

Bultmann and the History of Religions School perpetuated a belief about the beginnings of christology that still informs much of educated opinion today. They maintain that the emergence of the so-called 'high' christology, with its emphasis on the pre-existence of the Logos who became flesh in Jesus, was not part of the belief and experience of the earliest Christian communities, but rather marked a later departure from the first kerygma. They attribute the winning out of this christology over the 'low' christology (which sees the man Jesus of Nazareth being exalted and adopted as Son of God after his death) to Hellenising influences, particularly from the mystery religions. When searching for the culprit who perpetrated this syncretism, the sleuthing generally ended with the Apostle Paul. This buttressed the old contention that Paul was the founder of Christianity and was mainly responsible for its departure from the preaching of Jesus.

Although there has been enough research to counter this argument for some time now, this attitude continues to prevail not only in the popular mind, but even in systematic christology; one thinks of Pannenberg's discussion of christology 'from above' as contrasted with the 'older' christology 'from below'. In this little book, Martin Hengel sketches out the major evidence against this widely-held belief, centering on the Pauline use of the designation of Jesus as Son of God.

The title Son of God is used rarely in Paul, but appears at key points in his writing. It is used to speak of the close bond between Jesus and God, and of Jesus' role as mediator of creation and salvation. Hengel points out that the notion of Jesus as the pre-existent Son was already widely accepted less than twenty years after the death of Jesus, and that it was not Paul's invention: rather, Paul consistently takes it over from older sources. This may push back notions of Jesus' pre-existence to the very first years after his death. At any rate, Paul cannot be considered the originator of the idea.

What are the foundations of the use of Son of God as a title? Bultman and others had traced it to a variety of Hellenistic mystery cults. Drawing upon a consensus of current scholarship, Hengel shows

rather devastatingly that the so-called gnostic redeemer myths are generally fictions of twentieth century research and even their putative sources can hardly ever be dated before the second century A.D. The source of the title Son of God comes rather from within Judaism, where it was used to denote exalted personages enjoying a special relationship with God.

Hengel traces the Christian attribution of the title to three sources. First, the tradition of the title in Judaism. Secondly, the late-Jewish speculation on the pre-existence and personification of Wisdom, as found in the Wisdom literature and in Philo. And finally, Jesus's own perception of his unique relationship with God, whom he called Abba (though probably never calling himself 'the Son'). These three strands were woven together to express Jesus' unique relationship to God, which was the very basis for the finality of God's salvation he represented.

What this means is that the idea of Jesus's pre-existence, as well as the tendencies which were to lead to the trinitarian notion of God, were not the result of outside influences, but came from trying to express the belief in Jesus from a consistent, Jewish position. This is why the scandal of Jesus was so great for the Jews: models for describing him were fed by distinctively Jewish sources. Identifying Jesus as the personification of Wisdom, existing before all creation and sent to dwell upon the earth, was necessary to bring the finality of salvation full circle—in other words, Jesus' relationship to God had to be without parallel and from the very beginning. This close definition of Jesus' relation to God as Son was also needed to counter proto-gnostic speculations about Jesus and God (against a ditheism) rather than to accommodate them.

Hengel emphasises that, rather than setting an opposite course from the early notions of Jesus as prophet, the Son of God christology was its logical extension. Thus the high-versus-low christology debate leads to a false dichotomy. The Hellenising of Christology was to take place, but at a much later date. Paul is vindicated; Dehellenisers will have to find another culprit.

This book is an important statement

on the origins of christology. The position it represents is beginning to appear in more recent christologies, such as that of Schillebeeckx. Nevertheless it is helpful to have it so ably summarised by a renowned scholar like Hengel. The discussion is heavily documented for those who wish to

follow up Hengel's argumentation. The only weakness worth noting is some of Hengel's implicit notions about the very earliest chronology of christology (elaborated elsewhere, particularly in the Cullmann *Festschrift*), but these in no way impair the value of this book.

ROBERT SCHREITER

ETHICS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, by Jack T. Sanders. *SCM Press*, London, 1976. 144 pp. £3.25.

The question is how can we use the teaching of the New Testament in making present-day moral judgements? The traditional Christian expectation has been that the New Testament will yield at least the principles which may then be extended and applied by the competent authorities to cases as they arise. But sometimes the problems are so complex (e.g. whether to fight in the Vietnam war) or so massive (e.g. the conservation of natural resources) that even such principles as we may derive from the New Testament appear unhelpful. Or else the problems facing us are quite outside the concern of any of the New Testament writers, issues thrown up only in recent years; so that to wrest guidance from the sacred page is a false and artificial exercise.

Professor Sander's thesis is that the usefulness of the New Testament is to be contested for reasons even more fundamental. The first Christian writers believed the world's End was near, as did Jesus himself. This belief determined their moral teaching: all of it must be read in this light. The seemingly impossible ideals found in the teaching of Jesus and Paul wear a different aspect when their short-term character is recognized: they were not expected to be kept for long in the conditions of this world.

And once the expectation that the End would soon come faded (as it seems to have done, at least in practical terms, towards the end of the period represented by the New Testament writings), then a more conventional moralism entered in. Its character showed few points of distinction from the moral teaching of the surrounding cultures. Christians became, on most points, decent men, like other decent men.

Hence (so the conclusion goes), the

New Testament is no help to us in making moral judgements, for either its focus is wrong (that is, where the End is in view) or its voice is purely conventional (that is, where it is not). With the decks thus cleared, the ancient ghost laid, we may set about our Christian moral thinking more profitably, using more helpful tools. It is not the purpose of this book to tell us what those tools are; the task is left to others by an exegete who recognizes his limitations.

But is the negative conclusion quite so clear? Or, rather, need it be negative in quite this way and to quite this degree? Granted how much Christians need to see that the New Testament will be misread if the circumstances of its writing and their difference from our circumstances are ignored; granted that its moral teaching is formed by situations which are alien to us; still, its moral vision may kindle ours and move us to make our own Christian judgements on our own new and complex issues. This may apply both to the general directions of teaching (e.g. the command to love) and to more specific provisions. We have no need to choose between slavish following and total despair of finding anything that we can use. The moral teaching of the New Testament, for all its diversity and its strangeness, was, in its heart, related to certain directions of belief about God which echo across to us, however much we need, once more, to set them now in the light of fresh circumstances of thought and culture.

This book is an admirable guide to the moral thought of many of the New Testament writers, and particularly good on Paul and the Johannine writings. But it draws from them only one of the possible conclusions.

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