

Reflections on Konrad Hammann's Biography of Rudolf Bultmann—with Implications for Christology

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Having translated Konrad Hammann's biography of Rudolf Bultmann into English, I reckon that in its ferreting out and mining of the sources it is almost—if not quite—beyond praise. And yet, a biography of Rudolf Bultmann . . . what an odd idea, if also upon reflection what an instructive one, and for christology in particular! Consider:

In 1926, introducing his *Jesus* in the series *Die Unsterblichen* ("The Immortals"), Bultmann wrote:

Even if there might be good reasons for being interested in the personality of significant historical figures, be it Plato or Jesus, Dante or Luther, Napoleon or Goethe, it is still the case that this interest does not touch what mattered to these persons. For their interest was not in their personality, but rather in their work. And in fact not even in their work, insofar as that is "understandable" as an expression of their personality, or insofar as in the work the personality "took shape," but rather insofar as their work is a cause (*Sache*) to which they committed themselves.¹

True, Bultmann does not say that there are not "good reasons for being interested in the personality of significant historical figures," even if this were not what mattered to them. All the same, Hammann does give numerous and, I find, convincing reasons for holding not only that Bultmann was not interested in revealing his own "personality," but even that he had an aversion to such an interest. Thus, not only did he not respond to both personal and public entreaties from Karl Jaspers to do so, as well as persistently to decline to make a public confession of his own faith, but—and in this like his father—he also even explicitly refused to permit a sermon at his own funeral, seemingly sensing that eulogizing was, like sin, "lurking at the door" (Gen 4:6). Thus, it would seem that not only did an interest in his own personality not matter to Bultmann, but also that it did matter to him that this not matter to others. And this is quite a different thing, as I hope to show.

Consider the way Bultmann contrasts the sort of interest that we might have in "the personality of important historical figures" with that which we should

1. Bultmann, *Jesus*, 13.

not have in it. We might be interested in their personality as something that “took shape” in their work and that can be made “understandable” in this way, and we might also be interested in their work, as this makes “understandable” their personality. But from a specifically historical point of view, at least according to Bultmann, we should not be interested in either of these things. There is a twofold reason for this, having to do on the one hand with the character of our experience, and on the other hand with that of what we experience. As analysis of our experience reveals (and as Heidegger’s *Daseinsanalyse* in particular elucidated for Bultmann), we are inherently temporal beings, also in the emphatic sense of being specifically historical beings. Moreover, as Bultmann also realized, if perhaps with less than equal consistency, what we experience is itself also temporal. Since therefore history in both senses is something temporal, a properly historical interest consists not in an “enriching of timeless knowledge,” but rather in a “dialogue” with a “temporal series of events” (*ein zeitlicher Vorgang*).² For this reason, while there is nothing wrong with “enriching timeless knowledge,” there is something wrong with thinking that this is properly historical. There are, in other words, both “phenomenological,” specifically, “existentialist,” and also “ontological” or “metaphysical” grounds for Bultmann’s specifically historiographical reason for judging that an interest in the personality of historical figures is not a properly historical one. It treats things that are intrinsically temporal and historical as if they were not. This is just what Bultmann thought that most of his teachers, except for Wilhelm Herrmann, had done. And in so doing, in supposing that they were treating their topic in its concreteness, he judged they were mistaken. In contrast, Bultmann sought an approach that would credit its subject-matter “in the concrete situation of a person living in time,” in the manner of an “encounter” (*Begegnung*).³ By implication, therefore, this would also be what a biography ought to do, at least to the extent that it means to be properly “historical.”

It is worth noting two other points in the “Introduction” to *Jesus*. On Bultmann’s view, “what mattered” to the historically significant figures he mentions (including Jesus) was, so far as we can tell from their “work,” their work itself, and this precisely “insofar as their work is a cause (*Sache*) to which they committed themselves.”⁴ Here we have two inferences: first, that what mattered to these people was their work, an inference from their work to their intentions, and second, that this work mattered to them after the fashion of a cause: an inference from their work to its character.

Thus, Bultmann here infers (perhaps correctly, perhaps incorrectly) both what mattered to people from what they did and also what this was (namely, commitment to a cause). Now, in their being indirect, such inferences are dif-

2. Bultmann, *Jesus*, 15.

3. Bultmann, *Jesus*, 14–15.

4. Bultmann, *Jesus*, 13.

ferent from encounter, which is direct. Even the sort of descriptive analysis that Heidegger was doing in his work for *Sein und Zeit* involves a moment of reflection that distinguishes it from encounter. Nonetheless, what Heidegger meant to be analyzing was direct historical encounter, which he presented as having an "existential" (*existentiell*) character. Such a presentation might, Bultmann thought, be able to avoid both the error of objectification and the indirectness of inference—if it "got it right." In short, "timeless truths" miss the point in one way, and "inferences" miss the point in another. "Timeless truths" that are also "inferences" miss it twice. The so-called liberal theology had it wrong on both counts. How much work in departments of "religious studies" these days is little more than an extension of this? Bultmann's *Jesus* is his attempt to get the point, to avoid both of these errors, and so to "get it right" in presenting Jesus the proclaimer.

How did the proclaimer become the proclaimed?⁵ According to Hammann, Bultmann had first used the term *kerygma* in 1919 during the run-up to his own massive work, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, in reviews of Martin Dibelius' *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* and Karl Ludwig Schmidt's *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu* "to characterize the genuinely Christian proclamation that originated within earliest Hellenistic Christianity and through the Christ-myth made explicit the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus."⁶ Moreover, and providing the broader context for these works, Bultmann, as Hammann puts it, "agreed with the new picture of history developed by Wilhelm Heitmüller and Wilhelm Bousset, according to which the earliest Hellenistic community put a decisive stamp on the Christian religion between the time of the earliest Palestinian community and that of Paul."⁷ It is this understanding of the term *kerygma* that prevails both in the first edition of Bultmann's *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* and also ten years later in the second edition, in which the term figures more prominently. As Hammann puts it,

not only from the point of view of the history of religion," [Bultmann] "had now begun to regard the specific content of "the Christian *kerygma*" as a theological criterion for the emergence of the synoptic gospels. As intrinsic elements of the *kerygma* of the Hellenistic community, these proclaim not the historical Jesus, but rather "the Christ of faith and cult."⁸

In other words, it is for exegetical, which in this case is to say for specifically form-critical reasons, that Bultmann did speak of the linguistic activity of the earliest so-called Hellenistic community as *kerygma*, and also that he did not speak of the earliest linguistic activity of Jesus in this way. In his *Jesus*, it is all

5. Cf. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 1.33.

6. Hammann, *Rudolf Bultmann*, 116.

7. Hammann, *Rudolf Bultmann*, 127.

8. Hammann, *Rudolf Bultmann*, 116.

a matter of *Botschaft* ("message") and of such *Botschaft* as *Predigt* ("preaching"), *Ruf* ("call"), and especially in the manner of *Verkündigung* ("proclamation").

Now, at least so far as I can see, this is also odd. Bultmann's point in *Jesus* is to make clear that the linguistic activity in which Jesus was engaged was and also is for the sake of effecting direct existential encounter. If this is what the earliest Christian community was also engaged in and if this is also the reason for calling it *kerygma*, why is not the linguistic activity of both Jesus and also the earliest specifically "Palestinian" Christians not also precisely *kerygma*? Is it perhaps that, while they do share the same function, they differ in content, and that specifically with respect to cross and resurrection?

The linguistic activity of what Bultmann refers to as the earliest Hellenistic communities certainly does differ conceptually from that of other so-called Palestinian communities that passed on what they either saw or heard or were told Jesus to have said and done: it explicates the significance of Jesus via the Christ-myth, whereas their linguistic activity, as Bultmann thought and as we now also think, does not. If the two share the same "kerygmatic" function of eliciting existential encounter, however, do they differ in content? Does the message of death (through crucifixion or on a cross, or on "the" cross) and resurrection differ from that of other early communities that do not seem to speak in this way? What did Bultmann think about this?

Bultmann argues that to the extent that they saw themselves as "the eschatological congregation," these communities did "implicitly understand [Jesus] as *the* eschatological occurrence in Paul's sense."⁹ Thus, whatever battles Paul felt he had to wage against their particular explications of the significance of Jesus, including their misguided apologetics and their erroneous objectifications, their eschatological self-understanding indicates that the content of their faith was that which Paul also shared. Indeed, the whole idea of the "demythologizing" program Bultmann eventually laid out in his Alpirsbach lecture of 1941 is that, so far as the content of Paul's explicitly existential interpretation of "the Christian kerygma" is concerned, its *Sache* (or "point") is identical to that implied by that of the earliest communities. It is, in two words, "eschatological existence." And this is precisely the same thing as the "radical obedience" that, according to Bultmann, characterizes the call that Jesus made and makes upon his hearers—the "Jesus" who, as Bultmann puts "the historical phenomenon with which we are concerned" in inverted commas, is to be inferred from the synoptic gospels in particular.¹⁰ In other words, in function and in content, if not in concepts or terminology, the point of the preaching of "Jesus," of the various communities before and aside from Paul, and that of Paul himself is the same: all are kerygma. All understand human existence as grounded in a divine indicative, and all, "existentially interpreted" in the way in which they must be

9. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 1.37.

10. Bultmann, *Jesus*, 17.

in order to make their point at all, make the same point. For all the variability of formulation, the christological point that each asserts is constant.¹¹ Likewise, the "anthropological intentions" of *Nachfolge* ("discipleship") and *Nachahmung* ("imitation") are shared.¹²

Now, all of this calls to mind Bultmann's concluding words in the "Introduction" to his *Jesus* book. He writes: "Finally, I want to remark that we are concerned here not with especially complicated and difficult matters, but rather with ones that are as simple as they can be—so far as theoretical understanding is concerned." And then he goes on to remark that it is really a "being too much burdened with presuppositions," one that "is in fact characteristic of our own contemporary situation" that has made matters seem more complicated and difficult than they really are.¹³

This is perhaps the place to say a word about Karl Barth. The year 1919, in December of which Bultmann completed his own *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, also marked the appearance of the first edition of Barth's *Der Römerbrief*, the second edition of which Bultmann includes in the list of the six books that he took to have a decisive significance for his work as a theologian and interpreter of the New Testament.¹⁴ One of the multitude of sub-plots in Hammann's biography of Bultmann is the tale of Bultmann's and Barth's "attempts to understand each other."

As we have seen, it is exegetical and, specifically, form-critical considerations that lead Bultmann to identify the early church's explication through the Christ-myth of cross and resurrection as "the Christian kerygma." In contrast, as early as 1920 he could only see in the first edition of Barth's *Römerbrief* "an arbitrary propping up of Paul's Christ-myth."¹⁵ And this was to remain Bultmann's assessment. Behind Barth's presentation of Romans in the second edition of 1922 he sees a "modern dogma of inspiration," and when he takes up Barth's commentary on 1 Corinthians in 1926, he finds that Barth's replacement of Paul's cosmological eschatology of chapter 15 with a *futurum aeternum* is vague and imposed upon the text.¹⁶

Indeed, the most basic issue between Bultmann and Barth is, in Bultmann's own words, "not especially complicated and difficult . . . so far as theoretical understanding is concerned."¹⁷ Bultmann wanted to find out what biblical texts meant and mean. Barth already knew. Whereas Bultmann looked to the presupposition of eschatological existence that "the earliest Christian kerygma"

11. Ogden, *The Understanding of Christian Faith*, 58.

12. Betz, *Nachfolge und Nachahmung Jesu Christi im Neuen Testament*, 3–4, citing Herbert Braun, *Gottes Existenz und meine Geschichtlichkeit im Neuen Testament*, "his contribution to *Zeit und Geschichte*, the Festschrift on the occasion of Bultmann's eightieth birthday in 1964.

13. Bultmann, *Jesus*, 18.

14. Hammann, *Rudolf Bultmann*, 466.

15. Hammann, *Rudolf Bultmann*, 139.

16. Hammann, *Rudolf Bultmann*, 142, 179.

17. Bultmann, *Jesus*, 18.

implies, Barth looked to the concepts in which this same kerygma is formulated. In other words, Bultmann is like Paul, struggling to sort out and to assess the various points of the heterogeneous elements mediated to him, whereas Barth is like the synoptic redactors other than Mark, amalgamating these heterogeneous elements—in his case into a revision of the dogmatics of Reformed and Lutheran Orthodoxy, as indeed he himself more or less admits in his highly autobiographical “Introduction” to Heinrich Heppe’s *Reformed Dogmatics*.¹⁸ In this case, to extend the comparison, not a few “Barthians” would then in contrast to their mentor be more like Bultmann’s “ecclesiastical redactor” of the Gospel of John. Perhaps this is inaccurate or unfair; if so, I can only await instruction on either count.

Up to this point I have said very little about what I have referred to as the earliest Palestinian communities, “so-called.” Indeed, I suppose that a perhaps seemingly simplistic use of the “Hellenistic-Palestinian” contrast itself will not have gone unnoticed. To try to say very much more about the issues implied here would I think take us well beyond Bultmann—and yet still, I would hope through rather than around him. But I do want to say just a bit and to bring what I do say to bear directly on the complex of issues concerning the relation between “the preaching of Jesus” and “the earliest Christian kerygma” with which Bultmann’s name and work are rightly so closely associated, and usually under the rubric of the “‘new’ quest of the historical Jesus,” again so-called.

There are, of course, various and important distinctions of principle to be made between Jesus and his earliest followers, those whom tradition calls “the apostles.” After all, they proclaimed him. As Bultmann recognized, however, due to the character of the sources at our disposal for reconstructing the two, there is not, because there cannot, be any valid way to separate him from them (or them from him) in fact.

Bultmann’s use of inverted commas to refer to “Jesus,” “the historical phenomenon with which we are concerned” in his *Jesus*, signifies, I take it, the crucial distinction between what we can validly, if always tentatively reconstruct, by means of the genuine or operational controls provided by primary sources for what his followers proclaimed, even proclaimed that he proclaimed, and our inability so to reconstruct what Jesus himself proclaimed due to the fact that all our sources are of a secondary character and thus cannot offer the same kind of controls. What we have is secondary sources that are themselves proclamation. Thus, any attempt to identify a Jesus behind “Jesus,” such as many of those within the Jesus Seminar put forward, assumes a criterion for its claims that it cannot redeem. This, it seems to me, is so clear that there must be something else at work in the widespread inability to see it. Perhaps we can see what this might be in a moment.

18. Cf. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 1.63; Barth, “Foreword,” v–vii.

What then of the linguistic activity of those earliest followers of Jesus who spoke not in the terms of the "Christ-myth," but in other equally but also different mythological terms and for the reconstruction of which we do have primary sources to use as operational controls—what of the "earliest apostolic witness"? As I think Willi Marxsen in particular has shown, in proclaiming him who had proclaimed to them, even as they also now brought him to mind in proclaiming him to others, they too engaged precisely in "kerygma," albeit what Marxsen calls "Jesus-kerygma." And in so doing, they proclaimed the Jesus whom they had encountered as one whom their own apocalyptic worldview led them to interpret "as the decisive act by which the coming new age of God has already begun," confronting both his and their hearers with "the decision between continuing to live simply in the old age and daring to live already in God's new age even though still remaining in the old one."¹⁹ Thus, what Marxsen describes in his own inimitable way as the "turning inside out" (*Umkrempfung*) to which Jesus' followers call others through their Jesus-kerygma is again the same business (*Sache*) as the "radical obedience" Bultmann describes as that to which these people attested their encounter with Jesus to have called them.²⁰ The christology, which is to say the witness to the decisive significance of Jesus implicit in such "Jesus-kerygma," is in fact that originative form of "the Christian kerygma," the meaning or point of which is what Schubert Ogden terms the "criterion of appropriateness" for Christian theology. Furthermore, as more nearly fully critical reflection has revealed, this earliest "Jesus-kerygma" can also validly claim to be that "canon before," as distinct from "within" the canon which so far as the pre-circulated material indicates, does not even receive mention in the discussions of this or tomorrow morning. Moreover, while this insight into the character and role of the "Jesus-kerygma" does not in the least solve the numerous factual puzzles concerning either the identities or the historical relations among the earliest Palestinian and Hellenistic communities, so-called—which, by the way, Bultmann called "the one chief problem of primitive Christianity"—neither does the recognition of its importance in these respects depend on solving this problem.²¹ It does, however, appear to dissolve not only the problems just mentioned, but also, as we shall see, a variety of additional conundrums these relations have seemed to raise. All of this seems to me an implication and a legacy of Bultmann's.

It is all but universal practice to discuss christology in terms of "person and work." On Bultmann's view, as on that of the "Jesus-kerygma," this could only be a mistake. For both, the Jesus who is relevant to Christian theology simply is his work. Moreover, it is not only that (due to our inability in principle to identify sources that are primary) the quest for a Jesus "in himself" (*in se*) in any

19. Ogden, *The Understanding of Christian Faith*, 72.

20. Marxsen, "Christliche" und christliche Ethik im Neuen Testament, 56.

21. Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, 6.

and every sense is historically impossible or even that (due to their kerygmatic character) such a quest is theologically unnecessary, but that ultimately (due to what our sources are about [their *Sache*]), such a quest is religiously mistaken, because it is in fact idolatrous.

As Bultmann observed, “the tradition of the earliest church did not even unconsciously preserve a picture of [Jesus’] personality.”²² For those who first proclaimed him, the word “Jesus” signified precisely and only what they claim to have encountered, namely, Jesus in his eschatological, which is to say “existentially,” decisive meaning for themselves and, thence, for others. To them, so far as we can see, this and this alone is the Jesus who did matter, and this is how he mattered. It is not that there was not, for indeed there must have been, a “person” or “personality” that in Jesus’ case as in all others does find expression in or as word and deed, but rather that this is not in fact what the Jesus-kerygma proclaims. In other words, Jesus’ being in itself, were it accessible to them—or even to him—simply was not their point. In this absolutely basic respect, namely, by missing the point, the whole of both the classical and revisionary christological project with its “enriching of timeless knowledge” regarding “especially complicated and difficult matters” pertaining to the being of Jesus in himself proves to be not really relevantly Christian at all. It is all a mistake.

I can now come full circle and try to clarify what I find odd about a biography of Rudolf Bultmann. So far as the fulsome evidence permits us to infer, Bultmann seems not only to have had no interest in his own “person,” but also to have had a marked aversion to others having such an interest. Of course, we can only hope to understand Bultmann as we can only hope to understand, say, “Jesus,” or the apostles, or Paul, by understanding the “empirical-historical” “*Sitz im Leben*” of each. We do need “biography” in this sense. Thus, for instance, as Hammann makes admirably clear, failing to understand the political and also ecclesiological context of Bultmann’s 1941 lecture on “demythologizing” and “existentialist interpretation” did and still does lead to widespread confusion over it. Bultmann and his friend Hans von Soden entitled his collected essays *Glauben und Verstehen: Faith and Understanding*. The purpose for which we need such understanding is not the faith of Rudolf Bultmann, however, but rather that faith to which Bultmann’s attempts to understand are meant to open up for others.

As Hammann reports, when Bultmann received the *Festschrift* of *Zeit und Geschichte* on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, in thanking “all whose names were recorded on the *Tabula Gratulatoria* for the support they had shown him through their good wishes, [he added]:

But I am ashamed, and I can only conclude my thanks by bringing to mind the biblical words with which I once also concluded my lecture on the occasion of my departure from my teaching position: Gen 32:10 and 1 Cor 4:7: “[Lord], I am

22. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 1.35.

not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant," and "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?"²³

Hammann then goes on to remark on Bultmann's "inveterate personal modesty," thereby going beyond Karl Jaspers' more prosaic, "He's an Oldenburger, immovable as a granite block, only superficially demonstrative—one never knows what's going on inside him."²⁴ And yet, inferences of this sort, whether valid or not, express an "interest" that in Bultmann's case seems to miss the point. Indeed, such an interest can only strike one as at least potentially, even lurkingly, inimical in principle. For if it is not merely idle, curiosity about Rudolf Bultmann in himself seems, as Paul puts it, *kata sarka* ("according to the flesh"; 2 Cor 5:16), and this in the sense of "setting one's mind on the things of the flesh" (Rom 8:5).²⁵

Paul could "play the fool" and "boast a little," even to the point of it being "all about him," about his being in itself, even to the extent of things so intimate "that no mortal is permitted to repeat" (2 Corinthians 11–12). But I suppose that Paul knew what he was doing in writing this, as also when he writes (here not intending such irony): "we do not proclaim ourselves," except "as your slaves for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor 4:5). For any "ambassador for Christ," as he says, it can be strictly and only a matter of "God making his appeal through us . . ." "to each and every conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor 5:20; 4:2b). To look for something else or something more, whether in one whose function is that of an apostle, such as Paul, or in one such as Rudolf Bultmann, whose office was that of a preacher-teacher or even a theologian, much less to look for something in "the person of Jesus Christ," is oddly enough in one way or another to miss the point— whether simply mistakenly by looking for what is not there, or by confusing what is "seen" for what is "unseen," or even by falsely hankering for something that there ought to be no desire to find. Perhaps, then, what is odd about a biography of Rudolf Bultmann is just something about Bultmann himself, namely, that through his practice of "the open statement of the truth," he turns out to have been rather unusual, certainly as a theologian and perhaps also even as a person (2 Cor 4:2). But as to the latter, as Paul says: "I do not know; God knows!" (2 Cor 12:3).

23. Hammann, *Rudolf Bultmann*, 498.

24. Hammann, *Rudolf Bultmann*, 452.

25. Cf. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 1.238–39.

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