

New Testament and Mythology

by

Ernest W. Durbin II

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Walter Froese, Ph.D.

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Rudolf Bultmann, a prominent twentieth century German theologian and New Testament scholar, introduced a theological method termed “demythologizing” in his 1941 essay “New Testament and Mythology.” Although he was an astute Biblical scholar, Bultmann’s legacy rests strongly on this essay and his subsequent responses to the criticisms it initiated. The groundbreaking, insightful, and controversial thought contained in the treatise was developed through the confluence of social, philosophical, and theological factors experienced earlier in Bultmann’s life.

In 1884, Rudolf Bultmann was born into a family with ministerial pedigree, his paternal grandfather a missionary, maternal grandfather a minister and his father an Evangelical Lutheran clergymen. As with most Europeans, the Bultmann family was deeply affected by the World Wars of the first half of the twentieth century. One of his brothers was killed World War I, the other a prisoner in a concentration camp in World War II. The disturbing geopolitical circumstances of the first part of the nineteenth century subdued European confidence in liberal theology and the perceived utopian benefits of human progress, now used for destruction rather than the production. Rudolf Bultmann would later become a supporter of the German "Confessing Church" in the 1930’s, signing the Barmen Declaration, the movement’s statement of opposition to Nazism.

Bultmann received his doctorate from the University of Marburg and spent the majority of his career as a professor there. In the course of his studies, and duties as a

professor, Bultmann was influenced by the thoughts of many theologians and biblical scholars, Hermann Gunkel, Johannes Weis, and Adolf Harnack to name a few. Karl Barth and Martin Heidegger, contemporaries of Bultmann, also greatly shaped his existential outlook on life, the latter having the most significant impact. Bultmann's interpretation of existentialism closely associated theological truth and present human experience; truth based not on historical evidence, but on the experience of Christ's eternal presence.

As a New Testament scholar, Bultmann is most remembered for his interpretive method known as "form criticism." Introduced in his first book *The History of Synoptic Tradition*, the concept holds that the material of the Gospels existed first as oral tradition in various "forms" which were conditioned by different circumstances. Bultmann argued that the forms of the New Testament tradition were seldom intended as historical reports but rather shaped by preaching and teaching. As such, the Gospels were not reliable sources for the history of Jesus of Nazareth, being primarily theological not factual. This concept of division between historical fact and theological truth laid the groundwork for his model of demythologizing found in the essay "New Testament and Mythology."<sup>1</sup>

The principle concern of Rudolf Bultmann in his essay "New Testament and Mythology" is the preservation of the New Testament proclamation of truth. Bultmann contends that for the message of the New Testament to be relevant to modern man, it must be removed of its mythological content, which can be a stumbling block to the modern mind. Bultmann's essay is composed of two primary sections, the first describing

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to classroom lecture, many specific details in this introduction to Rudolf Bultmann derived from J. D. Douglas, Philip Wesley Comfort, and Donald Mitchell, *Who's Who in Christian History* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1992), "Rudolf Bultmann".

the problem of mythology in the New Testament and the necessity of “demythologizing,” the second section of discussing specific examples of mythology and the positive effect on faith that demythologizing can engender. Bultman closes his article strongly contending for the concrete, historical and salvific nature of the kerygma, found in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

The foremost problem Rudolf Bultmann finds with the nature of the New Testament is its essentially mythical character. The cosmology and worldview of the New Testament is filled with supernatural activity involving miracles, celestial beings and an antiquated “three-storied structure” (heaven above, hell below), all of which are an affront to modern scientific mentality. Bultmann asserts that as a result of this mythical content, the kerygma could be regarded as obsolete as the antiquated worldview. To accept the first century worldview would be to deny the reality of our everyday life; to expect others to accept the worldview of the New Testament is “to make the Christian faith unintelligible and unacceptable to the modern world.” As examples of these outmoded views Bultmann cites the Biblical doctrine that death is the punishment of sin, the doctrine of atonement, and the physical resurrection of Jesus.

The solution to the problem is to demythologize the kerygma. For Bultmann, the mythical view of the world found in the New Testament must be rejected (or accepted) in its entirety. In this process, nothing can be subtracted from the kerygma, nor can one demythologize the New Testament worldview selectively. Bultmann moves on to define the purpose of myth as the expression of human understanding of ourselves in the world in which we live. Myths are not intended to be an objective picture of the world as it really is, but are an attempt to describe the intangible in terms of forces or visible objects

in reality. Myth, Bultmann contends, “is an expression of man's conviction that the origin and purpose of the world in which he lives are to be sought not within it but beyond it.” As such, the importance of the New Testament message lies not in its world view (mythology) but in “the understanding of existence which it enshrines.” Our faith must not be encumbered by the mythology and imagery of the New Testament worldview.

After establishing the need to demythologize the New Testament, in section two, Bultmann fleshes out the positive affects of the process for the life of faith. He begins by describing human existence apart from faith. Living “for the flesh” is to embrace the material things of life, pursuing human creation and achievement for the sake of some tangible reward. In our attempts to provide visible security for ourselves we collide with others; making us a “slave to anxiety” as we try to hold fast to our life and property. In contrast, Bultmann sees the life of faith as the authentic life; based on unseen, intangible realities and the abandonment of all self-contrived security. The grace of God and forgiveness of sin brings deliverance from the bondage of visible security, the desire after tangible realities, and “the clinging to the transitory objects.” Bultmann understands faith as, “to open ourselves freely to the future” and “turning our backs on self and abandoning all security.” It is a “radical self-commitment to God in the expectation that everything will come from him and nothing from ourselves.” Bultmann proclaims an existential faith is lived in the now “for those who have opened their hearts to the redemptive action of God.”

After providing his eloquent definition of faith, Bultmann closes his thesis by proceeding to tackle the meaning behind the event of the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

Turning his back on mythological interpretations involving sacrificial and judicial analogies, Bultmann regards the cross as the vehicle by which men are not only released from guilt but also from the power of sin. To appropriate this power over sin, we must “make the cross of Christ our own to undergo crucifixion.” Again Bultmann moves the event of the cross to an “ever-present” existential reality in the now. Turning to the resurrection, Bultmann rejects a physical resurrection from the dead as “utterly inconceivable!” The real meaning behind the resurrection is its association with the redemptive event of the cross. The cross and the resurrection must be proclaimed together. Christ is resurrected in the kerygma; the historical event of the resurrection lies in the “Easter faith” of the first disciples, in the apostolic preaching which originated from the event of that day. Hence Bultmann proclaims, “Through the word of preaching the cross and the resurrection are made present: the eschatologically ‘now’ is here.” Bultmann ends the treatise arguing that the transcendence of God should not be allowed to be reduced by myth, but instead being understood as “God being present and active in history.”

Rudolf Bultmann has provoked much debate with his notion of demythologizing. Numerous critics are openly offended by his rejection of the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ. Others find his existential interpretation of the Gospel as more philosophical than theological, complaining he is removed the essence of atonement. Some might complain that demythologizing can potentially know no end, removing all factual history from the Christian faith. Bultmann’s severest critics by and large see his interpretation and view of history as a threat to the faith rather than an advantage.

Those who react so vehemently against Bultmann's conclusions should pause and reflect on whether they are defending the mythology or the kerygma. In no sense does Bultmann wish to relegate the life, crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus to mere historical fact. Rather Bultmann affirms the historical reality of these events while also seeking their intrinsic meaning in the ever-present now of our current existence. It is the proclamation of the saving efficacy of the cross, the kerygma, which impacts our daily lives. We know that Christ lives because of our own personal experience of him, not because his physical resurrection can be proven. Bultmann's call to demythologize is not intended to discredit the Christian faith, but instead contemporize it, assuring it will not be lost in the rejection of a primitive worldview. Unfortunately, in the same way that many outside the faith reject the kerygma in the context of the mythology, many in the community of faith reject Bultmann's contribution in the context of his interpretation of the resurrection. Concentrating on the mythology rather than the message, they fail to understand Bultmann's true intent, to defend the faith in the here and now.

## WORKS CITED

Douglas, J. D., Philip Wesley Comfort, and Donald Mitchell. *Who's Who in Christian History*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1992.