In 1953, Rudolf Bultmann’s famous *Theology of the New Testament* was completed and published with Mohr Siebeck in Tübingen. Almost exactly fifty years later, in February 2003 (even though 2002 is given as the year of publication), Ferdinand Hahn’s *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* was released by the same publisher in two massive volumes of more than eight hundred pages each. This may be a mere coincidence. However, in view of the scholarly weight of Hahn’s work as a comprehensive sum of (predominantly German) critical New Testament scholarship of the second half of the twentieth century, the comparison seems to be appropriate. After only two years, a second, corrected edition, enriched by a new preface and an index of subjects, was published. In the meantime, the work is being translated into Korean and Japanese, and in spite of its length, an English translation would be highly desirable, since there is no comparable work in English-speaking scholarship up to the present.

Ferdinand Hahn (born 1926), a former student of Günther Bornkamm in Heidelberg and thus an academic “grandson” of Bultmann, held the chair of New Testament at the Protestant Theological Faculty at the University of Munich until his retirement in 1993.
To English readers, he is known from his books *The Titles of Jesus in Christology* (London: Lutterworth, 1969) and *Mission in the New Testament* (SBT 47; London: SCM, 1965); for decades he has also served, for example, as editor of the commentary series *Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar* (KEK). During the last thirty or thirty-five years, Hahn has focused on the preparation of his *Theology of the New Testament*. Tentatively he started with different way of arranging the material until he found the pioneering solution he finally elaborated. In preparation for this work and for further argument of many details, Hahn has also written numerous articles, which were published on the occasion of his eightieth birthday in two other massive volumes *Studien zum Neuen Testament* (WUNT 191–192; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006). The *Theologie* as the final and comprehensive result of his life of research and teaching arrives at novel and groundbreaking solutions to the basic problems of the genre of a New Testament theology.

**DIVERSITY AND UNITY**

At the end of the eighteenth century, interpreters called for a “biblical,” different from “dogmatic,” theology. The teaching of the Bible should be explained by use of the historical method and without dogmatic presuppositions. The new approach inevitably led to further distinction between different types of teaching or even different “theologies” within the Bible and within the New Testament. So, the problem of diversity and unity was posed from the very beginning of writing a “theology” of the New Testament in the early nineteenth century. The question was, then, whether any coherence or even “unity” could be maintained within the *diversity* of ideas, concepts, and theologies as demonstrated by critical exegesis. But from the beginning of the discipline, authors of a New Testament theology also felt obliged to ask for the whole of the message of the New Testament, its unity, or at least its central teaching. Such a unity could either be a mere postulate; others tried to find it by some kind of harmonizing or systematizing interpretation. Others thought it was rooted in the religion of Jesus; others, such as Rudolf Bultmann, came to the view that any kind of unity within the diversity could not be demonstrated. For Bultmann himself, the “theology of the New Testament” could only be found through the lens of existential interpretation in the theologies of Paul and John.

As Rudolf Bultmann has stated in his *epilegomena*, reconstruction and interpretation are the two interests at work in writing a New Testament theology. For Bultmann himself, interpretation became the dominant task, with the consequence that the historical contexts and developments or simply the chronological sequence were often neglected. On the other hand, advocates of a primarily historical approach following up William Wrede tried to arrive at a mere description of the development of early Christian religion, with the consequence the exposition of the theological claims of the New Testament texts.
was weakened considerably. Between Wrede and Bultmann, New Testament theologies are all struggling with the double task of historical reconstruction and theological exposition and interpretation, between the description of mere diversity and the search for coherence, unity, or even the truth.

A NOVEL ARRANGEMENT OF THE MATERIAL

This is the context of discussion in which the achievements of Ferdinand Hahn’s *Theologie* should be seen. Most important is the novel architecture of the work as a whole. Earlier works of this genre were written according to a more systematic approach (or according to the loci of classical dogmatics), but most of the important works since Bultmann arranged their material in a roughly historical or tradiitiohistorical manner, from the teaching of Jesus (if this was included) down to the theology of Paul, the Synoptics, John, and the later New Testament writings. This is the common structure of the New Testament theologies by, for example, Hans Conzelmann, Leonhard Goppelt, Joachim Gnilka, Georg Strecker, or even Peter Stuhlmacher. They all arrived at a kind of *Theologiegeschichte* even if there was a kind of summary or comprehensive reflection at the end. But when the material was structured according to the historical or tradiitiohistorical development, the issue of the unity within the diversity could easily fall out of view. At best it is discussed in a more or less marginal last paragraph, but the architecture is clearly dominated by the plurality of “theologies” exposed side by side.

This is the challenge Hahn perceived very clearly, and in order to solve the problems he arrives at a completely new “double structure” that combines historical consciousness of the variety of New Testament thought and the systematic intention to ask for the unity within the diversity. It is the concept of two complementary volumes:

Hahn’s first volume, *Die Vielfalt des Neuen Testaments*, provides a history of early Christian theology in an arrangement that is quite similar to other works of the genre. After a preliminary paragraph, Hahn discusses the preaching and work of Jesus and its reception by the early community. Then he exposes the preaching and theology of the earliest Christian communities (the Aramaic primitive community and the Hellenistic-Jewish community); after that he extensively discusses the theology of Paul the apostle. The next chapters discuss the theology of the Pauline school, the theological concepts of non-Pauline Hellenistic-Jewish-Christian texts (James, 1 Peter, Hebrews, Revelation), the theological concepts of the Synoptics and of Acts, and the Johannine theology. The last chapter discusses the transition to the second century. Here Hahn discusses the problem of the noncanonical texts and the concepts of Jude and 2 Peter and, interestingly, the apostolic fathers.
The second volume, *Die Einheit des Neuen Testaments*, provides a complementary account of New Testament themes. Here we find the most important achievements of Hahn’s work. Being fully aware of the historical variety, Hahn provides a discussion of the major theological themes, which is structured roughly according to the chapters of classical dogmatics, but in detail he is committed to meet the structure and concepts of the New Testament traditions and texts. After a closer discussion of the overall task, the quest for the unity of the New Testament, he starts with a discussion of the Old Testament as the Bible of early Christianity; a second part highlights God’s revelatory work in Jesus Christ, including the notion of the self-revealing God, the realization of his kingdom, numerous aspects of Christology, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the implicit Trinitarian structure of the New Testament revelation. A third part discusses the soteriological dimensions of God’s revealing work. Here the idea of the human being as creation and sinner, the problem of the law, salvation (and the different interpretations of Jesus’ death), and the gospel as proclamation and representation of the salvation are discussed. A fourth part broadly considers the ecclesiological dimension of the revelatory work: faith and discipleship (with the different concepts of the people of God, body of Christ, and church in the New Testament), baptism, Eucharist, prayer, confession and worship, charisms and leadership, the mission among Jews and Gentiles, and the foundations of Christian life. A brief last part discusses New Testament eschatology and adds concluding reflections on the unity of the New Testament as convergence and divergence regarding the different themes.

This double structure of New Testament theology is developed to carry out the double task of New Testament theology (and to solve the problems of the genre). With his arrangement Hahn can maintain that New Testament theology is a *historical* discipline that must describe the concepts and structures of thought of various authors as well as the development of early Christian traditions in a historical perspective (vol. 1). But he can also sustain the idea that New Testament theology should seek theological subjects and the whole of the teaching of the New Testament with the goal of summing up New Testament thought in a way so that other theological disciplines can take them up for further discussion. Even though biblical exegesis is all but a simple “maid” (*ancilla*) of dogmatic or practical theology, New Testament theology must provide contributions that can be adopted and used within a broader discussion in theology, church, or society. In Hahn’s own academic biography, a very important field has always been the ecumenical process (chiefly between Roman Catholics and Protestants) in which the exegetical discussion on the common biblical basis and its different types of reception have provided major progress within the last four or five decades. But this could happen only on the presupposition that exegesis (peculiarly New Testament theology) is not only
occupied with historical details that seem to be completely irrelevant for contemporaries but is also prepared to take responsibility for churches and society.

The concept developed by Hahn is influenced by a brief article of Heinrich Schlier, a former student of Rudolf Bultmann who later converted to Roman Catholicism, from 1957: “Über Sinn und Aufgabe einer Theologie des Neuen Testaments.” In reaction to Bultmann’s work, Schlier had claimed that the task of “New Testament theology” (which is, notably, a singular) is not only to put the different types of teaching or the different “theologies” side by side but also to search for and, as far as possible, to demonstrate the coherence of the New Testament thought, as it is rooted in the earliest confessions or in the common worship of Christ. Such a view is strongly opposed to a position that tries to find divergence or pluralism from the very beginning (as, e.g., represented by Helmut Koester and J. M. Robinson). One might suspect that Hahn’s approach is more dogmatic, since it is more in line with the theological tradition, but we should not overlook the hermeneutical circle: a purely historical approach without any interferences from contemporary thought or application interests is impossible in this field, and the more “traditional” enterprise to demonstrate a fundamental coherence within New Testament concepts is not more “dogmatic” than the “postmodern” or even “antidogmatic attempt to detect plurality and theological diversity already at the roots of the earliest Jesus movement.

If the reader is aware of that hermeneutical circle, he or she simply must conclude that Hahn has done a remarkable job in his work. He has achieved an arrangement that is unparalleled in earlier works of this genre. He is sensitive to the multiplicity of New Testament concepts, and it would be absolutely contrary to his scholarly ethos if the variety of approaches was darkened by any kind of undue harmonization. Therefore, even his thematic syntheses openly state that there are not only convergences but also major divergences, tensions, and even contradictions between different texts and authors, most clearly concerning ecclesiological or eschatological themes but also between the different ways of interpreting Jesus’ death, the various positions taken toward the nature of faith, the Jewish law, and so forth. In his concluding reflection, Hahn clearly states that not all theological questions are solved within the New Testament and that the subjects where a fundamental difference remains provide the challenge of further reflection and discussion. Such openness is a sign of honest critical scholarship.

**MAJOR DECISIONS**

It is not possible to discuss all the major decisions taken by Hahn in his extensive work. I can just point to a number of important issues:
1. A first decision concerning volume 1 is that Hahn discusses the preaching, acts, and death of Jesus (and also the preaching and history of John the Baptist) as an integral part of New Testament theology. Contrary to Bultmann, Conzelmann, or Strecker, he states that the quest for Jesus is necessary and theologically relevant and that—according to historical insights—the kingdom of God was already inaugurated within Jesus’ works, so that the presence of salvation could already be experienced during his earthly mission, not only in the kerygma of the post-Easter community. On the other hand, Hahn considers the fact that the reconstruction of the historical Jesus is only possible through the lens of post-Easter traditions and that the canonical texts all take a post-Easter perspective. Therefore, a theologically valid picture cannot be achieved by the reconstruction of the “purely” historical Jesus but only if the reception of the pre-Easter traditions within the post-Easter community is also taken into consideration. Contrary to the view of numerous older and more recent interpreters, he maintains the view that the historical Jesus cannot be the only and decisive criterion for every later theology but that the post-Easter process of reception and interpretation, the insights gained from the new reading of Scripture and by the work of the Spirit, have their own theological right and must be considered as well. On the other hand, the historical quest for the earthly Jesus, his life and death and their historical setting, is theologically necessary, since the kerygma is fundamentally related to the story of his life and death that happened at a certain time and place in history.

Therefore, Hahn practices a double movement in every part of his reconstruction of Jesus’ history. The analytical reconstruction of Jesus’ preaching, acts, and passion is complemented by a reflection of the post-Easter reception of those traditions. In his analysis, Hahn adopts the established criteria for the historical reconstruction and maintains the clear distinction between pre-Easter and post-Easter traditions. But by the synthetic description of the later reception of the pre-Easter traditions he is able to check the historical plausibility of his analysis and to avoid the reductionism of some approaches of Jesus research. Without any loss of historical clarity, the links between the post-Easter confession and the work of the earthly Jesus are made visible, so that Hahn can take up the fact that all New Testament texts stress the unity between the earthly Jesus and the risen or exalted Christ of confession.

2. In his discussion of the proclamation and theology of the primitive community, Hahn maintains the distinction between the Aramaic and the Hellenistic Jewish-Christian community. But in correction of his earlier views (as exposed, e.g., in his dissertation on the titles of Jesus), he now admits that both communities are not consecutive stages of a linear development but more probably contemporary (see Acts 6:1–7) and possibly interrelated. Here Hahn acknowledges the historical argument of Martin Hengel and others, but in spite of that he maintains the view that different types of preaching and of
theology can be distinguished, especially regarding the Jewish law and the concept of mission.

3. The extensive exposition of Paul’s theology (150 pages) is preceded by cautious methodological reflections. In discussion with other approaches, Hahn does not begin with the teaching on God or sinful humankind, nor with Christology, soteriology, or eschatology, but with the proclamation of the gospel as the fulfillment of the salvation as promised in the Old Testament. From here he can go on to Paul’s proclamation of Christ, to the recognition of the human being and of sin, to the gospel as power of salvation (including the doctrine of justification), as the foundation of Christian life, as the salvific message for the world, and as a witness of hope. This structure is different from the traditional sequence of the loci of classical dogmatics but certainly more suitable for Paul’s thought, in which everything is based in the revelation of Christ as viewed against the background of Israel’s Scriptures. Hahn is quite skeptical against the more recent attempts to reconstruct a linear development within Paul’s ideas (see also in his Studien, 2:271–98). This is, in my view, largely correct, because the time span covered by the extant epistles is too small, compared with the time in which Paul had lived and worked as a missionary and theologian before. So we should rather assume that the main development of his ideas happened earlier, in the “unknown years” (as Martin Hengel phrased) between Damascus and Antioch, against the background of Paul’s previous life and education. In his view of Paul’s attitude toward the Jewish law, Hahn takes a moderate position: there is no abrogation of the law but also a clear distance from other Jewish approaches, since for Paul “fulfillment” of the law is possible only where freedom from sin is achieved, and this is possible only through Christ. Some readers might infer that Hahn does not take much notice of the so-called “New Perspective” on Paul (which has actually come to the age of twenty-five and is no longer “new” in the strictest sense), but there are good reasons for his own theological interpretation. Hahn is quite aware of the function of circumcision and law as “boundary markers,” but he maintains, correctly, in my view, that Paul’s wrestling with the law is not only a matter of mission strategy but is also based on much more fundamental christological and anthropological insights. So, the Pauline texts deserve to be interpreted theologically. In view of the Pauline texts, other approaches, including the more recent “cultural” views, must remain insufficient.

4. In Hahn’s theology the Deutero-Pauline and other later epistles receive broad consideration. This is rather unusual for a Protestant theologian, in view of the longstanding scholarly tradition of favoring the “original” Paul and viewing the later developments as examples of a decline toward “early catholicism.” Against the background of Hahn’s own thorough criticism of these views (by Ernst Käsemann and others), Hahn acknowledges the theological value of the later New Testament texts and cautiously interprets each concept in its own right. This is also a fruit of the ongoing ecumenical
dialogue and an example of consciousness of the history of reception within early Christianity. Hahn distinguishes between different traditions and teaching types within the Pauline school (2 Thessalonians; Colossians and Ephesians; Pastorals) and other texts from Hellenistic Jewish-Christianity that are not in the line of Pauline theology. All these approaches are important, because in their variety they represent the search for the appropriate teaching and debates during the formation of the church within the postapostolic period. Their ideas are also considered within volume 2 in the major chapters on ecclesiology, leadership structures, and ethics.

5. A very important chapter of about 150 pages is the exposition of the Johannine theology. Hahn is rather cautious in distinguishing between different strata within the Fourth Gospel (e.g., in the Farewell Discourses), but he maintains that there were later additions not only in John 21 but also in John 5:28–29; 6:39, 40, 44, and 51c–58 (for the contradicting view of this reviewer, see J. Frey, Die johanneische Eschatologie [3 vols.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997–2000]). The Johannine Epistles are read as later products of the Johannine school. For Hahn, the Johannine tradition adopts early Christian traditions but remains independent from the Synoptic Gospels. While these introductory issues may be viewed quite differently, the line of Hahn’s theological interpretation (which was developed by his academic teacher Günther Bornkamm) deserves attentive consideration. In his view, the Johannine story of Jesus was consciously written from a post-Easter interpretive perspective dominated by the Spirit-Paraclete. This perspective and the related hermeneutical process of deeper understanding is overtly described in John 2:22 and 12:16. It is the source of the Johannine image of Christ. In numerous passages the pre-Easter situation of Jesus and the disciples and the post-Easter problems and insights of the community are “blended” or amalgamated so that a reconstruction of the historical data is made almost impossible. By narrating the story of Jesus in a way that is sensitive to the fears of the addressees and by the conscious melding of the horizons of Jesus’ time and the time of the community, the Fourth Gospel can provide an image of Christ in which the “states” of the preexistent, the incarnate, and the exalted Christ are always viewed together, with the result that the earthly Jesus already acts with the authority of the risen and exalted one.

6. At the end of volume 1 Hahn feels the need to cross the borders of the New Testament canon. In the chapter on the transition to the history of theology in the second century, he not only discusses Jude and 2 Peter but also the apostolic fathers as documents of a period of transition. The canon cannot provide any restrictions for historical insights and the description of historical developments, even though it is the basis for phrasing theologically normative insights (in vol. 2). Apocryphal texts are not included, due to the conviction that they are basically later than the New Testament texts. This is also held for the Gospel of Thomas, which is, in my view correctly, viewed as a gnosticizing
reinterpretation of early Christian sayings that must be dated clearly in the second century, not in an earlier, or even pre-Synoptic, period.

7. In volume 2 Hahn chooses a structure that is roughly oriented at the structure of thought he had developed in the exposition of Paul’s theology in volume 1. This is not a mere coincidence: Paul’s theology remains the core of New Testament theology. In contrast with other thematic approaches, it seems quite appropriate that Hahn starts with a discussion of the Old Testament as Scripture and canon, as witness to God’s prior acting and as promise of eschatological salvation and completion. He discusses the types of scriptural interpretation in the New Testament and the relevance of the new Christian reception of Israel’s Scriptures. With these chapters Hahn takes up central interests of a “biblical theology,” even though he did not write a “Biblical Theology of the New Testament.” He is very aware of the early Jewish background of primitive Christianity and of the relevance of early Jewish texts for New Testament interpretation, but he also decidedly states that the new events produced a radical reinterpretation and that the scriptures of Israel were subject to an interpretatio Christiana that made a difference from their original meaning and from contemporary Jewish readings. However, within present Jewish-Christian relations, he also states that the Christian reading of the Scriptures does not abolish their pre-Christian character and their meaning and function for the Jewish community.

9. Against the background of the reflections on scripture and interpretation, Hahn exposes God’s revelation in Jesus Christ within a Trinitarian structure. He discusses the notion of the self-revealing God, the realization of his kingdom, and, in an extensive and insightful christological chapter, Jesus Christ as the revealer of God. After a very helpful sketch of New Testament pneumatology, Hahn gives evidence for a Trinitarian structure of the New Testament witness. He points to texts such as 1 Cor 12:4–6; 2 Cor 13:13; Matt 28:19; Rev 1:4–5; and 1 John 5:7–8 and demonstrates that these texts and others (e.g., the Paraclete sayings in John) form the basis for the later development of doctrine, even though there is no Trinitarian doctrine within the New Testament texts.

10. Contrary to, for example, Bultmann, Hahn maintains the view that the New Testament teaching of Christ is not only meant to be soteriological, insofar as it affects the relation between Christ and humans, but also christological, as a teaching of Christ’s “person” and dignity. In confession and doxology, narration and christological reflection, New Testament authors express in manifold ways who Christ “is.” Even though some of these assertions may thought to be “mythological,” New Testament theology has to reconstruct these views of Christ, starting with the “implicit” Christology in Jesus’ words and works and developed in numerous christological formula and “titles” in post-Easter time. A “high” Christology (asserting Christ as a preexistent being and mediator of the creation)
is developed already in pre-Pauline hymns (Phil 2:6–11; cf. Col 1:15, etc.) and asserted in Paul, in Hebrews, and, most distinctively, in John. Even though there are numerous and divergent views on Jesus’ earthly origins, his life and work, his exaltation and parousia, the various christological concepts converge in their reception of the Jesus tradition and their fundamental relation with the work of Jesus. The different aspects of New Testament Christology can be exposed in concentric circles departing from the event of Jesus’ cross and resurrection. In such an interpretation, the tensions and different nuances remain important but provide the challenge for further reflection on their relevance. For Christology, Hahn can state that, in spite of the plurality of views, there is a clear convergence that allows one to seek a fundamental unity. So Christology functions as a kind of “test case” for the question for unity as posed in Hahn’s volume 2. And, admittedly, here the center is more clearly visible than in the chapters on other New Testament themes.

11. With almost three hundred pages, the section on New Testament ecclesiology is the broadest one within volume 2. This is not only due to the sheer number of themes that are included here, beginning from faith, the notion of the church, baptism, and Eucharist down to the structure of leadership and church offices and also the aspects of early Christian ethics. One might ask whether the issue of individual and community ethics should have been discussed within a separate part, but this is related to the vibrant issue of the relation between dogmatics and ethics within theology, and one should not expect an exegete to solve all these issues. In most of the paragraphs on ecclesiological themes, there is a broader variety of views or solutions due to the different community situations in which the texts were written. But Hahn is also able to show the fundamental coherence of the early Christian views on baptism or Eucharist and also the interrelatedness of the different patterns of community order and offices developed toward the end of the first century.

12. In his concluding paragraph Hahn reflects the problem of unity and diversity again. Although tensions remain, such as in the concept of faith, in eschatological expectations, or between different types of community structure, it is possible to demonstrate a fundamental convergence, or even unity, in New Testament theology that is rooted in the notion of revelation and in the understanding of God’s salvific work in Christ. In his concluding remarks Hahn states, contrary to Bultmann and many others, that it is possible to show the inner unity of the New Testament message. Such a unity is not only an aprioristic postulate, nor can it be achieved by harmonization. In Hahn’s volume 2 it is made visible by a sensitive interpretation of the various theological concepts and themes, by a careful evaluation of the tensions, their reason and relevance, and by the application of the principle of a “hierarchy of truths” (which is taken from the more recent Roman Catholic theology).
CONCLUDING REMARKS

Of course, numerous details of such a “sum” could be viewed differently. But such a work deserves to be measured according to its basic achievements. In the context of the scholarly debate sketched above, the comprehensiveness of the work, the innovative arrangement of the material, and the vigorous and patient search for the coherence between the various concepts determine Hahn’s magisterial work to be a landmark for every further discussion. In spite of its length, it is written in a very condensed and clear German style, without footnotes. Many parts especially in volume 2 are simply lucid collections of the relevant New Testament material, accessibly structured for study and teaching. Scholarly works such as this can only grow and mature in decades, on the basis of lifelong academic research and teaching. Hahn’s *Theologie* truly stands in a line with the “big” works of the genre, the “theologies” of Baur, Holtzmann, and Bultmann. The two volumes by Hahn are a “must” for every biblical scholar or teacher occupied with the New Testament and its theology.