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I recall reading what I refer to as an alarmist review of New Testament studies in 2007. *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* by Markus Bochmuehl (Baker Academic, 2006) was a careful examination of where our discipline was headed and a call to reform or become obsolete. It was alarming if not overstated.

Thomas Hatina’s *New Testament Theology and Its Quest for Relevance* sounds similar alarms for the future of New Testament theology. In what is perhaps the most exhaustive and painstaking review of the subdiscipline to date (compare with G. F. Hasel’s *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* [Eerdmans, 1978]), Hatina is concerned with relevance: Will the message of the New Testament have any value or relevance in the twenty-first century not only to people of faith but for society at large? This tension has been with us at least since the mid-twentieth century, when Bultmann despaired of much of his historical reconstructive work as having a marginal value for the church and began a program of demythologization that hoped to rediscover something lasting, something normative that we can carry from the New Testament into the church or world. Hatina quotes Bultmann from 1951 (Hatina, 163) and shows how the tension within the discipline has always been between reconstruction and interpretation. He further believes that, because the world has changed (an “enchanted” worldview has given way to a “disenchanted” worldview), our thoroughgoing secular age requires us to reformulate what we are saying about the New Testament. Bultmann found his solution
in an existentialism that he felt had universal value. Hatina finds his in religion as framed by the social sciences.

Hatina (using the language of Gerhard Ebeling) explains that New Testament theology has basically worked with two different methodologies: the foundationalist and the dialectical. The first tries to discover unifying theological themes in the New Testament “from the ground up,” that is, using exegetical data that discovers the intent of the author/text, then reconstructs the original message of the New Testament. Scholars such as G. B. Caird, G. Stecker, I. H. Marshall, and F. Thielman each represent this school. Hatina believes that this view has not only brought the disciple to the brink of collapse (27), but it also has diminishing relevance for the modern world, is naïve in its understanding of religious knowledge, and cannot helpfully contribute to the interfaith dialogue that our world needs today. To that end, Hatina devotes an entire chapter (43–80) outlining its flaws. There are many, but one here will suffice: foundationalists work hard to find unity within the New Testament, but this denies the inevitable development and diversity that is present there. Even the canonical gospels themselves betray this tension. In the end, while this approach represents the beginnings of the discipline, its efforts are today misplaced (79). In chapter 4 Hatina shows how within this category two techniques are common: a chronological reconstruction of New Testament theology (W. G. Kummel, J. Jeremias) or an author-by-author approach (I. H. Marshall, G. B. Caird). Both are shown to be wanting.

The second approach seeks to do theology from the “top down.” That is, it tries to think theologically about those categories we need to recover from the text and sets out on a quest for relevant meaning. Some refer to this as subjective, prescriptive, existential, or interpretative, but the goal is to find useful categories drawn from external sources. Here the categories may be drawn from a salvation-history paradigm (O. Cullmann, G. Ladd, L. Goppelt, N. T. Wright), dogmatic or systematic theology (A. Schlatter, A. Richardson, K. Schelkle), or existentialism (R. Bultmann, H. Conzelmann). Each of these has its unique difficulties: some (particularly Wright’s massive program) neglect the diversity and development of New Testament thought, while others seem to impose on the New Testament categories that are foreign to it and spring from dogmatic considerations. Rather, Hatina asks, should not the central categories of the study originate from the New Testament itself, such as kingdom of God or resurrection? Ironically, this is a criticism of the dogmatic school, yet it is precisely what Ladd did with great care (A Theology of the New Testament, 1974, 1993). Nevertheless, Ladd is dismissed decisively (143–44).

Hatina shows us in his history of interpretation (83–118) that there has never been a consensus in the church regarding the problem of reconstruction and interpretation. From the patristic period right through the Enlightenment and the rise of a quest for a
“pure” theology, scholars have struggled with how to remain anchored in the text of the New Testament while also saying something meaningful to their own ages—and in many cases, those efforts were disappointing.

The aim of *New Testament Theology and Its Quest for Relevance* is found in its final chapter. If the previously outlined attempts are found wanting, where can we go? Here Hatina finds a third general methodology within the social sciences. He outlines what we know about religion as a human experience. He reminds us that, while commitment to large institutional religions is declining in the West, religious life is flourishing here and around the world. Therefore, he looks to “religion” (and its seven studied characteristics) to find ways to find categories from which we might discover new relevance from the New Testament for today. This is “mythmaking” (Hatina’s term) in the Joseph Campbell sense of the term, in which each culture in its own time and place creates meaning out of its circumstances with idealized stories, rituals, and experiences.

Hatina admits that this is actually a dialectical method, but rather than bring categories of meaning from traditional theological rubrics (that our post-Christian society has denied), he discovers them in the social sciences. Of course, one wonders if the criticisms given in chapter 5 to dialectical approaches would be relevant to his own effort. I think he would admit this. One of the primary attributes of such a modern mythmaker is humility, and it is clear in Hatina’s writing that he lives this as fully as he describes it.

This massive survey should be essential reading for anyone working in New Testament theology. Even if one disagrees with Hatina’s final resolution of the problem, the treatment of the primary issues is comprehensive, fair, and incisive. If I were permitted one brief complaint, it would be that it seems that Hatina’s appreciation for traditional methods was unduly critical.

Hatina is concerned about relevance, but it is unclear *for whom* this is a major issue: the academy? the church? society? His descriptions of mainline churches and evangelical preaching suggest that this is an ecclesial/pastoral concern (as it was with Bultmann). But again, I am not entirely persuaded. “Foundationalist” methods draw meaning from what emerges from the ancient text and if done well may be quite relevant. I can think of any number of ecclesial settings where people today (what Wright once called “post-post moderns”) are eager to embrace the antiquity of a text and form their theological categories from within it. Willow Creek Community Church here in Chicago comes to mind (Easter attendance: 33,000). It draws in highly educated, deeply secular, post-Christian visitors from metro Chicago who say that this is the most relevant preaching they have ever heard. While it is not always perfect, much is anchored to a reconstruction of the text in its ancient time and place, not to social-science categories. In other words,
the categories of the foundationalists are still relevant. Of course, the problem may be that efforts such as these are unique and that in many other places Hatina’s concerns need to be raised firmly.

But this leaves me wondering if deconstructing the native categories of the New Testament and finding new ones in the social sciences is as critical as we think. Or perhaps the alarm sounded here is springing from the paucity of religious life in the academy, where the social sciences today provide us with our new priests, sacraments, and keys to meaning. I do not know. But Hatina at least raises valid questions about what we are doing, why we are doing it, and whether our efforts will have cultural longevity.