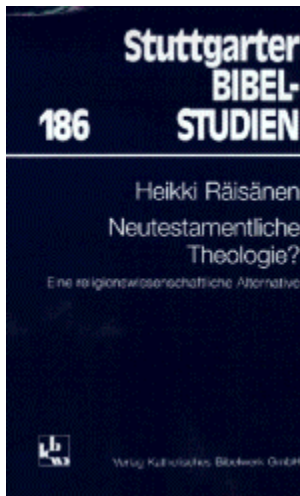


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Räisänen, Heikki

Neutestamentliche Theologie?: Eine religionswissenschaftliche Alternative

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The Finnish scholar Heikki Räisänen reaffirms and further expounds the program he put forward in 1990 in his book entitled *Beyond New Testament Theology* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International). The manuscript of the German study was ready by 1992, but unexpected delays in publication enabled him to rework it (see foreword, p. 9) and to include references to many recent works, such as the German *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* by Hans Hübner (3 vols.) and a work of the same title by Peter Stuhlmacher (2 vols.).

The title clearly indicates Räisänen's aim: he proposes that New Testament theologies can be attempted in a church (seminary) environment, but in the academy an alternative discipline should be practiced, one that can be characterized as a history of religions enterprise (see also his appendix concerning "actualization" [108-10]). Räisänen praises William Wrede for his 1897 study in which he pleaded for a strictly historical enterprise that should attempt to describe the religion and theology of the early Christians. Räisänen affirms that until the recent work of Gerd Theissen, *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion* (the updated German version was published in 2000), Wrede's proposal has not been put into practice. Räisänen is not fully satisfied with Theissen's concrete attempt either, even less by some other recent attempts (e.g., by Georg Strecker; Klaus Berger). Thus he restates his own program. His main interest lies in scholars who attempted a synthesis of early Christian thought or the early Christian thought-world, *Gedankenwelt*.

Räisänen's work is divided into two main parts: first he summarizes the history of the discipline of New Testament theology ("Zur Geschichte der 'neutestamentlichen Theologie' "); then he puts forward his own alternative ("Zur grundsätzlichen Problematik").

The historical survey is divided into three chapters. In chapter 1, Räisänen discusses the main representatives of the discipline of New Testament theology to around 1980 (12-31), from Gabler through the earlier scholars such as Baur, Wrede, and Bousset, to Bultmann and his pupils. He then turns to some scholars whose works are characterized by a salvation-historical approach (e.g., Cullmann, Kümmel, Goppelt). Räisänen briefly mentions scholars from the Catholic Church: Schlier and Schelkle. All the discussions are brief. They focus on a number of key problem areas. For example, there is a tension between the viewpoint of theology and that of a history of religions approach. It can happen that a scholar draws theological conclusions that are not consistent with his or her own historical analysis (e.g., Windisch [19]). Another question is whether one can confine one's research to the canonical writings. Räisänen argues that in a church context the effective history of the texts can be an argument for their special status, but in an academic setting the canon cannot be accepted as a limit to the scope of the inquiry; rather, all early Christian literature has to be taken into account. Räisänen affirms that most of the scholars mix their own theological agendas in with their historical work. This threatens the results of the reconstruction. Räisänen frequently uses the term "modernizing" in a pejorative sense. He probably means that the "modern" biases of the scholar can prevent him or her from understanding the experiences reflected in the biblical texts. This danger can be avoided if we opt for a distinction between two levels: a historical analysis of the thought-world of the early Christians and a theological reflection of the scholar on his or her own historical results.

Räisänen fails to take account of another possibility. One could argue that focusing on the canonical books can be justified if the historian finds that the early Christians defined their identity by a group of sacred writings (which were later called "canonical"). If, for example, the orthodox wing, the followers of Marcion, and the Montanists created their own separate "canons," then it is justifiable to focus on any one of these canons (for this possibility, see my thesis, *Challenges to New Testament Theology: An Attempt to Justify the Enterprise* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998]).

In the second chapter of part 1, Räisänen points out that in recent research there is a growing interest in a history of religions approach. For example, Räisänen draws on works of Dunn and others to point out the differences or the plurality in the theological content of the early Christian writings (32). Walter Bauer's thesis concerning the early presence of what was later called "heresy" is reaffirmed. This point is used as a further argument to reject the possibility of distinguishing between orthodoxy and heresy among the early Christians. Köster not only emphasized the necessity of studying all early

Christian literature; he also broke with the usual organizing principle of major authors or groups of writings and structured his monograph according to geographical area (33). Petzke claimed that exegetical work should not have a normative character; rather, it should be an informative discipline (34). Räsänen agrees with the recent work of Rowland, who describes early Christianity as the most significant messianic sect of Judaism. This short chapter in Räsänen's work makes a number of valid points. These observations support Räsänen's thesis that it is wise to separate a descriptive task from another task, that of the scholar's own theological evaluation of the data. However, the observations do not exclude the possibility of describing the theological content of one particular group of early Christian writings.

In the third chapter Räsänen summarizes the present situation at some length (38-66). He discusses recent works of, among others, Adam, Watson, and Balla, some biblical theologies of the New Testament (e.g., Childs, Stuhlmacher, Hübner), New Testament theologies (e.g., Thüsing, Caird, Gnlika, Strecker), history of theologies of early Christianity (K. Berger, Schmithals), and some further syntheses (Wright, Teeple, Goulder, Vouga, Theissen). These discussions are decidedly more detailed than those of the first two chapters. However, Räsänen often states his disapproval rather than argues against the views he disapproves of. It seems that if a scholar finds unity in the New Testament, he or she is suspected of "harmonizing." One wonders why the only acceptable result of scholarship is disharmony among early Christians. Räsänen should acknowledge that the texts are open to different interpretations. It is a matter of course that in a short, programmatic work one cannot go into detail concerning underlying arguments, but Räsänen should differentiate between a view that is only stated and one that is also supported by arguments, be it his own view or someone else's.

In the second part of his work Räsänen summarizes the issues involved in attempting a synthesis of early Christian thought on the basis of a history of religions approach. In the first chapter of this part he rightly warns his readers that even within the field of history of religions there is no consensus among the scholars whether one should include a transcendental aspect in the focus of study. Consistent with his own approach, Räsänen sides with those who argue that an "irrational dimension" cannot be made the subject of empirical study; rather, it belongs to a second, theological-philosophical level (68, 73).

In the second chapter of part 2, Räsänen reaffirms in a thematic structure the key characteristics of the enterprise he proposes. Some of the points included here had already been made in the course of the historical survey; nevertheless, it is helpful to see the alternatives in a clear presentation. Räsänen pleads for an "informative" discipline that is addressed also to members of other religions or to nonreligious people. The discipline should not be confined to the church. Räsänen is right in insisting that the discipline should focus on historical arguments and not on the dogmas of the church. One should add, however, that the result of the inquiry should not be anticipated. If at certain points a historical descriptive inquiry comes to results that are close to what the church

has traditionally held, these results should not be disqualified from research as “suspicious” (see, e.g., 79).

Räisänen is right in emphasizing that the thought-world of the early Christians can be summarized even by a nonbeliever. Every scholar should reflect on his or her own attitude to the sources and on his or her place in the line of a long effective history of the text. A call for a certain “distance” from one’s own convictions and for “fair play” is in place (92, 94). Nevertheless, Stuhlmacher’s call for an openness toward the subject of one’s field of research, in this case, to the religious or “faith” aspects of the texts, can also be argued for. Fair play is called for on all sides.

A short third chapter in this part is entitled “A Dialectical Model” (100-107). In a dialogue with Peter Berger’s view on experience, Räisänen argues that the thought-world of the early Christians was a result of an interplay among old traditions shared by the early Christians, their new experiences, and their interpretation of their experiences in order to maintain some continuity with the traditions and at the same time to account for the new experiences. We can add that this emphasis can be maintained even within a New Testament theology, if we define theology to include religious thoughts as well as experiences related to them.

To sum up, the subtitle of Räisänen’s book is right: he has put forward an alternative to the discipline of New Testament theology. This alternative has in view as addressee anyone who is interested in the origins of a religion that has had a strong influence upon history up to most recent times. Räisänen’s enterprise does not limit its inquiry to the canonical writings. The scholar’s own theological evaluation does not belong in the historical, descriptive task; rather, it belongs in a separate treatment, a second “level” of the inquiry. However, as long as one can put forward arguments in favor of a historical reconstruction that there was an early Christian group that identified itself with a group of sacred writings and that there is at least a basic unity underlying these writings, another alternative remains: New Testament theology can be maintained as a historical enterprise with the aim of describing the theological content of those writings. “Theology” should have a wide meaning: it should include not only the thoughts of the early Christians (as Räisänen himself rightly insists) but also their religious experiences. But the term in the name of the discipline should not include the “theology” of the present-day scholar. If the latter is included, then it is not an “alternative” to New Testament theology but rather a “separate” enterprise. Räisänen has made a point that does not necessarily depend on some of his other observations concerning the discipline. The discussion is expected to continue.