gospel as a meaning-making narrative also continues to unfold in the background, but Schnelle foregrounds a systematic theological structure here, a nine-part paradigm in which theology is followed in succession by studies of Christology, pneumatology, soteriology, anthropology, ethics, ecclesiology, eschatology and significance to early historical theology. This paradigm proves difficult for Schnelle to apply to some of the New Testament’s later corpora, but the size of Paul’s corpus and the articulation of his thought and mission accommodate the paradigm well enough. To his credit, Schnelle is also willing to admit that the components of his schematic cannot be abstracted from one another: under the heading of theology, he

acknowledges that Paul's statements about Jesus as mediator of creation are indebted to Jesus' role as mediator of salvation, such that 'protology points to soteriology from the very beginning' (pp. 209-10). Characterizing the Father as having 'shown himself to be the God hospitable to humanity' in the course of Christ's suffering and death (p. 244) is also commendable.

As Schnelle's analysis of Paul progresses, ethics, pneumatology and soteriology emerge as highly integrative foci. 'In Christ' is understood to connote a new state of being, but it also recalls a saving act of God, wherein believers are to live as those 'delivered from the power of sin in Christ's realm of salvation, where the Spirit holds sway', 'a new realm of existence' (pp. 262, 265). Schnelle can raise such a topic while discussing Christology, returning to it in more depth and from a new direction under the soteriological and pneumatological headings. He also links the early church's encounter with the Spirit to its adaptive hermeneutics, mentioned earlier, as pneumatology's 'integrative power ...enables Paul to impart a systematic quality to his interpretation of the Jesus-Christ-history' (p. 269, further justifying Schnelle's own systematic paradigm!). Schnelle terms Paul's exhortations (and those of Hebrews, later) as *paraclesis* rather than paraenesis, as the former is used by Paul himself and better describes his ethics. But Schnelle could do more to unpack the connection between *paraclesis*, ecclesiology and the meaning conferred by narratives (especially effective, as Schnelle himself notes, when the narratives claim to continue beyond the threshold of death), perhaps via the ethical construal of individual or collective vocation/calling.

Schnelle's next substantial chapter applies his schematic to Q and the Synoptics, although some adaptations to the schematic would make this application more viable. It is certainly worth considering whether Q can have a Christology without including the title *Χριστός*, a Passion narrative, or the resurrection; but might it not be more helpful to label Q's ecclesiology as a *missiology*, rather than forcing the sayings source to fit one's preconceived categories? In Mark, Schnelle expertly reveals the interdependence of Christology and story: the Gospel narrative is precisely what permits Mark to show the inherent unity of Jesus' mighty deeds and suffering. Where soteriology is often assumed as an aspect of Christology, Schnelle proposes that Mk 10.45 'expresses the *christological dimension* of soteriology' (p. 420, italics his). Treatments of Matthew and Luke show the role of community in

composition and reception. In the centurion of Capernaum, ‘the Matthean community recognizes its own story’, balancing Jewish priority and Gentile participation in the gospel (p. 437), and its new identity ‘under the lordship of its teacher of all nations’ (p. 458). Luke’s goal in Luke–Acts is for readers to ‘become insightful’ (p. 522) about how God’s σωτηρία came to the nations, as they respond to the eschatological charge of his historiography.

The final four chapters are devoted to the later New Testament books. In ‘The Deutero-Pauline Letters: Paul’s Thought Extended’, Schnelle tracks the development of Pauline thought, again through his schematic. Colossians and Ephesians adapt Paul’s image of the church as Christ’s body to promote Christ as the body’s head, replacing Rome’s ideological headship over the imperial body politic with a powerful counterproposal, a ‘politico-ecclesiological theology of unity’ (p. 568). Second Thessalonians receives concise attention, as Schnelle alters his schematic by combining christological and eschatological analyses. He also underscores the Pastorals’ emphasis on Christ as the definitive expression of ‘God’s philanthropy’, the imitation of which is a manifestation of ‘true humanity’ (p. 585). He bravely asserts that the Catholic Epistles’ theme, ‘being a Christian minority in an increasingly hostile world’ will be ‘central’ for twenty-first-century Christianity (p. 603). Here it is not the schematic components that occasionally merge, but the treatment of the books themselves, as Schnelle fuses his study of 2 Peter and Jude. He and Boring adopt Johannine language when they render Christ as the ‘Sent One’, whose incarnation is a completed event in which believers *abide* ‘in its continuing effects’ (pp. 678, 681). To his anticipated discussion of christological titles Schnelle also adds John’s christological *predications*: Saviour of the world, Holy One, Lamb of God, God himself—though ‘Sent One’ receives no study as such. In Revelation, Schnelle stresses the faith-experiences of *seeing* and *understanding*, meditating on worship as a locus where the church perceives its ‘new identity under the lordship of the Lamb and under the conscious, intentional rejection of the claims to lordship made by Babylon/Rome’ (p. 767).

Three critical points should be made in response to Schnelle’s excellent work. Firstly, its approachability could be vastly improved by adding chapter summaries, a table of contents expanded to include third- and fourth-order points for easier navigation, and perhaps access to the e-book format; as it stands, Schnelle’s nine-part schematic and

its attendant sub-points appear only intermittently in the contents. Secondly, more thoroughgoing attention could be given to the relationship between the schematic and Schnelle's emphasis on meaning-making narratives. How do the schematic's theological components relate to the composition of narrative, whether in the Synoptic accounts, the 'functional Christology' attributed to Q (p. 386), John's *theologia crucis* (pp. 694-703), or the possibility of a metanarrative soteriology in Paul? Thirdly, Schnelle's opinions on New Testament political stances—described variously as 'religio-political' and 'politico-religious', where a uniform use of 'theopolitical' would suffice—are sometimes provocatively overstated. Those who bristle at his statement that there is 'no basis for the obviously wished-for thesis that Jesus carried on a battle against Roman (and thus also American) imperialism' (p. 91 n 84) should also read his more balanced portrayals of Lukan, Pauline and Johannine engagement with empire, finding encouragement in a theology at once biblical and systematic that takes recent theopolitical scholarship in stride.

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