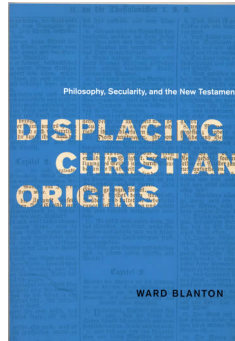


○ REVIEW OF WARD BLANTON, *DISPLACING CHRISTIAN ORIGINS: PHILOSOPHY, SECULARITY AND THE NEW TESTAMENT*

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The standard history of New Testament research presumes a gradual progress toward the true representation of Christian origins. This progress takes place primarily as more objective scholars gradually correct other scholars' eisegesis, as is the case, for example, in the popular understanding of the point of Albert Schweitzer's *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*. Ward Blanton tells a strikingly different story in which eisegesis is the condition for the possibility of New Testament studies. Blanton's critics speak performatively about early Christianity, not representationally. Blanton's critics, that is, create modern academic identity through their research into early Christianity and by reading themselves back into the early Christian tableaux.

Blanton's critics also work agonistically as they strive to become the authority on early Christian history. To this end, they often write their opponents into early Christianity in rather derogatory roles. Furthermore, their work is agonistic because it produces binaries – like ancient religion and modern secularity or faith and reason – important to modern academic identity. The creative conflict stamps criticism with the image of its adversary, so criticism itself has a religious aura.

Blanton's acknowledged precursors for his story of New Testament research include Martin Heidegger, Niklas Luhman, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jacques Derrida. His narrative also crosses paths with recent philosophical attempts to recover Paul as a possible source for change vis-à-vis global capitalism (e.g. Taubes; Agamben; and Badiou) because he describes his critics' self-performance as a 'happening of truth' or an 'event' forming a new subjectivity.

When New Testament research forgets its performative character, it becomes mythical (as Roland Barthes understands myth). It presents itself as natural or as the accepted order of things, rather than as a historical construct benefiting some. To be critical (Barthes would have said political), Blanton asserts that New Testament studies must become more historical and more critical of itself as religion's other. By the former, Blanton means a self-awareness of one's con-

structured, performed status in a particular time and place. By the latter, Blanton means a self-awareness of criticism's own performance of what amounts to mythic or religious work. To move toward this more historical, more conscious(ly religious) criticism, Blanton resurrects the now lost, interdisciplinary conversation taking place between a few important early Continental philosophers and biblical critics, and the modern media in which this conversation proceeded.

Blanton's first chapter considers G. W. F. Hegel and David F. Strauss, both of whom believe that modern identity depends upon an escape from the biblical aura. For Hegel, even polite conversation, which avoids troublesome aspects of religious doctrine, illustrates the Bible's offensiveness to modernity. While historical criticism is the coping mechanism of a society from which the gods have fled, Hegel claims that biblical critics have not yet accepted the modern identity which they produce. Their vain desire for an objective history alienates them from someone else's ancient and religious meanings. For Hegel, the historians should instead acknowledge their reflexive performance of modern identity in their historical work. Like Hegel, Strauss sees the biblical critic potentially – and himself actually – as cultural avant-garde providing therapy for moderns alienated from the Bible. For Strauss, rationalist critics err by presuming that a natural system of cause and effect lies beneath the New Testament and can be recovered by rationalist criticism. Strauss' New Testament is instead the production of an altogether different mythic mentality, which, therefore, requires Strauss' more rigorously historical, mythological approach. Thereby, of course, Strauss positions himself as the academic authority on the New Testament.

In chapter two, Blanton explores the Bible's offensiveness in more media-oriented terms. For Strauss, the mythic medium which produced the New Testament makes it unacceptable to moderns because myths are automatic, mechanistic, corporate productions, not those of a free individual. Blanton notes that this appraisal differs radically from that of earlier critics, like Herder, who saw the Bible's status as *Volksbuch* as its enduring value. For Strauss, the new gospel of free individuals is the newspaper, for which Strauss wrote extensively. Soon, however, Friedrich Nietzsche criticizes Strauss' own writings and the newspaper generally as itself the automatic writing of a manufactured culture. That criticism reveals that Strauss' rejection of the automatic does not simply represent antiquity. It also deals with a very modern concern about what is real, authentic communication or a very modern anxiety about the death of the bourgeois author in an age of industrialized text production. Despite Strauss' protestations about myth's antiquity, myth production ceases to be an altogether foreign economy in Nietzsche's criticism; the ancient becomes the modern's disquieting self; and New Testament studies becomes a site playing out its cultures' undecidabilities.

In chapter three, Blanton inspects the use of Paul's 'spirit' or passion as a vehicle for salvation from modern dogma or worldviews in the work of Adolf Deissmann and Martin Heidegger. Heidegger first uses Paul so in an early lecture commenting on the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians. Heidegger claims that when the Thessalonians turned apocalyptic expectation into dogma after Paul's first letter, Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians, which includes the uncanny double of the messiah, to frustrate such dogma (the letter) and to cast the Thessalonians back upon their earlier existentialist stance (the spirit). For Blanton, Heidegger continues his self-positioning with Paul's spirit (e.g., in calls to conscience) in opposition to literalistic opponents (a culture that had lost the ear for such calls) even in his later, less theological work. More importantly, Blanton's analysis notes that the (spiritual) self-identity work of both Heidegger and Deissmann loses sight of the place

of Tertius, Paul's secretary. Of course, such forgetfulness is the ground of their ability to draw boundaries demarcating the religious spirit from the letter.

In chapter four, Blanton turns to Albert Schweitzer who wrote important historical reviews of philosophy (*Verfall und Wiederaufbau der Kultur: Kulturphilosophie*) and of the quest for the historical Jesus (*Von Reimarus zu Wrede*). Both tell a story of the discovery of a way forward in modernity's failure. Philosophy's failure lies in its inability to provide an ethical orientation for technological progress, or, more philosophically, its failure lies in its inability to move past Kant's failure to provide a foundation for practical activity in pure reason. Schweitzer's way forward rejects metaphysics in favor of the mysticism of the everyday. The failure of historical criticism is its inability to find the historical Jesus. Schweitzer's way forward is the eschatological Jesus, a stranger to modernity that is equivalent to the mysticism of the everyday, something that provides a site for free humans to contest the dehumanizing tyranny of technological society. Accordingly, 'apocalyptic' is less a representation of early Christianity than it is an attempt to answer whether Western modernity would be for or against technological progress. Not incidentally, Blanton's Schweitzer becomes the precursor of recent philosophers like Badiou.

In sum, Blanton calls attention to the religious or mythic work of New Testament criticism. It is religious or mythic in that it defines itself in terms of an *archē* and in that it performatively creates itself thereby as the proper modern authority for this *archē*. It is also mythic in that it creates important binary oppositions in its own culture – notably religion and secularity as well as faith and reason or theology and history – in this performance. It is also mythic in that it idealizes and exorcises a part of its modern self in this process. Blanton has no quarrel with this mythic work, but he does, as already noted, object to the mythic quality of New Testament criticism when mythical means criticism's forgetfulness of its performative and historical character.

Notably, then, the critics that Blanton reviews create different identities for different cultural moments. Hegel and Strauss create a secular, modern identity by emphasizing their rejection of the offensive New Testament (except, of course, for some 'religious sense' that these critics are alone able to divine). By contrast, Heidegger, Deissmann, and Schweitzer create a less confident modern identity by embracing a part of the New Testament as a means to escape an oppressive modernity. In both cases, of course, the New Testament represents part of modernity itself.

If one sees these two different identities as a trajectory, Nietzsche is the lynch-pin, marking the move to a less confident modernity and to an awareness of the self-creation of critical identity. If one tries to read these two different identities in a more integrated way, one might arrive at another – more familiar – story of New Testament research as the product/performance of both Enlightenment and Romantic scholars. Or, one might read the history of this research as the road from Hegel through Nietzsche and Heidegger to Badiou, as the story of a rejection of Platonism in favor of the material (or the media), but which remains unable to exorcise a yearning for transcendence (or escape), for something that calls attention to the limits of one's cultural world (myth). If one reads in the spirit of Blanton, however, one cannot read this story as a progress, not even as a progress from mythic unconsciousness to consciousness. Critical self-consciousness can only be a goal, not an abiding result.

Blanton's work nicely underlines the importance of interdisciplinary work, particularly, between philosophy (theory) and biblical criticism. This suggestion does not mean, however, that interaction with Badiou or some other philosopher is 'where it's at'. It does mean that such historically chosen engagements may prove enlightening and enlivening for biblical criticism.

Finally, Blanton's work may also reposition recent discussions calling for secular biblical criticism. It may ask the guild – or the far too few people involved in the recent discussion of secular biblical criticism – to consider the religious or mythic work of secular biblical criticism itself. Such considerations, of course, would have to understand religion more in the vein of J. Z. Smith than in that of Mircea Eliade or of Christian doctrine. At the very least, Blanton encourages the guild to ask what it means to be critical of itself as religion's other. The most religious and the most secular critic might well meet at that place.