

THE SHADOW OF THE GALILEAN by Gerd Theissen, *S.C.M. Press Ltd.*, 1987, Pp. 212. £5.95.

This is a book of theology in a new genre. Its subtitle expresses its theme: *The Quest of the Historical Jesus in Narrative Form*. To the technical equipment of the biblical scholar Theissen adds a dimension by risking this new literary form. He does not just talk of narrative theology; he gives a substantial example of it in exegesis. And to avoid being accused of pure self-indulgence through the medium of fiction he adds a scholarly appendix acknowledging his sources and justifying his preferences. The body of the book is a developed narrative round the fictitious character Andreas, a well-to-do Galilean fruit and grain merchant, who, through his business, meets individuals and groups who made up the world of Jesus and were significant for the Gospel story. He never actually meets Jesus himself; he sees him only once and at a distance, in fact on the cross when he is dying between two terrorists. Nor does the story end with the crucifixion; the narrative has something to say about the way it began to work out as Andreas 'made a new covenant with life' (p. 185).

Theissen chooses to narrate in the first person (as Andreas) to help the readers understand more easily what is involved in history and hermeneutics. He acknowledges frankly that every scholar writes from a given perspective and for a given purpose (p. 55). At the end of each chapter he discusses such issues in a letter signed by Gerd Theissen to Professor Kratzinger, a prickly scholarly scraper of the old type, who keeps a steady flow of criticism directed towards this new venture in scholarship. These letters are justifying the form and content of the book, and they provide a splendid picture of the complexity of New Testament scholarship today. Through his scholarship Theissen wants to make a Christian impact on today's society. He is committed. This format helps him because the narrative includes his reflections on literature and history, sociology, philosophy and theology. He makes excellent use of his previous researches on the sociology of first-century Palestine, and he specifically acknowledges scholarly debts to G. Bornkamm, E.P. Sanders, and especially to Martin Hengel, who is 'indispensable' (p. 187). Hengel has long been reserved about the two optimistic claims made for the historical-critical method by very sceptical exegetes. To temper excessive scepticism Theissen stresses the dynamic social elements in history, which the biblical texts reflect, and which find corroboration in Josephus and others.

So the story is unfolded from the point of view of Andreas, this fictional upper-middle-class Jew. He comes from Sepphoris in Galilee, and has encounters with the Roman military presence because he got mixed up accidentally with a riot in Jerusalem. He is taken to Pilate, who blackmails him into becoming an informer on Palestinian movements, with especial reference to Essenes, Zealots and Jesus. Never meeting Jesus nor any of his disciples, his information comes through conversations with Chuzza and Joanna, Baruch and Barabbas and the centurion Metilius. The political and social issues of the day are aired in a very realistic way, with Josephus being used to good effect. It is made very clear that major complicated issues were at stake. Sensitivity, brutality and tragedy come through the narrative, but the whole story is not tragic. Theissen reflects the Gospel genius here; somehow, despite all the suffering, hope and dignity are preserved. And the death of Jesus was not hope-denying, like the destruction of Jerusalem.

Strangely Theissen avoids any detailed consideration of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. He is particularly anxious to do justice to the former, agreeing with the strictures of Professor Sanders, among others, about the Gospel presentation of them, and their negative estimate in scholarly tradition among Christians. By contrast the Sadducees and 'the ruling class' (p. 127) are supremely guilty of collusion in the death of Jesus. Theissen does briefly acknowledge the excessive legalism of the Pharisees, especially concerning the Sabbath observance, but he does not seem to agree with Mark (3, 6f.) that

they plotted to get rid of Jesus for his violation of it. This remains a very complicated question however. For while Theissen is happy to use Josephus as a faithful describer of first-century movements, twenty years after the death of Jesus (e.g. Bannus as illustrative of John the Baptist), one wonders why he did not use material from St. Paul, who was a near-contemporary of Josephus, to illustrate what the Pharisees were like in the days of Jesus. Paul described himself as one (Gal 1, 22; Phil 3, 7). He approved entirely of the killing of Stephen (Acts 8, 1f.) According to Hengel Pharisaism in the first century was divided into two main divisions, the universalist and intellectual, and the nationalist and eschatological (*The Charismatic Leader and his Followers*, Edinburgh, 1981, p. 26), and it seems they had a history of violence behind them (G.H. Box, *Judaism in the Greek Period*, Oxford, 1932, pp. 49–56). But there is also interest in what Theissen says about Mark whom he thinks to have written his Gospel just after the fall of Jerusalem and at Antioch. He sees him to be close to Paul in many ways, though theologically independent of him (p. 189). Mark was certainly a companion of Paul. The Palestine which figures in his work is not significantly different from that of the war period (66–70 a.d.) in which the Pharisee Josephus fought as a commander in Galilee, when he was thirty years old. The Gospels say that the Pharisees in Galilee wanted Jesus dead, just as they say that Romans and Sadducees colluded in killing him in Jerusalem. If Theissen gives scant space to this it is probably for non-historical reasons.

Like many German scholars today Theissen is keenly conscious of Hitler's holocaust and the anti-semitism that provoked it (pp. 36, 140). But it is surely not anti-semitic to accept that the Jew Judas betrayed Jesus, and that Peter and the others did not enter publicly for his defence. Paul was not anti-semitic in deploring the rejection of Christ by his fellow Jews. The Gospel accounts say that nearly everyone of influence or importance fomented or connived at the death of Jesus. Their failure highlights marvellously his integrity and goodness in the face of the evil perpetrated on him. Indeed so much does the question of Judaism engage Theissen that he answers Kratzinger self-mockingly, that he should have entitled his book *Disputes about Judaism* (p. 36). He stresses that the Gospels do not reflect fairly the historical conditions that pertained before Christianity and Judaism began to go their separate ways. Before the fall of Jerusalem Jesus was not the focal point of Palestinian history (p. 10). However, even when all this is agreed, Theissen's narrative would have been even better had equal space been given to encounters with Pharisees and Sadducees by Andreas, at least equal to that given to the other groups. The Gospels certainly thought they deserved it.

The book succeeds in making New Testament studies relevant for the nonspecialist. In lively fashion it touches on some sensitive issues today. There is coherent presentation of terrorism with its legitimate grievances and tragic commitments. Sympathetic feeling is expressed for the outsider, the lost, the lonely and the undecided. There is a dispassionate discussion of the problems facing a great power goaded by a little one. Everyone seems to share some guilt for what is going on, and the way out is not just through some political compromise. Wanting the Bible to speak to life Theissen presents Jesus as a poet, philosopher and prophet. He sees faith seeking understanding in the troubled context of personal and social existence. There is interest in the individual and the nation, with great emphasis on the mystery of God, master of nature and of history, the lover of the loser and sustainer of those suffering without hope. The Bible text begins discussions philosophical and historical; the narrative genre serves the purpose well. The cultivated Andreas is allowed to muse and dream and fear, well versed in his Jewish history, acquainted with the Roman mind. In everyone he meets he finds reflected some aspect of himself. Theissen is drawing attention to the fact that the biblical texts have many meanings, and ordinary historical enquiry does not exhaust them. Questions of life and death engage more than purely historical matters. This is the stuff of lived experience. Andreas has to paint his own picture of Jesus from the data he acquires from others. He is like someone using the

historico-critical method, working with traditions, painting his portrait in the context of the social, political and religious unrest of his day. Theissen feels that the Kratzingers of this world do not sufficiently appreciate this context, for, unjustifiably sceptical, they inhibit the creative imagination of the interpreter.

Is Theissen's picture of Jesus really only a shadow, as the title of his book suggests? It is hard to say. A sample conversation with Barabbas who was a companion of Simon the Zealot yields the following: 'B. "He raises hopes that things might change without resistance and bloodshed. He's worse than those who say you must reconcile yourself to everything. He wants change and peace at the same time, and that's an illusion, a dangerous illusion". A. "But don't you have illusions, too? Has Simon perhaps recognised that your methods are no better? Did he follow Jesus because it was the only way out of these caves?" B. "Simon is a problem. If his example catches on more will leave us. Some have suggested that we should execute him as a traitor. A. "For God's sake." B. "I stopped it". Barabbas said that quietly. But it moved me very deeply. Gratitude and sympathy over came the indifference of the night. Everything seemed to be looking at us as if the universe had an interest in saving life. Wasn't it also looking to me to get Barabbas out of here? (p. 91).'

But we do not really get into the personality of Jesus this way, not so as to throw our arms round his neck, as Karl Rahner said we should when we come to know him well. Theissen is afraid, in fact, that religion would withdraw again into the conversation between God and the soul (p. 153). Hence the social aspect of his Christianity is far stronger than the personal element. This is a limiting factor in his work; he accentuates the intention of Jesus to renew Israel but is not so much concerned with the question of the community of the Church which issued from his mission. He sees him as poet and philosopher and prophet in the past but not enough as the Living Person who breathes through the Gospels. Theissen sees him waiting for social change without the help of politics, waiting for the miraculous. But why did the disciples devote themselves to his Person? How did his personal authority express itself so attractively for them? 'None knows the Father except the Son' (Mt 11, 27) does not figure in our book. Are texts of this kind all post-resurrection? Theissen expresses his own position to Kratzinger: 'Should I not have brought out the incomparability of Jesus more strongly right from the start, instead of relativizing his preaching by using many analogies? ... The "criterion of originality" (another name for the criterion of difference) is dogma in disguise; Jesus seems to drop directly from heaven. And this dogma has an anti-Jewish slant: what puts Jesus in opposition to Judaism cannot be derived' ... while Theissen holds that 'Not only Jesus but the whole of primitive Christianity can be derived from Judaism' (p. 141). This position sounds safely dogmatic—whatever it means!

But the book achieves what its author set out to do. It is a splendid read and a mine of information. Let us hope that scholars of his competence follow his lead, for the Bible would become much more accessible to the general public, and to the faithful especially who are longing to hear its message.

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