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Zager, Werner

Jesus und die frühchristliche Verkündigung: Historische Rückfragen nach den Anfängen

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This book is a collection of four loosely related essays that are slightly expanded versions of papers Zager had given previously in various academic settings. In the first, a lecture given in 1996-97 at several German universities, Zager discusses "the theological necessity of asking about the historical Jesus, and our exegetical possibilities of answering the question," as the essay's subtitle says. The other three were originally papers read in 1995-97 at the annual "International Seminar Days" in Günsbach, Alsace; in these Zager considers the death of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, respectively, all in the light of the writings of Albert Schweitzer.

After a brief survey of previous scholarship on the historical Jesus, Zager argues in the first essay that it is still necessary and possible to undertake such research today, since Christian faith must be based on the historical foundation of Jesus himself. He then lists four standard criteria of authenticity (pp. 10-13), and applies them to the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:23-35). Except for minor redactional additions (vv. 23a, 35), the whole parable is judged to be authentic, mainly because the harsh punishment of the unmerciful servant in the third scene (vv. 31-34) fulfills the criteria of dissimilarity and coherence. However, since Jesus' own eschatological expectations were wrong (God's reign did not fully come during the lifetime of Jesus' first disciples; p. 28), Zager asserts that the application of the parable for believers today must be found in its message about God's mercy and love, and about the necessity for us to do God's will so as to bring about the Reign of God on earth (pp. 30-33).

In chapter 2, Zager claims that for people today, the idea that anyone's death could atone for the sins of others is increasingly questionable and unacceptable. However, to prove that Jesus himself did not interpret his impending death in this way, Zager argues that the only two Gospel sayings that might support a theology of atonement (Mark 10:45b — "The Son of Man came... to give his life as a ransom for many"; and 14:24 — "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many") are both inauthentic, especially since they contradict Jesus' authentic teachings about the unmerited mercy and forgiveness of God. But if Jesus did not consider his own death atoning, then modern Christians are not bound to this theology either, even if it dominates the NT and much of later Christian theology. How and when did the idea of Jesus' sacrificial death arise? Zager argues that it was not from the early Christians' reading of the servant song of Isa 53 (the only OT text even considered possible). Rather, the Hellenistic Christians around Stephen are suggested as the first to interpret the deaths of certain people as martyrdoms "for" others (esp. 2 Macc and 4 Macc). However, Zager never considers whether Jesus himself might have gotten the concept of an atoning death from his own reading of such biblical texts as Isa 53. Moreover, Zager's initial premise, that giving one's life on behalf of others simply cannot be understood today, should be questioned. The example of Maximilian Kolbe, who gave his life in place of another man about to be executed at Auschwitz, or the heroic deaths of other lesser-known individuals, show that such self-sacrificial offerings are still possible (even if rare) and that they can be understood and even admired by many people today.

Zager's third essay considers the resurrection of Jesus briefly from a historical-critical view, and then more extensively from psychological perspectives. Here he mainly summarizes the writings of D. F. Strauss, G. Lüdemann, and U. Müller to argue that the so-called "resurrection appearances" were "purely subjective visions" of the early apostles, meaning that they were "not caused by God's actions" (p. 72). While Strauss and Lüdemann focused unduly on the individual crises of Paul (existential turmoil over the value of the Law) and of Peter (profound grief at the death of Jesus), Müller more appropriately deals also with the communal visions of the early disciples, including the women. Zager then adds some parallels from modern research into "hallucinations," along with some stories of the post-mortem "appearances" of others, including Becket and Savonarola, and Peter and Paul in the apocryphal Acts. His conclusion, however, is far too brief; only a single paragraph touches upon the implications for Christian faith if Jesus' resurrection cannot be considered "objective" in any way. Even more problematic is that Zager's absolute dichotomy between "subjective" and "objective" presupposes a modern positivism that is no longer tenable in today's post-modern world.

In the fourth essay, which discusses "the experiences of the spirit in early Christianity" (subtitle), Zager highlights the differences between the earliest disciples' ecstatic experiences of the Spirit (as seen in the Pentecost event) and later Christians' more ordinary manifestations of the Spirit (as in the daily life of Paul's communities already). Following G. Lüdemann and others, Zager argues that the Pentecost narrative of Acts 2

actually refers to the same event as the Pauline report of Jesus' appearance to 500 believers (1 Cor 15:6), since both can be interpreted psychologically as cases of "mass ecstasy" or "collective hallucination" (pp. 94-95). He also discusses the psychological dimensions of other phenomena associated with the Spirit in early Christianity: glossolalia, ecstatic visions, prophetic utterances, and miracle working. But since these phenomena are part of an ancient worldview completely inaccessible for modern people, Zager maintains (p. 108), only Paul's teachings about finding the Spirit in the virtuous actions of ordinary life are useful today. This emphasis on hearing and applying the demythologized ethical teachings of Jesus remains the hallmark of modern German Protestantism, despite Zager's attempt to use contemporary psychological exegesis to provide a deeper understanding of Christianity.

This short book is clearly written and contains detailed notes, fairly large indices, and an extensive bibliography. Although it does not break much new ground, it would be worthwhile reading for anyone interested in the psychological exegesis of the NT, and for those concerned with the historical-Jesus writings of Albert Schweitzer and D. F. Strauss.