ROLAND DEINES

Acts of God in History

Edited by
CHRISTOPH OCHS
and PETER WATTS

Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
zum Neuen Testament
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Studies Towards Recovering a Theological Historiography

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Christoph Ochs and Peter Watts

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Heinz-Horst Deichmann

benefactor — mentor — friend

. . . one of the great old men
who truly inspire

Preface

It was during the yearly conference of the Society of Biblical Literature in November 2011, that I was pleasantly surprised with the offer to publish a selection of my essays in WUNT. Slightly hesitant at the beginning, mainly because I felt that my essays strayed in too many directions and lacked a coherent theme, I gradually warmed to the idea. I felt honoured by the trust of the series editors, in particular Professor Jörg Frey, and the encouragement of Dr. Henning Ziebritzki from the side of the publisher. Others signalled their support as well, most notably my doctoral student (and now "doctor") Christoph Ochs, who was willing to undertake the tedious task of translating the German papers for this collection into English. His enthusiasm for the project continued until the very end, and I owe him not just the initial translations, but also most of the formatting, improving (especially the pictures for the article on Bar Kokhba) and indexing of the volume. Next to him Peter Watts, doctoral student (who will hopefully be fully a "doctor" when this book is out of the press) and biblical languages teacher in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies here in Nottingham, invested with good humour and never-ending gentleness countless hours to polish, clarify and check what I attempted to say. If the English style does still betray some (many?) Germanisms, the blame is not to be laid on the two editors, but on my stubbornness not to let go of some formulations which sound fine (even 'academic' or 'wissenschaftlich') in German, but not necessarily so in English. It can be said without exaggeration that without their help (and steering pressure) this project could not have been completed in such a short time and in such a satisfying way. I also owe thanks to Lawrence Osborn, the linguistic editor, and Mark Wreford, one of our Nottingham students, for their help in the process of proof-reading and indexing.

I am very glad that the support I received gives me the opportunity to publish some of my German papers in English so that at least my students can benefit from them. Besides, editing translations of my own writings in another language was an interesting experience. It taught me the benefit of having with English a *lingua franca* in contemporary scholarship that allows us to communicate easily with each other across language barriers. But it also revealed the fact that some things can be better expressed either in one language or the other. What makes perfect sense in German can sound rather clumsy in English and vice versa. This is to say that scholarship in general

and theology in particular should resist the temptation to publish in one language only, as this would mean a real loss for the breadth and depth of our discipline.

The newly translated texts follow the German originals carefully but not slavishly. I took the liberty to clarify some of the points where I felt it necessary. For the sake of a wider readership we also added English translations for quotes in Greek and Hebrew, which was not always the case in the original publications. Translations of works originally cited in German were used throughout where available. Where English translations were unavailable we translated from the German original, which was not easy at times (and in some cases we therefore supplied the German). Whenever works are cited by their German titles only the translations are our own.

The papers that appeared initially in English were also edited linguistically. Again, the main attempt was to improve their readability. The footnotes and bibliographical data were harmonised as far as possible throughout the book without being too anxious about some inconsistencies that may have remained. Most papers were written for research conferences with a clearly defined focus and intended to address colleagues who work in the same field. I hope that this collection and the additional editorial work will be to the benefit of a wider audience. Inevitably, there exists some overlap and repetition, but this would only affect the reader who reads the book from cover to cover. Each essay can be read (and copied) independently and all bibliographical references can be found within the individual essays themselves rather than being consolidated into one single bibliography at the end. This would have saved us perhaps two or three pages but the inconvenience for the reader would be much greater, and the publishing house of Mohr Siebeck is to be praised that they do not bargain with their authors about a few pages more or less. When I occasionally hear from my colleagues that they have to cut their bibliographies or delete source quotations because they went over the agreed word count or number of pages I am always deeply thankful for Mohr Siebeck's generosity and dedication to the wishes and needs of their authors.

Re-publication, especially when combined with translation, is tempting insofar as it offers the chance for major additions and changes. A tight time frame (not least because of the impending "Research Excellence Framework," abbreviated REF, which assesses the quality of research in UK higher education institutions on a regular basis) and, more importantly, the conviction that the Humanities are 'slow' disciplines,[1] reined back any such temptations to a minimum.

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[1] This means that a proposal or thesis needs time to be disseminated and to make an impact. The availability of texts in electronic form makes them seem easily and quickly available but this is an advantage that does not really matter in the long run. What matters, however, is whether one finds readers willing to engage critically and supportively and this

The articles are redacted in the following ways: New literature is added only to a very small degree and somewhat randomly. I usually try to integrate in my papers a representative and fairly wide amount of the literature available and relevant to me at the time of writing, and to interact with it as much as possible. As our discipline produces ever more literature it is impossible to keep up with every topic covered in this volume, let alone to engage all the relevant studies thoroughly in a re-publication. I have, however, added references to some of my later publications if I have re-addressed one of the topics, which then often includes discussions of further literature.

The at times (admittedly) extensive footnotes are indicative of my way of engaging with colleagues and my desire to take them seriously. Just to list literature without pointing out to the reader where I agree or disagree with other perspectives and how I tried to develop my own understanding with the help of colleagues does not work well for me. I admire the often almost footnote-free monographs of my British colleagues who are able to present their arguments with great elegance, almost leaving no traces of the hard work that was put into writing them. Having learned my craft from Martin Hengel, I have developed a rather different style, one which (hopefully) shows the material out of which the structure is built. The footnotes serve as an archive for those who want to know about the 'archaeology' of an argument, but the hope is that everything above the line separating text and footnotes can be read and understood without the latter.

Most of these essays have been written since my appointment in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies in Nottingham (2006), and their editing and reworking for their initial (and now re-) publication took place here in all cases. The strong theological orientation of the Department and its refreshing approach to reality and truth made it possible to further develop thoughts that are normally not at the forefront of historically oriented biblical scholarship but are unavoidable if the historical enquiry is confronted with the question of God, who is, after all the key subject matter of theology and the Bible. This environment, therefore, allowed ideas to resurface which I had written down for the first time as a student in my twenties but somehow became buried during the following years when I started my academic career, following the established (and subtly but inescapably enforced) conventions to discern strictly between the scholarly task as a historian and convictions accepted as true as a Christian. The latter were to be located somewhere in a religious hinterland not to be visited during the scholarly expeditions into the past. What blurs such a convenient separation, however, is that which finally

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can easily take ten years or so, sometimes even longer. Therefore it is not necessary to update a paper constantly in the light of new literature, because new literature in our fields of research does not usually provide new data (as in the sciences) but rather competing readings of the same sources.

became the title of this collection: God acts in history.[2] This is the conviction, based on historical experiences, of those people to whom we owe the biblical and related texts. And it is the conviction (and experience) of those who are Christians (and also those of other faiths) today. The ideal of a strict separation, therefore, between professional, distanced scholarly enquiry of past experiences of the God who acts, and the theologically accepted and daily expressed conviction of him continuing acting as creator, sustainer and perfecter of this world and its history, has lost its persuasiveness.

All essays in this volume touch upon the question of God acting in this world and the possibility of experiencing him, in some way. This is, however, not the result of a programmatic outline with which I started in order to prove my case, but rather a common thread that became visible (even to me) only from hindsight. This explains what some might regard as a serious omission, namely a closer engagement with the — fortunately very lively — current debate on the concepts of history and historiography within Biblical Studies, which I follow to a greater degree than is visible via the bibliographies of these essays.[3] Some closer engagement can be found in the essay on salvation

[2] It was only after I had decided on this fairly presumptuous title that I came across G. Ernest Wright's small book with the title: *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (Studies in Biblical Theology 8; London: SCM, 1950). It was written at the peak of dialectical theology, with its emphasis on "the Word of God," whereas Wright notes — correctly to my mind — that "a more accurate title [for the Bible] would be 'the Acts of God.' The Word is certainly present in the Scripture, but it is rarely, if ever, dissociated from the Act; instead it is the accompaniment of the Act" (12). I also saw only recently, glancing over the first two volumes — fresh from the press — of James Barr, *Bible and Interpretation: The Collected Essays of James Barr* (ed. John Barton; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), that he took up Wright's phrase and the implied question after "the reality of God's work in history" (ibid., 2.34), with which he wrestled critically — as it seems — throughout his life.

[3] A brilliant summary of this discussion can be found in Ruben Zimmermann, "Geschichtstheorien und Neues Testament: Gedächtnis, Diskurs, Kultur und Narration in der historiographischen Diskussion," *Early Christianity* 2 (2011): 417–44, which demonstrates the strength and limitations of these new theories which are all more or less critical of the idea of a factual history behind the historical stories. Disconcerting however is the language Zimmermann uses when he laments that the idea of *a* history (and related to it of 'facts' and not narratives only) is "unausrottbar" ("ineradicable" [432]). I was not aware that it is the task of historians (or exegetes) to eradicate certain convictions, especially those held by most before the 'linguistic turn.' But I fully agree with Zimmermann that we need to discuss our historiographical conceptions and specify our methodologies for what is indeed a common task, namely to enable meaning ("Sinnstiftung") by fostering "confidence in God's salvific history with the world as it found its narrative condensation in the master narrative of Israel's and Jesus of Nazareth' history ("Der Verzicht auf Sinnstiftung oder gar die bewusste Destruktion des Sinns entzieht dem Neutestamentler die Berechtigung seines Tuns. Das Vertrauen in Gottes Heilsgeschichte mit der Welt, wie sie sich in den Meistererzählungen der Geschichte Israels und Jesu von Nazareth narrativ niedergeschlagen hat, muss für Theologen ein notwendiges Postulat historiographischen Arbeitens am Neuen Testament bleiben" [444]).

history, but I am aware that more could be done on this side. What seems missing in this discussion within Biblical Studies, however, or at least what I miss in it — which might be due to my own fault by not searching in the right direction — is an engagement with the role of "transempirical realities" (a term I owe to my Nottingham colleague Anthony C. Thiselton) within the historical process.[4] To simply ignore them for the sake of methodological purity (begging the question of who or what defines what is 'pure') is in my eyes neither attractive nor upright for a Christian theologian. The hope for these selected studies is therefore to contribute towards the task of recovering a theologically motivated historiography, and to seek a viable reading of history under the assumption that the one God to whom the Holy Scriptures of the Jewish-Christian tradition bear witness is indeed a major cause — indeed 'the' cause — in our world, disposed to manifest himself so that he can be experienced and witnessed in such a way that this witness allows others to experience the same God.

The introduction of this collection, "God's Role in History as a Methodological Problem for Exegesis," is based on my Tyndale New Testament Lecture, which I had the honour of delivering during the Triennial Conference in July 2009. It addressed these questions about God, history, and how to scholarly engage this topic by means of a public lecture delivered to a wider theological audience comprising not only biblical scholars but representatives of other theological disciplines as well. Those familiar with the British theological scene will know that the Tyndale Fellowship, which organises these lectures, represents a high view of Scripture and orthodox Christian doctrine.[5] It is the only part in this book where the original context is deliberately left to shine through, so as to allow the reader to understand my main theological objectives more explicitly, which could be formulated in an affirmative and less guarded way in this context. Although all the other essays originated as conference papers too, they were heavily reworked for publication, and

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[4] For a very interesting debate in this respect see Brad S. Gregory, "The Other Confessional History: On Secular Bias in the Study of Religion," *History and Theory* 45 (2006): 132–49; Tor Egil Førland, "Acts of God? Miracles and Scientific Explanation," *History and Theory* 47 (2008): 483–94; Brad S. Gregory, "No Room for God? History, Science, Metaphysics, and the Study of Religion," ibid., 495–519; Tor Egil Førland, "Historiography without God: A Reply to Gregory," ibid., 520–32. From the perspective of Catholic systematic theology a challenging thesis was made by Klaus von Stosch, *Gott – Macht – Geschichte: Versuch einer theodizeesensiblen Rede vom Handeln Gottes in der Welt* (Freiburg: Herder, 2006). For a Protestant systematic-theological reading of Jesus as God's revelation, which deals profoundly with New Testament research see Michael Welker, *Gottes Offenbarung: Christologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2012).

[5] Cf. Thomas A. Noble, *Tyndale House and Fellowship: Research for the Academy and the Church — The First Sixty Years* (Leicester: IVP, 2006).

therefore betray fewer traces of their original 'Sitz im Leben'. The Tyndale Lecture also demonstrates that I am not postulating a method for others to follow but that I am trying to formulate what I think needs to be explored and discussed more fully in the future. It is therefore the least 'finished' contribution of this volume but correspondingly the most inviting one.

The first group of essays, classified as "Historical Studies," functions as a preparation for the following. With the exception of "Jesus and the Jewish Traditions of His Time" these were written before I allowed myself to get involved in the search for a theologically grounded historiography (which was set in motion, if I look back, by the first volume of Joseph Ratzinger / Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, in 2007). They show from different areas of the biblical-Jewish tradition what the historical method is able to achieve when it seriously factors in religious convictions as of decisive relevance. These studies all have in common that they deal with groups and individuals who considered God's acts in history, from creation to their own present, as something meaningful and of significance, and thus responded in that they altered their own behaviour accordingly.

"The Social Profile of the Pharisees," as is argued in the first essay, cannot be understood adequately if their efforts for influence are primarily seen as grasping for social prestige and their religious convictions are only taken as a means to this end. Instead, the attempt is made here to see their social involvement as an overflow of their understanding of God's will for his people. The subsequent study on the role of Galilee in recent Jesus research, entitled "Jesus the Galilean," demonstrates (albeit unintentionally) how secular ideology has taken the place of religious convictions and retrospectively seeks to read its own ideals into the biblical texts. The essay on "Jesus and the Jewish Traditions of His Time" then seeks to show to what extent the figure of Jesus of Nazareth is really an exception historically. In the light of the fact that Jesus research of the last 30 years has been able to draw on Jewish comparative material to hitherto unprecedented levels of detail, such a conclusion is warranted. In fact, the contemporary search for the historical Jesus has reached the point where it has to concede that the mere comparison of Jesus to various historical parallels is not able to account for the mystery of his existence and his historical impact. Finally, the study on "the Apostolic Decree" identifies its guiding principle as behaviour in conformity to an intrinsic order of creation, that Jews could also expect non-Jews to respect. Creation, God's foundational life-giving act, is as such the central point of reference for the ordering of the new, God-given, community of Jews and non-Jews in the name of Jesus.

The second set of studies, "Responses to the God who Acts," show how the experience of God's acts in history engenders historical effects, which

themselves then initiate the formation of religious tradition and in doing so enable new experiences with God that subsequently affect history.

The first essay in this group, "How Long? God's Revealed Schedule for Salvation and the Outbreak of the Bar Kokhba Revolt," is on the causes that gave rise to the Bar Kokhba revolt in the year 132 AD. This concrete example demonstrates how the situational reading of Holy Scriptures became a determinative factor in the historical processes after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD. The guiding principle is, again, the conviction that in order to understand these events one must factor in that Jewish readers of Scripture at that time tried to understand their own present in the light of biblical texts, 'overscribing' their own experiences and relation with God with those of the past. The question in the title "How Long?" formulates a reasonable biblically generated attitude in that regard, that the Temple would not remain in ruin and that the judgement of the people would not remain forever. The psalmists's question echoed, as such, once again over the ruins of Jerusalem, and the answers derived from the Holy Scriptures determined the expectations and the interpretation of the historical events at the time of Hadrian. Since God had acted on behalf of his people in the past, an analogous act was also to be expected for the immediate future. But the hope that God would step in also implied by necessity that the faithful would not have to wait passively, but, on the contrary, it was able to motivate them to the highest levels of activity. One can, therefore, observe in the historical process an attitude, which also provides a better understanding of religiously motivated zeal in contemporary society.[6] The second study, "Biblical Viewpoints on Repentance, Conversion, and Turning to God," which is the only one that was not written for professional exegetes or historians of religion, shows that conversion, as presented in the biblical tradition, can be defined as a *reaction* on part of humans to an *action* of God. The affected persons have experienced this action as so striking that they do not wish to remain as they were and as if this encounter with God had never taken place, but instead to enter into a new loyalty relationship with this God. The frequently felt difficulty to arrive at a positive understanding of the process of conversion — and this is one of the theses of this paper — is intrinsically related to the banishment of God from the public discourse into the ether of the 'world of faith.' In other words, God is not understood as active in the present and as such relegated to a reality that is ultimately not relevant to the 'real world.' The last study in this middle group, "The Term and Concept of Scripture," deals with the issue of how

[6] On this see also Roland Deines, "Gab es eine jüdische Freiheitsbewegung? Martin Hengels 'Zeloten' nach 50 Jahren," in *Die Zeloten. Untersuchungen zur jüdischen Freiheitsbewegung in der Zeit von Herodes I. bis 70 n. Chr.* (Martin Hengel; ed. Roland Deines and Claus-Jürgen Thornton; WUNT 283; 3rd rev. ed.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 403–48, esp. 439ff.

biblical texts became Scripture, and shows how the development of what in the end became the canonical "Holy Scriptures" cannot be comprehended without any regard for the experiences of God's acting and speaking in and through these texts. The fact that such texts in their pre-canonical state were handed on from generation to generation is intrinsically linked to their ability to mediate a fresh encounter with God that is detached from the original historical situation.

The final group, "Methodological Probings," comprises three studies that attempt to break through the methodological limitations that historical exegesis has imposed on itself. That this is more of an 'attempt' and a tentative 'probing' is due to the fact that one has to rescover here a dimension that for the last 300 years has been pushed to the back of the exegetical agenda, although the Christian faith would never have come into existence without the firm belief in a God who acts in a discernable and comprehensible way. These probings, however, are not to be read as a backward longing for a pre-modern dogmatic exegesis, as if the future is to be found in the past. Rather, it is an attempt to step forward without wanting to negate the insights of the Enlightenment as a period of learning and better understanding of the conditioning of what we can know. This led to a necessary disenchantment of the historicity and factuality of Christian dogma that was too naively taken for granted, and with it allowed the historical quest as a theologically necessary one to resurface. That the God of the biblical prophets and of Jesus is different from that of the philosophers is not the smallest contribution we owe this period. Yet one should refuse to see the Enlightenment as the final word for all times.

The first study, "The Recognition of God's Acts in History," deals with the controversial topic of salvation history, by which the history of God's special acts within the course of human history is meant. Salvation history is defended as a life-enhancing conception of time, which ought to be seen as the specific contribution of theology that is able to advance the contemporary discourses about time and history. The Gospel of Matthew provides a case study, and demonstrates how Matthew presents Jesus' life and teaching as divine revelation; one that is possible to be recognized, and which therefore demands a response.

The two final essays pick up on important insights of Pope Benedict and my teacher Martin Hengel respectively. The attempt is made to bring these to bear on a future exegesis that not only suffices itself with tracing human thinking about God's acts, but to explore the reality of divine acts as a factor in historical processes. In "Can the 'Real' Jesus be Identified with the Historical Jesus?" I discuss Joseph Ratzinger's three Jesus books, and the challenge of biblical scholarship they represent. Benedict's conviction that God acts in this world in a discernible and thus describable way has to be reciprocated by

a historical methodology that allows God to be recognized as such. This means for Ratzinger that — at the least for *Christian* theologians and exegetes — the historical Jesus ought to be understood as God acting in history. This, however, involves a paradigm shift in the current methodological approach, and I conclude with a discussion of the need for this shift and some suggestions for how a new critical methodology might be found. In fact, this book is a humble attempt towards such a new way of doing historical-critical research "as if God is a given" (*veluti si Deus daretur*).[7] Finally, in "Pre-existence, Incarnation, and Messianic Self-Understanding of Jesus," I analyse Martin Hengel's important contribution to Christology, namely how Jesus' self-understanding provides a link between the historical Jesus and the pre-existent, incarnate Son of God. For Hengel, the development of a very early high Christology, traceable by the means and methods of historical research, points to Jesus messianic self-awareness and authority who saw himself as acting in the place of God, a testimony accepted and purposely perpetuated by his followers. This, to Hengel, is a unique *historical* phenomenon.

These essays, then, ought to be understood as a contribution to striving towards a theologically motivated historiography that has as its basic task the exploration and description of the reality of this world and her history under the premise that God, as witnessed in the Holy Scriptures of the Judeo-Christian tradition, is really creator, sustainer, and the fulfilment of this world and its history, or, to say it again with the words of my Nottingham colleague:

> Christian doctrine relates closely to memory of God's saving acts in history; attention to God's present action in continuity with those saving acts; and trustful expectation of an eschatological fulfillment of divine promises.[8]

All essays in this collection were written at a time when I had the privilege to encounter — in very different ways — three great 'old' men, each of whom have a lasting impact on my work. First of all Professor Martin Hengel, whose influence on my theological development started in 1985 and lasts beyond his death in 2009. My gratitude to his inspiring influence and never-ceasing interest in my — and all his other students' — work is expressed in two of the articles in the third part which were occasioned by conferences in his honour. He passed away while I was working on the Tyndale lecture that forms the introduction to this volume. This was less than a year after I had the privilege to accompany him and his wife, together with Professor Peter Stuhlmacher, to the "Schülerkreistreffen" of Pope Benedict in Castelgandolfo, where he and Prof. Stuhlmacher held lectures in the presence of the

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[7] On this phrase see below p. 358.

[8] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 65.

Pope to discuss with him and his students the quest for the historical Jesus.[9] My interest in the work (and person) of Joseph Ratzinger is fairly recent and started only shortly before this meeting as a result of the publication of the first volume of his *Jesus of Nazareth* (2007). It was during preparation for a Nottingham conference held in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies in June 2008 that I read from and about him for the first time, but this resulted in a deep reverence for his contribution to the Church, and to New Testament and Jesus scholarship in particular, although I am aware that not many share my appreciation of what I call in my essay "a friendly but intentional intrusion into exegetical territory." To meet him in the same year in person and to see him listen attentively and engage with my own teachers from Tübingen added to my admiration for him as a scholar and as a Christian. This is why I regard him as one of the great old men who enriches my life, even if only from a distance. In yet another way I came to meet Dr. Heinz-Horst Deichmann, who is the rare but truly inspiring combination of a medical doctor by training, successful businessman, devoted Christian and lifelong student of Karl Barth, in whose vision and generosity originated the "Deichmann Program for Jewish and Christian Literature of the Hellenistic-Roman Era" at *The Department of Bible, Archaeology, and Ancient Near East Studies* of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (Beer-Sheva, Israel). It was launched in 2003 and I had the honour to be involved in it from the beginning. Its most visible activity is the *Deichmann Annual Lecture Series,* which celebrated its tenth anniversary this year.[10] These ten years have involved many meetings, visits, and talks, and the dedication of this volume to Dr. Heinz-Horst Deichmann is a token of gratitude for his support of Jewish and Biblical Studies (among the many other necessary things for human welfare that he very generously supports), but even more so for his friendship.

Nottingham, September 2013 Roland Deines

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[9] The meeting is documented in: *Gespräch über Jesus: Papst Benedikt XVI. im Dialog mit Martin Hengel, Peter Stuhlmacher und seinen Schülern in Castelgandolfo 2008* (ed. Peter Kuhn; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), and for my slightly personal review of it see Roland Deines, *Jahrbuch für Evangelikale Theologie* 25 (2011): 244–8.

[10] For his motivation see his own reflections: Heinz-Horst Deichmann, "Opening Remarks to the First Deichmann Annual Lecture Series," Appendix 1 in Larry Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 207–14 (the first four chapters of this book were delivered as the first Deichmann Lectures). For his life story see Andreas Malessa and Hanna Schott, *Why Are You Rich, Mr. Deichmann? The Deichmann Story: How to Deal with Money and Responsibility* (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 2006).

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Abbreviations and Formal Guidelines

With the exception of the abbreviations listed below, most references to ancient sources and secondary literature accord with those suggested in P. H. Alexander et al., eds., *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999). Likewise, the formatting style is based on the SBL style guide.

ABG	Arbeiten zur Bibel und ihrer Geschichte
AJEC	Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity
AKG	Arbeiten zur Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte
BBLAK	Beiträge zur biblischen Landes- und Altertumskunde
BKP	Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie
BSGRT	Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana
BThSt	Biblisch-theologische Studien
BWANT	Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament
EHS	Europäische Hochschulschriften
EKK	Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
ET	English Translation
FASk	Forschungen zur antiken Sklaverei
FS	Festschrift
FSÖTh	Forschungen zur systematischen und ökumenischen Theologie
FTLZ	Forum Theologische Literaturzeitung
GLAJJ	*Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (ed. M. Stern)
GT	German Translation
JAJSup	Journal of Ancient Judaism Supplements
JBTh	*Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie*
JSHJ	*Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*
KNT	Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
LuThK	*Lutherische Theologie und Kirche*
MthSt	Marburger theologische Studien
SFSHJ	South Florida studies in the History of Judaism
SKI	Studien zu Kirche und Israel
SSIR	Skrifter utgivna av Svenska institutet i Rom
TANZ	Texte und Arbeiten zum neutestamentlichen Zeitalter
TBLNT	*Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament*
TzF	Texte zur Forschung
UTB	Uni-Taschenbücher
WdF	Wege der Forschung

God's Role in History as a Methodological Problem for Exegesis

1. Towards a Historical-Critical Assessment of the Conviction that God Acts in History

This long title attempts to encapsulate as precisely as possible one of the dilemmas with which biblical scholars are confronted when they attempt to understand themselves as theologians as well. For as theologians we find ourselves unable to follow the pattern so often found in the works of the Jewish historian Josephus when he is forced by his biblical *Vorlage* to talk about a miraculous event. After referring to such an event in a way that remains essentially faithful to the biblical text — though typically providing a rationalising explanation — Josephus frequently concludes with this kind of formula: "However, concerning such matters let each one judge as is pleasing to him" (*Ant.* 1.108: περὶ μὲν [οὖν] τούτων, ὡς ἑκάστοις ᾖ φίλον, οὕτω σκοπείτωσαν).[1] By doing so Josephus follows a practice that is well-established in Greek and Roman historiography, and which is also adopted by Lucian of Samosata in the 2nd century AD.[2] Their recommended approach can be paraphrased as a 'reserved objectivity,' which is careful to show no partiality. This seems to be the perfect approach for an historian, and one may well wish that modern historians (and also biblical scholars) could be content with such. Unfortunately such an approach is no longer practicable. What separates our reading of the world and historical processes from that of Josephus, Lucian, and others up until the 18th century is that they lived at a time when,

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[1] Trans. by L. H. Feldman, *Judean Antiquities 1–4: Translation and Commentary* (Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary 3; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 39, n. 271.

[2] Lucian, in the final chapters of his work *Quomodo historia sit conscribenda* (Πῶς δεῖ Ἱστορίαν συγγράφειν), which contain criticism of contemporary historians, outlines how the ideal historian should approach this topic. Among the points Lucian addresses briefly is the issue of myth (imagine a modern handbook for historiography including a theoretical discussion of such a point): "Again, if a myth (μῦθος) comes along you must tell it but not believe it entirely (οὐ μὴν πιστωτέος πάντως); no, make it known for your audience to make of it what they will — you run no risk and lean to neither side," in "How to Write History," in *Lucian VI* (LCL 430; transl. K. Kilburn; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 2–73 (70–1, § 60).

as John Milbank puts it, "there was no 'secular'."[3] This means that the causation of so-called "*trans*empirical realities"[4] within the cosmos was not denied but held as a fundamental conviction, a kind of basic position in discourse about reality that more or less all participants accepted. The question was not "does God exist," or, less theistically formulated, do "spiritual powers" and "cosmic forces" exist (cf. Eph 6:12; Col 1:16 etc.). As long as they are presupposed and acknowledged, the issue is not *whether* they intervene at all, but *how*, *when*, *where*, and *why* they intervene, or are claimed by some to do so.

The 'reserved objectivity' of the ancient historians with regard to the supernatural existed within the context of a world full of gods and spiritual powers. In such a world when there was no secular, critical discourse about God(s) sought to understand divine action in the right way and to ensure that the general acceptance of transempirical realities was not abused for mundane and selfish ends. The authority of the sentence, "God wills it" is a dangerous weapon in the hands of religious leaders, and even more so, from a theological perspective, within the reality of a fallen humanity, for which 'will to power' is one of the most disastrous sins. The misuse of that purported to be God's will for selfish ends has cost the lives of millions who have died on all too many battlefields. And in the wake of catastrophic wars there has arisen the notion that the world would be better off if politics were to be handled *etsi deus non daretur* ("as though God were not a given"). This famous phrase was coined by the Dutch jurist, philosopher, politician and biblical exegete Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) in the prolegomena to his book, *De iure belli ac pacis*, published in 1625 during the 30 years war.[5] In the midst of a religiously motivated conflict he made the claim that politics should be conducted without 'playing the God card' for political ends. This does not mean, however, that he was unconvinced about God's active participation within this world, which is evident when one reads the whole paragraph in context:

> What we have been saying would have a degree of validity even if we should concede that which cannot be conceded without the utmost wickedness, that there is no God, or that the affairs of men are of no concern to Him. The very opposite of this view has been implanted in us partly by reason, partly by unbroken tradition, and confirmed by many proofs as well as by miracles attested by all ages. Hence it follows that we must without exception render obedience to God as our Creator, to whom we owe all that we are and have; especially since, in manifold ways, He has shown Himself supremely good and supremely powerful, so that to

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[3] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 9.

[4] Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 377 (italics original).

[5] Hugo Grotius, *The Law of War and Peace* (trans. Francis W. Kelsey et al.; Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1925), 13 (Prolegomena, XI), cf. Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism* (trans. Darrell L. Guder; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983), 18–9, 58.

those who obey Him He is able to give supremely great rewards, even rewards that are eternal, since He Himself is eternal.

The same attitude can also be seen in his later apologetic work *De veritate religionis christianae* written after *De iure belli ac pacis*, but which started in the form of a Dutch poem written in 1619/20 while he was a prisoner. In this Grotius defends the superiority of the Christian religion against atheism, paganism, Judaism and Islam,[6] which he considers to be confirmed — in a very traditional way — through the miracles reported in the Bible and the resurrection of Jesus. This was the time when there was no secular, although the dawn of a secularized age was appearing.

2. Neutrality as the Price for Acceptability

Our situation today is completely different. The secular success-story regarding the reality discourses within the western world during the last three centuries is impressive, and its dominance is perhaps even stronger than it is perceived by many on account of the fact that secular societies leave certain places of refuge for religions. As long as theological discourse is willing to confine itself to these designated areas, no open conflict arises.[7] But as John Milbank rightly observes: "If theology no longer seeks to position, qualify or criticize other discourses, then it is inevitable that these discourses will position theology" (1). This results in theology and religion becoming objects of study and subjected to a methodology not derived from their own understanding of reality, and instead confined to a so-called 'objective' approach that treats religion and faith purely as objects of investigation. This in turn precludes serious participation in reality discourses, let alone making any value judgments or discerning between true and false. The formulation of equality and antidiscrimination rules — as important as they are to certain aspects within the public sphere — correlates well to this expected academic neutrality. Accepting such a positioning seems to be the price to be paid to a secular society, which in return enables biblical scholars to work within the academic setting of publicly funded theology and religious studies departments.

George Marsden comments on this situation in his stimulating little book *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*:

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[6] Cf. Jan Paul Heering, *Hugo Grotius as Apologist for the Christian Religion: A Study of His Work* De veritate religionis christianae (1640) (Studies in the History of Christian Thought 111; Leiden: Brill, 2004).

[7] Examples are abundant; cf. Milbank, *Social Theory*, 1–2; also the discussion between Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2007), see below in this volume pp. 368, 403–6.

> Many contemporary academics affirm as dogma that the only respectable place for religion in the academy is as an object of study. Suggestions that religious perspectives might be relevant to interpretation in other fields are viewed with puzzlement or even consternation.[8]

Marsden further suggests that the prominent place theology still holds within many academic institutions is not a sign of its strength or acceptance within contemporary academia, but rather a vestige of the idea of the traditional university where theology often held a prestigious and time-honoured position. Moreover, he indicates that hostility towards "religious perspectives" increased significantly between the 1950s and the 1980s:

> Old secular liberals and postmoderns, despite their differences, typically agreed that acceptable theories about humans or reality must begin with the premise that the universe is a self-contained entity.

This means that drawing upon a religious perspective is tantamount to "violating canons of academic respectability."[9] Angus Paddison in a chapter on "Scripture, Participation and Universities" reminds us not to "forget how tightly policed by secular presumptions academic pluralism is."[10] The result is a growing pressure upon theology to justify itself as an academic discipline.

Biblical scholars, however, are not at the centre of the storm because Biblical Studies as a historical and literary discipline shares a number of characteristics with other text based disciplines: engagement in textual criticism, source criticism, and literary analysis; the employment of the tools of grammar, semiotics and linguistics; and the writing of commentaries and historical monographs where God appears only in the margins — if at all. When God is discussed, it is not as subject but as object, an expression of cultural and social codes to which religious beliefs also belong. Committed Christians within Biblical Studies sometimes try to bracket out a supra-historical core from historical examination to leave their central beliefs unthreatened. The result is an apparent half-heartedness in (often conservative or evangelical) parts of Christian scholarship resulting from a sense of divided loyalty: On the one hand the desire to do objective and critical scholarship and on the other to pursue a religious commitment. The problem, however, is not the latter, but the pressure exerted from the former to set faith aside for historical enquiry. No wonder, therefore, that the flight into canonical exegesis, narratology, literary criticism and theological exegesis is quite common among evangelical PhD candidates.

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[8] George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 13; and idem, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[9] Marsden, *Outrageous Idea*, 18–9, see also 27.

[10] Angus Paddison, *Scripture: A Very Theological Proposal* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 123.

This was, and still is, possible because of the traditional place given to theology in western academia, rather than because of the inherent strength of the discipline. But recently, even Biblical Studies has faced attack and been labelled a pseudo-discipline. In this regard it is worth reading Hector Avalos' 2007 book, *The End of Biblical Studies*, in which he calls for a complete abandonment of Biblical Studies on account of it being a form of 'scholarly' research that is largely driven by confessional interests, subjective eisegesis, and dubious historical assumptions.[11] Avalos is still a lonely voice in the desert, but this may change in the not-too-distant future. Therefore, Biblical Studies would do well to invest some thought into its self-understanding as a historical *and* theological discipline, and to describe more precisely what it offers to the academy. Its genuine, irreplaceable contribution however, is the insistence on the fact that history is not without God and therefore the world is not without God. The fact that the vigorous debate about the plausibility and necessity of theology and religious studies has so far barely impinged upon Biblical Studies (at least as long as it does what is expected from it as "part of a scientific community")[12] should not be taken as an excuse for staying silent. If God's active role in the history of the world is lost in Biblical Studies, no other theological discipline can retrieve it. Theological contributions to ethical, political, ecological and economic discourses are without foundation when God is no more than a story, or, as Markus Bockmuehl puts it, "to the extent that theologians are not answerable to a biblical account of doctrine, their work is no longer based on Christianity's historic creeds and confessions.[13] That a new current has developed within biblical scholarship

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[11] Hector Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2007). His opening sentence leaves no room for doubt: "The only mission of biblical studies should be to end biblical studies as we know it" (1, see also 341). It is worth noting, however, that Avalos's critique is not primarily directed against more conservative scholars or evangelicals (for whom he has no sympathy nevertheless) as he equally (or even more so) scorns liberal and modernist positions. A pleading for a strict division between secular Biblical Studies in the university setting and theological readings of the Bible in ecclesial contexts can be found in Philip Davies, *Whose Bible is it Anyway?* (2nd ed., London: T&T Clark International, 2004); Paddison, *Scripture*, 135, against Davies, argues that the university needs "the witness of theology … to resist adopting a universal perspective on truth in abstraction from particular practices, commitments and the narrative of Scripture" (see also 123–35).

[12] This expectation is most clearly expressed by Tor Egil Førland, "Acts of God? Miracles and Scientific Explanations," *History and Theory* 47 (2008): 483–94: "I suggest that when doing historical research, historians are part of a scientific community; consequently, historiographical explanations must be compatible with accepted scientific beliefs. Whereas many historians and natural scientists in private believe in supernatural entities, *qua* professional members in the scientific community they must subscribe to metaphysical naturalism, which is a basic working hypothesis in the empirical quest of science" (483).

[13] Markus Bockmuehl, "Introduction," in *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics* (ed. idem and Alan J. Torrance; Grand