CHAPTER FOUR

SALVATION-HISTORY IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

An Example of Biblical Theology

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I. Introduction

1. Biblical Theology

The term 'biblical theology' may be construed in two ways. On the one hand the adjective 'biblical' conveys conformity with the content of the Bible, that is, it can be used in the same way as the qualifying adjective 'Lutheran'. On the other hand 'biblical' may also be taken as a precise definition of the theology in question, in casu the one contained in the Bible; it is of course in this sense it will be used in the following about biblical theology. Even so, the adjective 'biblical' will have to be more clearly defined, depending on how the relationship between the Old and the New Testament is understood. According to the so-called 'new Tübingen School', represented in the first place by Hartmut Gese and Peter Stuhlmacher, the word 'biblical' signifies that the two testaments represent a joint development of traditions, which virtually comprise a continuum, that is, a unity. In the following I shall consider the relationship between the Old and the New Testament from the opposite viewpoint, namely that the Jewish Bible de facto became another book


when it was taken over by the Christian Church. Discontinuity came to overshadow the continuity.3

The reason for this was that the tradition, which only gradually was set down in writing in the various New Testament books, was primarily created by and dependent on faith in Christ. This means that the very existence of the communities that created and handed down this tradition is of the utmost importance when it comes to understanding what biblical theology embodies. Whatever the New Testament writings may represent, they also express individual attempts - primarily based on Holy Writ - to legitimize any Christian community's right to see itself as the fulfilment of the biblical promises, as possessing the key to a true understanding of the Jewish Bible and as the chosen people incorporating both Jewish and Gentile Christians. All New Testament books were written with a view to the life of these Christians and the preaching to them. To put it differently, they were not directed at an unqualified audience, on the contrary they spoke to people already familiar with the conditions of congregational life and the content of Christian faith. Because they had been baptized, they belonged to the people of the new covenant. Each in its own way the New Testament writings represent attempts to evoke and interpret the common basis, be it the Jewish Bible, the Jesus-tradition or a more catechism-like ethical teaching. In this mediation process the various authors seem like theologians. This not only applies to the author of the Gospel of John, who, in this connection, is usually paralleled with Paul; it applies as much to the other evangelists. It goes without saying that such implicit prerequisites cannot be left unconsidered, for if we did so, our interpretation of the various writings would go awry.

2. Salvation-history

The concept known as 'salvation-history' presupposes that salvation has a history, i.e. is manifest in a chain of events in which one state of things replaces another. One may also say that salvation is manifested in historical events which, thanks to their interpretation, are given the impress of revelation. New Testament theology characteristically consists in interpretations of the acts and fate of an historical person. Jesus of Nazareth is not only seen as the preacher of an eternal and unchangeable message, but his very person, his sufferings and death are irretrievably

3 Cf Ernst Haenchen, "Das alte "Neue Testament" und das neue "Alte Testament"" in idem, Die Bibel und Wir. Gesammelte Aufsätze 2 (Tübingen, 1968), 13-27: 18, where it is said, that it is an unfamiliar thought for most evangelical Christians and exegetes, "daß das in seinem ursprünglichen Sinn verstandene Alte Testament noch nie zum christlichen Kanon gehört hat." I owe thanks for this reference to professor Otfried Hofius, Tübingen.