

JESUS AND THE HOPE OF THE POOR by L. Schottroft and W. Stegmann. *Orbis Books, N.Y., 1996, pp. 134. p/b £8.25.*

This interesting little study is an attempt to understand from the Synoptic Gospel sources the early Jesus movement and how it developed. An analysis of the earliest traditions reveals Jesus as the hope of the poor and the friend of tax collectors and sinners, founding a movement which refused to be exclusive, refused to safeguard its religious claims by dissociating itself from those whose membership brought criticism upon it. The movement is plausibly shown to be rooted in scriptural traditions, but to be unique in its own non-exclusivity, which arose from its understanding of God and its belief in God's kingdom. 'If it is true that God is Lord of all, then God's promise must be fulfilled first in those whose actual existence was most remote from that promise of a life free from want and suffering. Blessed are the poor. The tax collectors and sinners will enter the kingdom of God before you'. (p. 37).

The belief in God's kingdom is clearly seen to raise questions for modern Christians concerned with the poor:

'We must not cover up the aspects of the Jesus movement that we find disconcerting ... We find it disconcerting, first of all, that human beings should expect the reign of God to bring a complete transformation of the world and history. We also find disconcerting the expectation of the poor that their lot will be reversed ... Such a hope not only makes us conscious of confronting an alien world-view ... It also spurs criticism of its content: Does such a hope stultify the poor and fill them with a false consolation, even as it renders them passive? ... The meaning of the following of Jesus cannot be that we must make these disconcerting notions our own to the fullest possible extent and that we must give the name "faith" to the strain such an effort imposes ... Concretely, we hope that there will be a future in which the powerful will no longer prevail over the weak; that it will for evermore be wrong to endanger and kill human beings and to cheat them of life. We call this hope a hope in the reign of God ... We believe that the poor and the weak can work miracles for one another' (p. 21f).

The conclusion of the paragraph seems rather lame, and it is a pity that the issues raised are not reconsidered at the end of the book, where no conspectus or epilogue is found. Instead, two chapters illustrate developments in the tradition. Chapter Two deals with sayings material shared by Matthew and Luke and supposedly stemming from a common source which reflects the experience of itinerant missionaries who urge the poor to renounce anxiety and live out the utopian vision of a people trusting God. The existence and extent of this common source have rightly been called into question, however, and the simplistic reading off of a social situation from a text, practised by redaction critics and by these authors, is too hazardous to be convincing.

Chapter Three makes an attempt to discover the addressees of Luke-Acts from Lucan material about rich and poor. Luke is seen as the pastor of the wealthy, outlining a utopian ideal to provoke his rich readers into repentance and almsgiving, but his community is envisaged as a social mixture experiencing tensions because they do not share possessions in the way depicted in the first chapters of Acts. Hence 'in Luke's view the following of Jesus takes concrete form in the solidarity of those whose divergent social and material circumstances would of themselves produce only hatred and destruction' (p. 120).

The book provides insights into the variety of teachings about rich and poor countenanced in the Synoptic Gospels, but it fails to evaluate the differing perspectives or show their strengths and weaknesses, in spite of the introductory remarks about a dialogue between the present and the past.

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