

Existentialism, Science, and the Scriptures: The Mythological Christology of Rudolf Bultmann.

One of the greatest barriers to accurate biblical interpretation is the set of paradigms that define the basic foundation from which one seeks to accomplish the task. One who believes that the biblical scripture is completely accurate and reliable will approach the task of interpretation much differently than one who does not; as the latter will seek to disregard that which he/she feels is not relevant or correct, while the former will seek to find clear truth in all parts of the text. Some would approach the text in a fully literal/textual sense, while others will make an effort to understand the scriptures within the literary, historical, and cultural context from which they were written. As a consequence of this wide range of hermeneutic approaches, there is no shortage of differing opinions as to how the task of biblical interpretation should be correctly accomplished, and the resulting variations of opinion of the translation of many scripture passages is immeasurable. “These interpretations constitute the history of the hermeneutic problem and even the history of Christianity itself, to the degree that Christianity is dependent upon its successive readings of scripture and on its capacity to reconvert this Scripture to the living word.”¹ It is predominantly the wide range of hermeneutic approaches that form and characterize the wide range of theological positions and the resulting denominationalism of today’s church.

I was a child of the physical sciences long before I was a child of God, and as such was certainly academically prepared for a liberal, existentialist world-view. Though I have been a professor of computer engineering for over 25 years, my initial chosen field of study was in physics and its sub-fields of astronomy and quantum

mechanics. I was led to this discipline by a strong desire to understand this physical universe, its formation, its continuing development, and its ultimate future. Much of my understanding of the universe was obtained from the study of the works of two significant, and truly brilliant scientists: Carl Sagan and Stephen Hawking. I spent many years studying their work, and comparing their (and their colleague's) viewpoints with what I was learning from my parallel study of the scriptures. Slowly, the respect and authority I attributed to Sagan and Hawking (and others) as authorities on the cosmos was diminished by my faith in the integrity of scripture, and I became to think of these scientists as simply mathematicians who were trying to place their observations of creation into an existentialist box through a blind faith in their own theories that are based on their own observations and scientific findings. Their science blinded them to the truth of God's Word. Contrary to their positions, I found that the more I learned of the fine details of the physics of this cosmos the more I find that the conclusions of those observations invariably defend the scriptural kerygma. Soon Carl Sagan was dethroned as my "patron saint," and now I see him as forever separated from God by his folly. I am reminded of Paul's description of the Sagens, Hawkings, and others in their camp who, "professing themselves to be wise, became fools (Romans 1:22)." Sagan died lost in his apostasy. Hawking is treading down the same path. The fundamental difference between us is in the set of presuppositions that we have chosen to adhere to as we approach the theological enterprise.

Sagan and his atheistic philosophical fraternity contend that all religion is framed by belief in a set of non-existent myths, and anything that cannot be proven using the physical laws of this universe, simply do not, and never have, existed.

Likewise, in the same way, those who combine this philosophy with Christian theology fall into the same existentialist camp, adopting similar presuppositions that deny God's Word, and by so doing deny the existence of God. At its very least, such a viewpoint argues that much of the content of scripture is mythical; in its most rabid form God Himself becomes a mythical character.

Somewhere, along the pathway of these years I have come to adopt a changed set of presuppositions that lay the groundwork for my current method of biblical interpretation that is in significant variance with the position taken by the liberal existentialist camp established by liberal theological philosophers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Soren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, and Rudolf Bultmann. I now affirm that the only written authority for theological truth is the Bible, and its original content, context, and form is without any mixture of error or contradiction. Though this conservative position is far from radical when compared to both ancient and modern theological thought, it is far from the rational, humanistic, and post-scientific positions taken by most modern scientists and liberal theologians. It is a chosen presupposition, accepted by a faith that is just as relevant as the faith that the Sagans, Hawkings, and theologians like Bultmann place in their modern existential science.

When I first came to this faith-based conclusion concerning biblical truth, a new conflict arose that I have spent the last thirty-plus years addressing: how does one go about resolving the seeming disparity between the supernatural events and properties of scriptural history, teaching and apparent mythology when measured against clear and certain modern existential experience and scientific discovery? The rabid humanists, existentialists, and rationalists of our day seek to use their

interpretation of scientific observations of our universe to refute scriptural history that cannot be otherwise explained by it. However, the more I observe our universe, the more I come to see that the events of scripture and the tenets of modern scientific discovery are in complete and uncompromised agreement.

“Another problem that has tended to hide the increasing amount of agreement between the Bible and the facts of the universe that are being uncovered by science is the cloud of misunderstanding created by the old belief that theology and science could not mix. But there are now enough facts and knowledge at hand to show that theology and science are compatible, that the theologian can actually use scientific facts to help him illustrate his points and in some cases even provide additional evidence to support some theological doctrines.”² Paul himself was convinced that the observation of God’s creation itself was sufficient to prove the existence and purpose of God (Rom. 1). “Science, of course, has never disproved the supernatural. Because of the uncertainties inherent in Einstein’s theory of relativity and Heisenberg’s indeterminacy principle, quantum physics has left twentieth-century scientists far more cautious in pronouncing the impossibility of God’s existence and direct intervention in human history. Meanwhile, evangelical Christians never have abandoned their belief in biblical miracles as historical events. Ironically, however, much conservative application of the gospel miracles has differed little from the more liberal demythologizing. Conservatives do not reject the miraculous; they merely relegate it to Bible times!”³ I am personally convinced that what we learn as fact from modern science is totally compatible with Christian theology, and when contradictions

appear to exist, they are produced solely from our lack of complete understanding of one field or the other.

In order to establish and define my conservative to fundamental theological position it is appropriate to come into a dialogue with those who fundamentally disagree with this viewpoint. There are many well-respected theologians who would take my set of presuppositions to task, particularly in light of the faith that is initially necessary for such an inerrancy theology. If the myths of existentialism are the opposite of the kerygma of faith, then worthy opposition should be found in the ranks of the existentialists. One of the most significant liberal existentialists in the school of contemporary theological thought is Rudolf Bultmann, and it is his position that I have come to oppose over the last several years.

Rudolf Bultmann (1884 – 1976) was born in Wiefelstede, Germany, in a family that was deeply steeped in religious heritage. The grandson of a missionary and the son of an Evangelical Lutheran cleric, Bultmann was surrounded by theological debate his entire life. He was educated at Tübingen, Berlin, and Marburg universities in Germany, and had a long and successful career as an academician, best known for his lectures in religious philosophy. Initially influenced by Schliermacher, Bultmann's relationships with contemporaries such as Karl Barth and Friedrich Gogarten helped form his existentialist paradigm.

Bultmann's more significant lectures arose from his desire to address the then-liberal theology that regarded all improbable scriptural content as mythical prose that is to be summarily ignored. Bultmann entered a philosophical and theological debate where "the liberal answer consisted in the elimination of all mythology..."⁴ The task

of interpretation for this liberal viewpoint largely consisted of the determination of which scriptures are mythical, and which are not. Complete truth can then be ascertained by simply eliminating that which is false. It is in the choosing of the falsehoods that this camp is then settled in debate. Bultmann sought to temper that viewpoint by establishing a purpose and meaning behind the myth that those more liberal than he are freely dismissing.

One can be introduced to Rudolf Bultmann's basic hermeneutical presuppositions by his own confession that "The world picture of the New Testament is a mythical world picture."⁵ Bultmann approaches the scripture with the unabashed conclusion that the literary forms of poetry, allegory, metaphor, apocalyptic, and the primitive scientific understanding of the ancient writers is in its entirety no less than a collection of myths, a form of belief in a non-existent supernatural realm not dissimilar to that professed by the ancient Romans and Greeks. Bultmann then sees his task as one of "demythologizing" the text by rejecting any scriptural material that is not consistent with "modern" scientific existential understanding, and unlike his liberal contemporaries, he then seeks out those real and underlying truths that are hidden under the myths that remain. It is this seeking out of the truths that underlie myth that separated Bultmann from his liberal contemporaries and established a new orthodoxy, or according to his own critical assessment, a "new hermeneutic."

Consider his words in a letter he wrote to Karl Barth, November, 1952:

"Now you have not convinced me that my formal view of myth is wrong. For my part I regard your material view as too narrow. For myth lives not only in stories of the gods but also in the world-view presupposed by them. The New Testament authors did not, of course, present 'general' cosmic relations and connections in the form of a story of the gods. But sharing the

mythical world-view of their age, they tell the story of the Christ event as a story of the gods, as a myth.”⁶

Still, the result of such liberal thought falls far short of the kerygma of faith as Bultmann clearly rejects even the personal witness of the scripture writers.

“According to Bultmann, the New Testament authors were not trying to write facts about God and the world. Rather, they were expressing in inadequate human terms their encounter with the kerygmatic Christ.”⁷ Consequently, Bultmann’s Christology rejects the virgin birth of Jesus,⁸ denies the miracles that He performed,⁹ and denies the event of His resurrection.¹⁰ Bultmann’s critics had accused him of Docetism, the heresy that Jesus only appeared to suffer and die, but did not actually do so.¹¹

Bultmann even goes so far as to state that since the life of Christ is so steeped in the miraculous that even “the early Christian community thus regarded him as a mythological figure”¹² and that “for modern man the mythological conception of the world, the conceptions of eschatology, of redeemer and redemption, are over and done with.”¹³ Bultmann goes so far as to say that the resurrection of Jesus was not a historical event.¹⁴ Certainly, if this is true, then all of the disciples and apostles who gave first-hand testimony to the resurrection were either lying or misquoted, and the remainder of their days spent proclaiming the resurrection to the point of their own persecution and death were either misreported, or as Bultmann will profess: myth.

“Bultmann sought to ‘demythologize the Bible, to interpret the *kerygma* or ‘message’ currently couched in its (in his view) outmoded mythological worldview.”¹⁵ Many modern conservative Christians might find Bultmann’s position to be anything from nonsense to heresy, as it is certainly cultic by fundamentalist standards since he

rejects among other things the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but actually “the question of ‘demythologizing,’ brought to the fore by Rudolf Bultmann, was considered central by many.”¹⁶ Bultmann provided a means of rationalizing away scriptural content that requires any application of faith, or that which necessitates an interaction with the text that demands deep understanding of the culture and language of the ancients. The debate that Bultmann engendered gave credibility and defense to liberal theology, a contribution that was, and still is, welcomed by a large part of the Christian and Christian-thinking community. One only needs to casually observe post-modern Christian theology to see where Bultmann and his contemporaries laid a foundation of compromise. The result is a liberal theology party that in a sense has rationalized away the necessity of repentance from sin and the placing of one’s self under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

“Bultmann makes himself responsible to the presuppositions of modern thought rather than to the statements of the New Testament.”¹⁷ For example, Bultmann argued that “Modern people, thinking in the terms of modern science or scientific philosophy, no longer believe in a ‘three-story universe’ or in apocalyptic eschatology or in miracles. Therefore it is the duty of the interpreter to take the insights of the Bible which are expressed in mythical language (language related to such matters as ancient cosmology, and so on) and reinterpret them in a language relevant to moderns.”¹⁸ Bultmann saw ancients who saw only a physical universe, just as he does, and so misunderstands the metaphoric richness of their language and culture. The ancients did not think that they could dig a hole in the ground to find hell, nor did they really think that they could build a tower of Babel to reach into

God's heaven, though some of the more foolish may have been convinced of such folly. The scriptural writers, particularly New Testament writers, identified that a "three-story universe" does, indeed, exist but not in the physical realm. The "modern" philosophy of Bultmann rejects the existence of an eternity that is fully sentient, yet fully separate in time and substance from the physical. The New Testament writers described hell in a variety of physical ways in an effort to explain how terrible such an existence would be: an eternal abode, separated from the Spirit of God; an everlasting existence influenced only by evil. If one could imagine how this earth would be without any of God's influence, and fully saturated with Satan's influence, we can begin to see how horrific hell must be. Add to that the fact that eternity represents an existence for all time, past and future. Furthermore, the ancient writers described heaven in a variety of physical ways in an effort to explain how wonderful such an existence would be: an eternity spent in the presence of God, free of the influence of evil. Illustration of the spiritual realm must be couched in physical terms, since that is the only vocabulary of man. We have never seen heaven or hell, so there are no words to describe its details. However, we still see three tiers: this temporal universe, and the two eternal states of heaven and hell. Modern cosmology has served to only help us understand this physical universe, and does nothing to refute the *kerygma* as Bultmann assumes it does. Our cosmology, however, does serve as a display of the relative immensity of God's power, as the universe appears unfathomably large from our perspective, but may be the minutest of specks to God.

Since Bultmann requires that all truth come within the limitations of explanation by modern science, he also rejects any event in the scriptures that might

be interpreted as miraculous. He writes “in any case modern science does not believe that the course of nature can be interrupted or, so to speak, perforated by supernatural powers.”¹⁹ Such a position denies that Jesus had the power to turn water to wine, heal the sick, cast out demons, raise the dead, or to perform any other of the miracles or signs. Also, the miracle of Jesus’ own resurrection becomes impossible. Bultmann simply refuses to believe that Jesus had the power to do these things, and because of Bultmann’s agnosticism, he replaces the necessity of faith with an academic formula that rationalizes away what he deems impossible. To Bultmann, the impossible never happened; he cannot submit to Jesus’ statement that “with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26). However, even Bultmann’s rejection of Jesus’ own words is rationalized away by his stated position that anything Jesus says that disagrees with his existentialist viewpoint is a mythical quote, and should be literally disregarded, but should be investigated to determine what was “really” stated. Furthermore, Bultmann’s very theology asserts, “The New Testament undoubtedly presents the Christ occurrence as a mythological occurrence.”²⁰ “Indeed he is so clear about this that it is difficult to comprehend why several of his interpreters have misunderstood his position.”²¹ There was a movement among Bultmann’s students that reacted to his rigid denial that one could know little or nothing historical about Jesus. They (and many others) asked how one could have an authentic Christian faith without an actual historical Jesus. They wondered whether Bultmann’s agnosticism about Jesus might actually undermine the faith.²² Many argued that Bultmann never came to know Christ in faith as Jesus demanded of Nicodemus (John 3) and does of every believer and if this is true, he is in no position to be instructing anyone in the faith.

Bultmann's doubts that Christ is a real person belies his agnostic position and sets his theology, and particularly his Christology, clearly apart from the fundamentals of the Christian faith. I am reminded of Paul's assertion "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved" (Romans 10:9). Bultmann seems to miss the blessing on both counts.

Furthermore, Bultmann is no Carl Sagan or Steven Hawking. Bultmann has a very limited understanding of his own science, the foundational argument that he uses for his existentialist interpretation. For example, speaking of Jesus he asserts that "the virgin birth is inconsistent with the assertion of his pre-existence."²³ He cannot separate the properties of created time with the property of an Omnitemporal eternity. This one example is worth investigating.

His insistence that all scripture fits within his personal and somewhat ignorant modern scientific view forms a necessity that he reject the possibility of the virgin birth of Christ. What he fails to consider is that his modern view is limited when he limits all of the properties of God to only that which he can personally understand. We now know much more about the property of time than what was known in Bultmann's generation. Based upon more modern discoveries, again contributions by Sagan and Hawking, I would assert that God is eternal. Eternity is an existence that is separate from this physical existence, and like all other properties of this physical universe, time as we experience it on a moment-to-moment basis is a *physical property*. God is not limited by created time any more than he is limited to the space of this created universe. God created this universe and the property of time that seems

to hold it together in sequence. Once we step out of this physical universe into eternity we will be freed of the physical limitation of time, just as Jesus did at the ascension.²⁴ God, therefore is free to interact with this universe at any moment from its creation to its prophesied end in any form he chooses. Bultmann agrees that Jesus was “in the beginning” (John 1:1, 14). He and his contemporaries simply never had the opportunity that today’s “moderns” have to understand better the property of time. Hawking helps us to understand the properties of time as he and his contemporaries describe how we can manipulate it in the same manner that we manipulate energy and motion.²⁵ Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, is the Eternal Word who by His eternal nature pre-exists and post-exists the created age of time as He can from the point of eternity observe all of time’s events in “the palm of His great hand.” At the same time, because of his eternal nature, He has the power to interact with creation in any point He chooses, whether it be prior to the incarnation, at the incarnation, or through the power of the Holy Spirit after the resurrection of Christ.

Many of Bultmann’s arguments fall impotently silent when scripture is examined within its historical context rather than through his application of modern form criticism alone. To approach the task of interpretation with blinders applied to how the ancient and first-century culture applied the literary forms in their own interpretation is ignorant at worst and arrogant at best. Such an approach adjusts the kerygma to the existentialist desires of the interpreter rather than the sincere intent of the authors. “The novelty present in demythologizing does not seem to lie in its criticism of the ancient world-view ... The novelty lies in the thoroughness with which an effort is made to separate the primary elements in the Bible from the

secondary, and to reinterpret what is regarded as primary in terms of existentialist philosophy.²⁶

Bultmann's approach requires that one read the Bible with an existentialist hermeneutic.²⁷ "What Bultmann asks is essentially a philosophical anthropology capable of furnishing the 'proper conceptuality,' at the moment of entering upon a biblical anthropology and of interpreting the cosmological and mythological statements of the Bible in terms of (modern) human existence."²⁸ Such an intense reinterpretation of scripture results in a theology that is in significant variance of that espoused by Christ and by the apostles. However, the proponents of this neo-orthodox and liberal position are not daunted by such criticism since they argue that most of what we know about Christ and the apostles is only myth in the first place. Fundamental and conservative believers are laughed at by the liberals as the ignorant ones, blinded by their "child-like," unenlightened faith. Bultmann allowed that readers of the Bible may disregard anything that they deem as prescientific, such as primitive cosmology, myths, etc."²⁹ This liberal position holds that it is only when the presuppositions that come with blind faith can be shed and replaced by a theology that agrees with modern science and philosophy that an individual is finally "enlightened." Carl Sagan would be proud.

The trouble with this kind of interpretation is two-fold. "First, it is assumed that there was a single ancient world-view which can be reinterpreted wherever it appears in the New Testament; similarly, it is assumed that there is a single modern world-view and that this world view is correct. Second, the biblical texts undergo a

kind of metamorphosis as their more obvious historical meaning is transmuted into something more closely resembling the intention of the existentialist exegete.”³⁰

It is evident from this interaction with Bultmann’s theology that his “new hermeneutic” is neither new, conclusive, nor in agreement with faith-based fundamental Christian doctrine. He came to his liberal and existentialist conclusions using his own method of interpretation that employed a formula that matched his hypothesis. That is, he built his model to match his presupposed hypothesis, a method that today is often referred to as junk science. “Instead of employing a methodology or process for determining the meaning of texts (i.e., what they historically intended to communicate, practitioners of the new hermeneutic focused attention on the modern situation – how the ancient text speaks with power and freshness today. They studied the text through the lenses of today, rather than seeking to understand life today through the interpretation of the text.”³¹

Theologians such as Bultmann and his contemporaries wield a lot of power to dissuade people away from the truth of the gospel. And like the false teachers that were continually criticized by Paul, He and his camp should be clearly castigated by today’s theologians. “Bultmann rightly has been criticized because he places so much emphasis on the existential dimension that for him it matters little if any objective or historical events recorded in the NT even occurred. This is a serious flaw, for though Christ’s death or resurrection may be inspiring ‘mythical events,’ if they did not actually occur in history, how can they provide objective atonement or assure the Christian’s own resurrection?”³² Rudolf Bultmann and his adherents rob from the young Christian disciple the very basics of the faith. Recall Jesus words concerning

false teachers: “But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and *that* he were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matt. 18:6, KJV). It would be better if those like Bultmann were completely taken out of the picture. James also writes, “Be not many of you teachers, my bretheren, knowing that we shall receive heavier judgment” (James 3:1, ASV). Those of us who profess to teach God’s word are subject to a greater scrutiny by God Himself as we have the power to lead people away from the very truth of God. Theologians share a responsibility to present the kerygma in the most accurate form possible, a form that is not adulterated by personal or modern cultural bias.

So, if a sincere theologian as respected and quoted as Rudolf Bultmann can be so summarily criticized, how does one less educated than he approach the hermeneutical task? What are the errors that lay in wait, ready to misdirect even the most sincere reader? The solution is in the consideration of the historical and cultural paradigm of the scriptural writers. A cursory study of the history of biblical interpretation will show that a concerted effort to interpret scripture in its historical/cultural context is relatively new. It is a somewhat intense process that necessitates becoming familiar with the culture and language usage of the day. It necessitates learning the idioms and poetic forms used by the original writers. It necessitates peering through levels of translations (for example, Jesus’ words as they were translated from Aramaic, to Greek, to English.) It necessitates an understanding of how the ancients interpreted literary styles such as parallelism and apocalyptic imagery.

This is no easy task. However one can start by simply acknowledging that the scriptures were written to be read and understood by common people and they used common language, idioms, and literary styles of their day, a day that had a radically different culture and language structure than our own. If one is willing to study the scriptures using an exegetical approach, utilizing theological dictionaries, historical and literary commentaries, and other resources that will instruct in ancient culture and language, scripture can explode with meaning and power, for “all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). All scripture is profitable, not just those segments that we agree with, nor just those sections selected by the published theologians. We are free to study all scripture and gain from its consistent wisdom and knowledge as we try to understand its content through the mind of the original writers, and trying to place ourselves into the culture of the intended readers. This is simple common sense, a power far superior to that of the most researched and widely respected false teaching.

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