

## Bousset's *Kyrios Christos*: Imperfections of a Benchmark

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*Denn das rein historische vermag eigentlich niemals zu wirken,  
sondern nur das lebendig gegenwärtige Symbol,  
in dem sich die eigene religiöse Überzeugung darstellt.*  
(Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, 75)

### Abstract:

The author considers Wilhelm Bousset's *Kyrios Christos* (1913) as a benchmark in the history of the study of early Christianity – despite its obvious errors in the reconstruction of early Christology, partly due to a biased understanding of contemporary Second Temple Judaism. Within its historical context, Bousset constructed the history of early Christianity as a continuous process starting with the preaching of Jesus and the veneration by his first Palestinian followers and then moving into the Hellenistic world of the Pauline churches. Moving beyond dogmatic categories of description, Bousset focused on religious action, piety and cult of the early Christians. His work still sets the agenda for a reconsideration of early Christianity as a religious movement within a changing cultural context.

Rudolf Bultmann, the editor of the fifth edition of Wilhelm Bousset's *Kyrios Christos*, opened his preface with the remark that amongst those books he regards as a must read for his students *Kyrios Christos* tops the list. Almost 50 years later I still regard this book as one of the best ever written in New Testament Studies. This book is a benchmark and the reprint of the 1970 English translation by Baylor University Press in 2013 keeps it available to those who have difficulty to read the original German, which is, to worsen the case, in Gothic type (“Fraktur”).<sup>1</sup>

That the book is a benchmark for the study of the first decades of Christianity does not mean that it is perfect. But it was a first. Allow me to put the book within its historical context. By the end of the 19th century there were not that many presentations of the history of early Christianity. In 1887 Otto Pfleiderer, professor of theology in Berlin, described primitive Christianity, its writings and teachings in a historical context.<sup>2</sup> Any attempt to construct the development of early Christianity must explain how it happened that the first Christians, who were a Jewish Messianic movement, evolved into a church, with congregations throughout the Roman Empire. Adhering to the principles of emerging historical criticism,<sup>3</sup> he started his book not with Jesus, but with the earliest documents in the New Testament and first treats Paul's life, then his authentic letters in chronological order and his theology. The rest of the

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<sup>1</sup> W. Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: Geschichte des Christusglaubens von den Anfängen des Christentums bis Irenäus* (Göttingen 1913; 2nd ed. 1921; 5th ed. 1964; 6th ed. 1967); English trans.: *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus* (Nashville 1970; repr. Waco 2013).

<sup>2</sup> O. Pfleiderer, *Das Urchristentum, seine Schriften und Lehren in geschichtlichem Zusammenhang beschrieben* (Berlin 1887).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Pfleiderer, *Urchristentum* (see n. 2), VI.

book treats the Apocalypse of John against the backdrop of the book of Daniel and 1 Enoch. Pfleiderer discussed the Gospels only after the Apocalypse under the historical books (Matthew–Acts). The book ends with the remainder of the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers under the headings Christian Hellenism and anti-Gnostic Catholicism. When answering the question how Paul fits into the historical development of early Christianity, Pfleiderer refutes the Hegelian dialectic of Ferdinand Christian Baur, who regarded the opposition between Jewish Christianity and Paul as the driving force in the development of Christianity. In Pauline theology, according to Pfleiderer, two streams came together, a Pharisaic and a Hellenistic way of thinking.<sup>4</sup> But these two streams did not merge. The gospel Paul preached stood with the one foot in the narrow Messianic faith of primitive Christianity, with the other it stepped into the thought world of Hellenism. Hellenistic Judaism, of which Paul was part, could combine Jewish monotheism and the Platonic belief in the immortality of the soul.<sup>5</sup> Paul preached to a world prepared by Hellenism and the churches amongst the Gentiles flourished on the basis of the Hellenistic side in Paul’s preaching, but they did not adopt the Pharisaic side of Paul’s theology. His theology enabled the transfer from the narrow frame of the Jewish Messianic congregation into a universal global religion without the Pharisaic elements. Through Paul’s gospel Christianity was transformed into a less nationalistic Hellenistic religion, not shackled by Jewish law.<sup>6</sup> But Pfleiderer’s attempt to explain how Christianity, which originated in first century Judaism, became the religion of the Hellenized world, that the Messianism of the first Christians got a second, a Hellenistic face in Paul’s gospel, left too many questions open.

Although Bousset started his studies in Erlangen and continued it in Leipzig, the History of Religions School in Göttingen was the intellectual circle in which Bousset did his research.<sup>7</sup> This circle would re-address historical questions posed by Pfleiderer. A major assumption of the School was that Christianity cannot be explained as a natural development of the religion of ancient Israel. This was the position of Albrecht Ritschl in Göttingen.<sup>8</sup> He would not start Christian history with Paul as Pfleiderer did. According to Ritschl’s concept of the kingdom of God, Jesus preached and lived an ethical life. Every individual, who loves his or her neighbor and meets his or her obligations, meets the demands of the kingdom in this life. The kingdom of God becomes a reality through Christian action.<sup>9</sup> The most severe blow against Ritschl’s conception came from his son in law, Johannes Weiss, who studied also with

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Pfleiderer, *Urchristentum* (see n. 2), 304.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Pfleiderer, *Urchristentum* (see n. 2), 304.

<sup>6</sup> “Der Glaube der von Paulus begründeten Heidenkirche war also von Anfang nichts anders als *christianisierter Hellenismus*, die geradlinige Entwicklung des vorchristlichen Hellenismus” (Pfleiderer, *Urchristentum* [see n. 2], 305). Pfleiderer’s view that Pauline theology takes on Hellenistic ways of expression and Greek forms of communication lead to serious historical research on Paul and Hellenism by his student C.F. Georg Heinrici in Leipzig, the *spiritus rector* of the project *Corpus Hellenisticum ad Novi Testamenti* (cf. C. Breytenbach, “Die Briefe des Paulus: Kreuzpunkt griechisch-römischer Traditionen,” Presidential Address at the 52th Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense 2013, to appear in BETL).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. A.F. Verheule, *Wilhelm Bousset, Leben und Werk: Ein theologiegeschichtlicher Versuch* (Amsterdam 1973), 11–13; G. Seelig, *Religionsgeschichtliche Methode in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart: Studien zur Geschichte und Methode des religionsgeschichtlichen Vergleichs* (Leipzig 2001).

<sup>8</sup> In *Kyrios Christos* (see n. 1), I, Bousset specifically denounces Ritschl’s hypothesis that great phenomena of the New Testament should be understood on the basis of the Old Testament.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. A. Ritschl, *Die positive Entwicklung der Lehre*, Vol. 3 of *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung* (Bonn 1874).

Pfleiderer in Berlin and who was one of the key role players in the History of Religions School. According to Weiss, the historical Jesus held a first-century apocalyptic worldview, for him the kingdom of God was not part of human history but the end to all history.<sup>10</sup> By placing Jesus within the context of Jewish apocalyptic, the question arises how apocalyptic influence changed the religion of ancient Israel in the Hellenistic age and whether Jesus and his first followers belonged to the mainstream Judaism of the time. But does Jesus fit into the frame of what Bousset pejoratively called “late Judaism” or is he, notwithstanding common ground, distinct from it? Following the Göttingen scholar Julius Wellhausen in regarding Judaism of the Second Temple as inferior in comparison to the prophets of ancient Israel,<sup>11</sup> Bousset’s comparative studies played a seminal role to contrast Jesus against the negative foil of the then popular construction of “Spätjudentum.”<sup>12</sup> Bousset’s work *Die Religion des Judentums im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter* (1903) was very influential in this regard, establishing a picture of “late Judaism,” especially in the Diaspora, as imitative and uncreative, imbued with Greek language, knowledge and thought, Babylonian astrology, Iranian religion and Egyptian magic.<sup>13</sup> Bousset constructed the history of Second Temple Judaism in such a way, that Judaism departed more and more from the religion of ancient Israel. Jewish religion moved from the national to the individual, from this world to the world to come, from lived piety to learnt piety and that superstition rose.<sup>14</sup> For Bousset the decline of the Israelite Religion into “late Judaism,” the latter absorbing various elements from Babylonian, Iranian and Hellenistic religion, prepared the way for the creative miracle formatting gospel of Jesus and the early Christians.<sup>15</sup> Bousset’s Jesus of history is taken into “late Judaism,” but constructed in contrast positively as a powerful non-nationalistic messianic prophet, proclaiming the miraculous dawn of God’s future reign.<sup>16</sup> Jesus’ trust in the Father for example, is put in sharp contrast to contemporary Jewish belief in God.<sup>17</sup> Bousset’s grave misconstruction of Second Temple Judaism<sup>18</sup> had bearing on the way in which he constructed the relation between Judaism and Christianity in *Kyrios Christos* ten years after the first edition of *Die Religion des Judentums*. This added one of the imperfections to his benchmark publication of 1913. It would take more than half a century and the Shoa before later studies on Judaism of the land of Israel, on Jesus within Galilean Judaism, on Jesus and Jewish wisdom and on Diaspora Judaism would correct these skewed, but highly influential presuppositions of Bousset’s work.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. J. Weiss, *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* (Göttingen 1892).

<sup>11</sup> The reasons why members of the History of Religions School did not give Jesus and the early Jerusalem Church a place within Judaism of the Second Temple but juxtaposed them over against what they called “late Judaism” (“Spätjudentum”) have been critically discussed by Karlheinz Müller as long as 30 years ago: K. Müller, *Das Judentum in der religionsgeschichtlichen Arbeit am Neuen Testament: Eine kritische Rückschau auf die Entwicklung einer Methodik bis zu den Qumranfunden* (Frankfurt a.M. 1983). On the recent discussion by American scholars, cf. L. Hurtado, “A New Introduction,” in *Kyrios Christos* (2013) (see n. 1), v–xx.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. W. Bousset, *Jesu Predigt in ihrem Gegensatz zum Judentum* (Göttingen 1892) 7–11, 18–39.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. L. Doering, in this issue of *EC*.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. W. Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums im späthellenistischen Zeitalter* (3rd rev. ed.; Tübingen 1926) 472–474.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Bousset, *Religion des Judentums* (see n. 14), 542.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. W. Bousset, *Jesus* (Halle 1904) 11–13, 39.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Bousset, *Jesu Predigt* (see n. 12), 44.

<sup>18</sup> On this cf. Müller, *Judentum* (see n. 11).

Changing the agenda for New Testament theology, William Wrede challenged the guild 1897 to reconstruct the development of the earliest phases of Christian religion within the context of other neighboring religions. Wrede was only 47 when he died 1906, but the remaining members of the History of Religions School followed his line of questioning. How could one explain the development of Christian religion from the apocalyptic Jesus, via the first congregation in Jerusalem and Paul up to the syncretistic religion of Hellenistic Christianity historically and what were the specific characteristics of this religion? This meant that the development and the origin of new concepts, rituals, myths and terms within the religion of early Christianity must be explained as part of an historical process.

When Bousset published *Kyrios Christos* in 1913, he took up a tension between his own contribution on Jesus and Wrede's part on Paul in a common project started 1904 by the members of the History of Religions School.<sup>19</sup> Wrede regarded Paul as the real creator of Christian theology by making Christianity a religion of redemption.<sup>20</sup> In this sense he is, next to Jesus of Nazareth, the second creator of Christianity.<sup>21</sup> This of course implies an answer on how Christianity developed from Jesus via the first congregation to Paul; not in continuity, as Paul Wernle constructed it in 1901,<sup>22</sup> but as a process of fundamental transformation. In the first four chapters of *Kyrios Christos*, Bousset poses and answers the question how Christianity developed from a religion having its roots in the apocalyptic preaching of Jesus about the coming of the kingdom<sup>23</sup> via the veneration of Jesus as Messiah and Son of Man by the first followers in Jerusalem and Galilee to Christ the Lord within a redemptive religion in the Greek context of the Pauline Churches.<sup>24</sup> As the first book seriously addressing these questions, it set the standard for all following studies.

*Kyrios Christos*, however, set the margins to narrow. The first edition of 1913 refers to a very important essay Bousset's friend Wilhelm Heitmüller published a year before in 1912 in the *Zeitschrift für Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* on the relationship between Jesus and Paul.<sup>25</sup> Bousset was pleased by the agreement between him and Heitmüller on the importance of the Christian congregations in Damascus, Antioch and Tarsus. Both geographically and culturally they were important in transforming the message of early Christianity in Jerusalem and Galilee before Paul was introduced to it.<sup>26</sup> If one compares Heitmüller's essay and Bousset's work, however, there is a fundamental difference. Paul was introduced to the gospel by Jews from the Diaspora, here he got his first impressions.<sup>27</sup> For Heitmüller the term "Hellenists"

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<sup>19</sup> In 1904 they published a book together: *Die Religion des Neuen Testaments*. In the first volume Paul Wernle treated the sources of the life of Jesus. Bousset himself wrote on Jesus, Ernst von Dobschütz on the apostolic age and William Wrede on Paul.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. W. Wrede, *Paulus* (Halle 1904) 102.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Wrede, *Paulus* (see n. 20), 105.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Wernle dedicated his book *Die Anfänge unserer Religion* ("The origins of our religion") (Tübingen 1901), to Bousset in memory of the time they studied together in Göttingen. For Wernle, Christian religion started with Jesus' eschatological message. Paul diverts the gospel to the gentiles, the apocalypse turns it against Rome, but the continuity with the Jesus as the supreme leader is given throughout the period of origin.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Weiss, *Predigt Jesu* (see n. 10).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Wrede, *Paulus* (see n. 20).

<sup>25</sup> W. Heitmüller, "Zum Problem Paulus und Jesus," *ZNW* 13 (1912) 320–337; cf. Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* (see n. 1), 92, 94–95, and the added reference on page 105 in the 2nd edition 1921. Bousset's *Kyrios Christos* often refers to Heitmüller's works on early Christian baptism and the Eucharist (cf. *ibid.*, 101–102).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Heitmüller, "Paulus und Jesus" (see n. 25), 333.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Heitmüller, "Paulus und Jesus" (see n. 25), 329.

refers to Greek speaking Jews from the Diaspora like Stephen in Jerusalem, Ananias and others in Damascus, Barnabas and the anonymous men from Cyprus and Cyrene (Acts 11:20).<sup>28</sup> For Heitmüller Christianity developed from Jesus and the first Christians in Jerusalem via Hellenistic Christianity with a Jewish basis to Pauline Christianity.<sup>29</sup> Bousset constructed the development along similar lines, but there is one important difference. In *Kyrios Christos* Hellenistic Judaism loses its Jewish basis. It becomes a Gentile Christian “Urgemeinde”.

This is the second imperfection in Bousset’s benchmark. Not only the apocalyptic Jesus and the first congregation in Jerusalem awaiting the Son of Man Messiah from heaven were divorced from contemporary Judaism (Bousset’s “late Judaism”), but also the first Greek speaking Jews who became Christians were totally absorbed in Hellenistic syncretism, losing their Jewishness. The shift of Christianity to Damascus and Antioch amplified Christianity’s difference from “late Judaism,” since Christianity was now in the syncretistic realm of Hellenistic religiosity. “The great and decisive turning point in the development of Christianity is marked by its transition to Gentile-Christian territory in its very beginnings.”<sup>30</sup> The influence of Bousset’s Jewless Gentile Christianity can be documented in the way in which Bultmann’s very influential *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* followed the structure of Bousset’s work.<sup>31</sup> Bultmann’s *Theologie* would hardly have taken the form it did without Bousset.

But Bousset did not write a history of early Christian theology or religion. Building upon his research on the use of the title *Kyrios*<sup>32</sup> he wrote a *History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus* (“Geschichte des Christusglaubens von den Anfängen des Christentums bis Irenäus”). For this reason he set the agenda for later research on what is called the Christology of New Testament. Ferdinand Hahn’s *Christologische Hoheitstitel* is subtitled *Ihre Geschichte im frühen Christentum*. It appeared 1963, fifty years after the first appearance of Bousset’s *opus magnum*. In his introduction Hahn explicitly corrects Bousset’s structuring of the history in three phases: “Primitive Palestinian Christianity,” “Hellenistic Christianity,” and “Pauline Christianity.” Without explicitly stating it, Hahn argues along the line of Heitmüller<sup>33</sup> and adds a phase to the history of earliest Christianity: Palestinian Jewish Christianity, Hellenistic Jewish Christianity, Hellenistic Christianity. In constructing the development of Christology he gave due attention to the role of Hellenistic Jewish Christianity. At the same time he underlined that it is not possible to localize these groups as Bousset did, since the Hellenized Jews lived from Egypt to Rome around the Mediterranean.

<sup>28</sup> Heitmüller, “Paulus und Jesus” (see n. 25), 329, defines Hellenistic Christianity as “ein Christentum, das von Diasporajuden getragen war und bereits Heidenmission trieb.”

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Heitmüller, “Paulus und Jesus” (see n. 25), 330.

<sup>30</sup> Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* (2013) (see n. 1), 12 (1913: p. VI).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. R. Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Tübingen 1958), with Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* (1921) (see n. 1) in part I: Bousset, “Jesus der Messias-Menschensohn im Glauben der palästinischen Urgemeinde,” vs. Bultmann, “Das Kerygma der Urgemeinde”; Bousset, “Die heidenchristliche Gemeinde,” vs. Bultmann, “Das Kerygma der hellenistischen Gemeinde vor und neben Paulus.” In part II Bousset treats “Paulus,” Bultmann “Die Theologie des Paulus”; Bousset, “Der Christusglaube der johanneischen Schriften,” Bultmann, “Die Theologie des Johannes-Evangeliums und der Johannes-Briefe.”

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* (see n. 1), I.

<sup>33</sup> F. Hahn, *Christologische Hoheitstitel: Ihre Geschichte im frühen Christentum* (Göttingen 1963) 11.

Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament* became the blueprint of the theology of his student Hans Conzelmann and dominated German protestant theology.<sup>34</sup> During the last decade, however, Ferdinand Hahn's history of early Christian theology replaced Bultmann's theology as standard work for the German reading student and scholarly community.<sup>35</sup> Simultaneously it replaced the model Bultmann took over from Bousset. After treating the preaching and effect of Jesus and the reception of the Jesus tradition amongst the first congregation ("Urgemeinde") Hahn treats the preaching and theology of the oldest Christian congregations in part two. In this part Hahn distinguishes between those parts of early Jewish Christians who spoke Aramaic (vol. 1, § 9) and those who spoke Greek (§ 10). In parts three and four he then turns to Paul and the Pauline school, returning in part five to the theological conceptions of those Greek speaking Jewish Christians who were independent of Paul (the Letter of James, the First Letter of Peter, the Letter to the Hebrews and the Apocalypse). Hahn presents the development of early Christian theology as a movement within Greek speaking Judaism (cf. § 23), avoiding the caveats of the Bousset tradition. But unlike Bousset, his focus is on theology, not on the development of cultic practice and piety. It would be fair to say that Hahn's approach shows the influence of dialectical theology's focus on the proclamation of revelation and the importance of the process of tradition within Christianity over against Bousset's fundamental interest to construct the development of early Christian cultic action and piety in the light of influences of non-Jewish religions. In the light of this shift of focus Bousset's challenge to construct the development of early Christian religion as action (including ritual and devotional utterances) under changing cultural conditions applicable has still to be met.

Hahn's monumental theology was rather written with Bultmann and not so much with Bousset in mind. Hahn's famous dissertation, *Christologische Hoheitstitel*, published 1963, was written in extensive discussion with Bousset. In the same year Werner Kramer published his Zurich dissertation on the use and meaning of the Christological denotations in Paul and the pre-Pauline Churches. He called it *Christos Kyrios Gottessohn*.<sup>36</sup> Both Hahn's and Kramer's works were heavily indebted to Bousset's approach to focus on the individual titles Christianity attributed to Jesus. Correcting Bousset's version of the origin, meaning and development of Christological titles, their concentration on the titles and their development shifted the focus away from the forms of practiced religion which caused the use of the titles.<sup>37</sup>

Through the work of Hahn, Kramer and various scholars like Marinus de Jonge, Joseph Fitzmyer and Martin Hengel research into the development of early Christian use of the designation "Son of Man," "the Son of God," "Christ," and "Lord" produced results which all in all refuted almost every hypothesis of Bousset on the development of all major names of

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<sup>34</sup> On this debate, cf. C. Breytenbach and J. Frey (eds.), *Aufgabe und Durchführung einer Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Tübingen 2007).

<sup>35</sup> F. Hahn, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (2 vols.; 2nd ed.; Tübingen 2005).

<sup>36</sup> W. Kramer, *Christos Kyrios Gottessohn: Untersuchungen zu Gebrauch und Bedeutung der christologischen Bezeichnungen bei Paulus und den vorpaulinischen Gemeinden* (Zurich 1963).

<sup>37</sup> There are reasons for this change of perspective and line of questioning. In the first place, the post-World War II discussion was dominated by dialectical theology and Bultmann's controversial theology and hermeneutic. Bousset's focus on the religious action seemed to be outdated. Secondly Oscar Cullmann's treatment of the titles of Jesus in *Die Christologie des Neuen Testaments* (Tübingen 1957) was a challenge to both Hahn and Kramer, but unlike Bousset, Cullmann's salvation history approach was not really concerned with cult and piety.

Jesus.<sup>38</sup> I merely highlight a few points of critique, some which could be raised in the light of the discussion which prevailed when the book was published 1913.

On the “Son of Man” Bousset could have been forewarned. Authors like Adolf Hilgenfeld and Otto Pflleiderer introduced research on 1 Enoch into mainstream scholarship. The History of Religions School explained the changes between the prophetic movement in classic Israelite and “late Judaism” by referring to apocalyptic concepts. Since the first edition of his commentary on the Apocalypse of John the parables of Enoch thus played a major role in Bousset’s work.<sup>39</sup> In the same year Bousset published his commentary, in 1896, thus long before Geza Vermes<sup>40</sup> and Joseph Fitzmyer<sup>41</sup> had their watershed discussion on the Aramaic expression *bar naša’*, Hans Lietzmann<sup>42</sup> and correcting him Julius Wellhausen<sup>43</sup> argued for the generic use of the expression which could be no Messianic title. After the discovery of the Qumran documents Bousset’s support of Dalman<sup>44</sup> that the expression was not used in Aramaic can no longer be maintained. As far as the Messianic character of the expression in the Gospels is concerned, it is notable that Jesus is never predicated as “Son of Man” and Mark’s Jesus openly used the expression referring to himself. Unlike “Son of God” and “Christos” it is not followed by a command to keep it secret, the expression does not reveal Jesus’ identity. It was only because Bousset presupposed that Jewish apocalypticism knew a heavenly Messianic figure titled “Son of Man” that he could construct the development of earliest Christology along these lines. Bousset styles the expression “Son of Man” into a confessional title on par with “Kyrios.” In the process he also disregards the early evidence in 1 Thess 1:10 that the risen Jesus who will come as eschatological savior is called “Son of God” and the exalted at the right hand is called “Lord” (Mk 12:36) before he is called the “Son of Man” (Mk 14:62) who has a father (Mk 8:38). Apart from the issue of the “Son of Man,” the fact that the Jewish manuscripts of the Old Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible prove that the Tetragrammon was not translated and most probably “*kyrios*” was read. The Qumran documents prove the use of *māreh* as epithet for God in Aramaic.<sup>45</sup> The absence of an early confession “Jesus is the Messiah” and the fact that in the sixties of the first century the Gospel according to Mark still needs to redefine “*Christos*,”<sup>46</sup> is a strong argument against an uncontested veneration of Jesus as the Messiah in the first communities as Bousset presupposed it.<sup>47</sup>

We could continue this type of detailed critique, but it suffices to state that Bousset has been corrected on almost every aspect of his construction of the development of the titles used in early Christology and the concepts associated with these titles. If this is so, why is his book still a benchmark?

Bousset’s work attempted “to take its point of departure from the practice of the cultus and of the community’s worship and to understand the way in which things developed from this perspective.”<sup>48</sup> Although several people, e.g. Heitmüller and Deissmann,<sup>49</sup> underlined the

<sup>38</sup> M. de Jonge, *Christology in Context: The Earliest Christian Response to Jesus* (Philadelphia 1988); J.A. Fitzmyer on the Son of Man and Kyrios in *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays* (Missoula 1979); M. Hengel, “Der Sohn Gottes,” in *Kleine Schriften IV: Studien zur Christologie* (Tübingen 2006) 74–145. For the reception of Bousset’s *Kyrios Christos* in the English speaking world, cf. Hurtado, “New Introduction” (see n. 11).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. W. Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis* (KEK 16; Göttingen 1896) 273.

<sup>40</sup> G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian’s Reading of the Gospels* (Minneapolis 1973) 163–168, 188–191.

<sup>41</sup> Fitzmyer, *Wandering Aramean* (see n. 38).

<sup>42</sup> H. Lietzmann, *Der Menschensohn: Ein Beitrag zur neutestamentlichen Theologie* (Freiburg 1896).

<sup>43</sup> J. Wellhausen, *Skizzen und Vorarbeiten: Sechstes Heft* (Berlin 1899).

<sup>44</sup> Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* (1921) (see n. 1), 11–12.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Fitzmyer, *Wandering Aramean* (see n. 38) on 11QtgJob 24:4–7; 26:8 and 1QapGen 20:12–13, 15.

<sup>46</sup> On this, cf. de Jonge, *Christology in Context* (see n. 38), 53–70.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* (see n. 1), 1.

<sup>48</sup> Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* (2013) (see n. 1), 11.

<sup>49</sup> W. Heitmüller, *Taufe und Abendmahl im Urchristentum* (Tübingen 1911); A. Deissmann, *Paulus: Eine kultur- und religionsgeschichtliche Studie* (Tübingen 1911).

importance of the cult for understanding early Christianity, Bousset realized that his book was the first coherent and comprehensive treatment of the topic. It is exactly this focus on religious action, on piety and cult as the situation in which religious expressions originate, which still makes Bousset's book the benchmark. In his masterly treatment of early *Christian Christology in Context*, Marinus de Jonge describes the Christological conceptions of the different New Testament literary traditions in chronological order,<sup>50</sup> but he does not merge his discussion into early Christian development of religious practice. In Gerd Theißen's *Die Religion der ersten Christen* Bousset's focus on piety and the veneration of Christ the Lord disappears behind the dominant role the categories of myth, Christian ethos and ritual sacrifice play to structure the material.<sup>51</sup> Heikki Räisänen chose to describe the thought world of early Christians in his *The Rise of Christian Beliefs*,<sup>52</sup> and not their patterns of piety, veneration of God and Christ or ethos.

There is thus still ample room for those who want to measure their own work against Bousset's benchmark. Like Bousset one should focus on the actions of the first Christians, remembering that little can be known about their practice of worship.<sup>53</sup> That this is still a fruitful approach, Larry Hurtado has illustrated by focusing on the devotion to Jesus in earliest Christianity.<sup>54</sup> But there is no reason to confine oneself to this question. In the light of the numerous doxologies and eulogies in the early Christian documents one could also ask with which actions and language the first Christian venerated God. But the first Christians did not spend all their time calling the name of the Lord at baptism or praising and blessing God during worship. In the light of the huge amount of paracletic and paraenetic exhortation in the New Testament one could ask the question what type of ethos different Christian groups propagated. In the light of the central role the interpretation of the death of Christ plays in early Christian documents one could construct how the different understandings of the death of Christ and the various conceptions about his resurrection and role as exalted Kyrios helped Christian communities to come to terms with their own suffering, sin and prospective death. But in answering such questions one must depict the first Christians as real people, living in real places within a specific cultural context and expressing themselves in religious action, including language, focused on effective communication. To achieve this one needs to have a thorough source based knowledge of the religion of Second Temple Judaism, including Diaspora Judaism. Even if Bousset's construction of "late Judaism" was marred by prejudice of a scholarly epoch, he tried to understand the world into which Christianity stepped. Like him one ought to oversee early Christian literature from Paul up to the apologists. On the basis of these sources one must have the vigor to construct the development of early Christianity as religious movement within the context of those religious groups within the early Roman Empire with which they could have had contact on the different locations into which Christianity spread. The following questions could be asked:<sup>55</sup> What were the

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<sup>50</sup> De Jonge, *Christology in Context* (see n. 38).

<sup>51</sup> G. Theißen, *Die Religion der ersten Christen: Eine Theorie des Urchristentums* (Gütersloh 2001).

<sup>52</sup> H. Räisänen, *The Rise of Christian Beliefs: The Thought World of Early Christians* (Minneapolis 2010).

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Hahn, *Theologie* (see n. 35), vol. 2, § 19.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. L. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids 2005).

<sup>55</sup> Cf. C. Breytenbach, "Erwägungen zu einer Geschichte der Religion des Urchristentums," in *Reflections on Early Christian History of Religion/Erwägungen zur frühchristlichen Religionsgeschichte* (ed. C. Breytenbach and J. Frey; AJEC 81; Leiden 2012), 1–25.



fundamental preconditions for the religion of the first Christians? Which forms of religiously motivated action were typical for them? What were the functions of their religious convictions, how did it give direction to their lives? Which institutions did the early Christians have? What were their fundamental communal experiences? What forced early Christianity to change? What were the creative ways in which early Christians responded to a changing cultural context, thereby transforming religious practice? In asking such questions, one takes up a line of questioning inaugurated by Bousset a century ago.

As Bultmann did, I still recommend Bousset's *opus magnum* to my students in Berlin.

Although Bousset's book has many imperfections, for the agenda it sets for the study of early Christian religion it is still the benchmark.