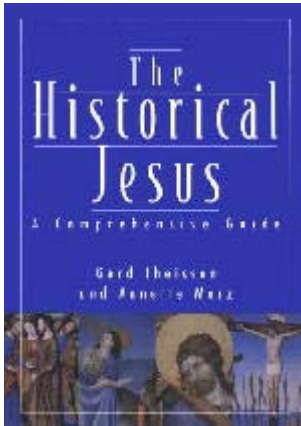


RBL 11/15/1999



Theissen, Gerd and Annette Merz

The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide

Translated by John Bowden

Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998. Pp. xxix + 642, Cloth, No Price Available, ISBN 0800631234.

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This impressive volume (xxix + 642 pp.) is the result of the collaboration of Gerd Theissen, best known for having introduced the category "wandering radicals" into New Testament scholarship, Professor of New Testament at the University of Heidelberg, and Annette Merz, his former pupil, who also teaches there. Though both assume responsibility for the whole volume, he composed chapters 1, 4-5 and 7-16, she 2,3 and 6, as well as some sections in chapters he wrote. She also composed for each chapter a series of "tasks" "meant to check how much has been learned" (p. ix), with their "solutions" at the conclusion of the book (pp.573-612). "In all, Annette Merz wrote around one-third of the book" (p. ix), such as the argument that the first appearance of the Resurrected was not to Peter, but to Mary Magdalene (15.2.5.2=pp. 496-499).

"Potential readers" include "interested lay people" (Biblical quotations are translated into English). Thus this "comprehensive guide sets out to present the way in which scholars study Jesus - not only the results they arrive at but also the process by which they acquire their knowledge" (p. vii). The volume is comparable in readability to Dominic Crossan 's best-seller *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (though their own view is nearer that of E. P. Sanders, p.11). After the normal introductory sections on the sources and the geography and history of the period, the main section is on "The Activity and Preaching of Jesus," with chapters on Jesus as a Charismatic: Jesus and his Social Relationships, Jesus as Prophet: Jesus' Eschatology, Jesus as Healer: The Miracles of Jesus, and Jesus as Teacher: The Ethics of Jesus. This is followed by a concluding section on the Passion and Easter. There are of course select bibliographies.

Each chapter combines skillfully phases in the history of research, the major alternatives, and the present situation regarding the pros and cons of each subdivision, then a summary and hermeneutical reflections. The "Tasks" and "Solutions" invite the reader to get into the debate oneself. If those seeking ready and certain answers find this bewildering, this is all to the good! For anyone who works one's way through the book will in the process have become an insider. This is as near as one can come to a do-it-yourself education about the historical Jesus. Of course one will welcome all the more the four-page Retrospect: A Short Life of Jesus (pp.669-672), where the authors' own positions are summarized.

Whereas the balanced presentations of the numerous problems and alternative solutions at times do obscure the authors' own position (which itself is often fluid), there is a refreshing candor on topics about which the academic community is often in agreement though hesitant to speak openly: Regarding David Friedrich Strauss' *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835-36): "Scholarship can never go back behind its basic thesis of the mythical transformation of the Jesus tradition" (p.3). "Jesus was born in Nazareth shortly before the end of the reign of Herod 1(37-4 BCE), the son of Joseph, a craftsman in wood and stone, and his wife Mary" (p.569). "Here we shall concentrate on the problem of Jesus' erroneous expectation of an imminent end. . . . Jesus did not reckon that the world would continue to exist for so long a time" (p.277). Yet this frankness does not indicate the authors to be on the left wing of scholarship. In most regards, they represent a middle-of-the-road position. Actually, a much broader scope of sayings is treated as authentic than is common in form criticism. The reader sees on every page the authors grappling intensely with the issues they discuss.

This volume thus presents something like a topically organized encyclopaedia on the historical Jesus. It also includes a wide selection of English-language literature, much more so than one had come to expect in foreign-language scholarship. It documents well the ever-increasing internationalization of scholarship. The recognition that Jesus was a Jew rather than a Christian, already pointed out by Reimarus, Wellhausen, and Bultmann, is here implemented more fully than in previous generations.

Of course not all the endless issues can be discussed in a brief review. But a couple of instances may illustrate the discussion the book invites:

With regard to the unending controversy about the idiom/title "son of man," the authors, no doubt correctly, favor the former alternative, all too often opposed on christological grounds (p.572): "They remembered that Jesus had spoken of himself as 'the man' - specifically when he was confronted with excessively high hopes in himself."

On pp.260-261 the authors summarize the perennial debate about Luke 17:21: "the kingdom of God is in the midst of you . . . remains a riddle," given the choice, to translate

ἔντος, between "within" (dominant through Albrecht Ritschl) or "among" (dominant since Johannes Weiss) (pp, 260-261). If the authors' translation "in the midst of you" suggests the latter alternative, much of their argument suggests a return to the former: "But as a rule ἔντος means 'within'.... If we add that the repudiation of a spatial localization of the kingdom of God—it is neither 'here' nor 'there'—hardly suggests a spatial view which seeks the kingdom of God in the midst of those addressed (say in the form of the person of Jesus) Luke himself could have understood the logion spiritually: the previous pericope ends in 17.19 with the promise: 'Your faith has saved you'." The International Q Project also ascribes (with some uncertainty) the saying to Q. The preceding Q context (Q 17:6), like Luke, suggests the saying interprets faith: "If you have faith like a mustard seed, you might say to this mulberry tree: Be uprooted and planted in the sea! And it would obey you." This miracle-working power accorded to humans would seem to call for some explanation: God's reign being "within" would serve as a clarifying commentary. The same saying "appears twice in the Gospel of Thomas, in such different versions that it cannot be regarded as a redactional reworking of the same Lukan original." Luke and Thomas apparently go back, independently of each other, to oral tradition. Actually, the only other instance of ἔντος in connection with this saying is Saying 3 of the Gospel of Thomas (fortunately extant among the Greek fragments: P Oxy 654): "The kingdom of God is inside you and outside" Here, translate ἔντος, standing in contrast to "outside," has to mean inside." Furthermore, an article has appeared since the completion of the book under review (whose Foreword is dated January 1996) which demonstrates that "within" is the only semantically justifiable translation: Tom Holmén's essay, "The Alternatives of the Kingdom: Encountering the semantic restrictions of Luke 17,20-21 (ἔντος ὑμῖν)," *ZNW* 87(1996) 204-229.

The next impression, which can, in view of the scholarly value and practical usefulness of the book, be fully expected, should correct the confusing, at times misleading, copy-editing errors apparently bypassed in a spelling-check.