

JESUS, JUSTICE, AND THE REIGN OF GOD. A MINISTRY OF LIBERATION by William R. Herzog II *Westminster John Knox Press* Louisville, Kentucky, 2000. Pp. xv + 316, £19.95 pbk.

This well-written study of Jesus as a prophet of the justice of the reign of God belongs to the so-called third quest for the historical Jesus. This quest is according to the author both a historical and theological necessity whose purpose is to supplement the canonical portraits of Jesus. He criticizes earlier attempts, beginning with the attempt to write a biography of Jesus. The third, postmodern, quest is more modest—it does not try to define the whole reality of Jesus—but it is already yielding a rich harvest. It is an interdisciplinary approach, makes use of social models, studies the Galilean context, reads Jesus as a political and public figure and works without a dominating philosophical and theological synthesis such as, for instance, existentialism.

Herzog sees Jesus as a popular peasant prophet who interpreted the Torah not as a representative of the dominating 'great tradition' emanating from Jerusalem but as one who embodied the 'little tradition' of the oppressed farmers and village dwellers of Galilee. Pharisees and scribes represented the powers that be in Jerusalem who tried to convince the poor Galileans to obey the 'great tradition' and their interpretation of it and to pay the taxes due to the Temple and the political authorities. Herzog describes the political and religious situation of Galilee: the patronage system, the different levels of bureaucracy, the position of the priestly families, the role of city, village and family life, the Torah as providing a totalizing world view, the monetization of the economy, and the way the elites used the debts of the peasants to grasp more power and prestige.

In the third quest for the historical Jesus the incident in the Temple has been viewed as an event tracing to Jesus himself. The Temple was built as a 'cosmic mountain', in which the standard scrolls of the Torah were kept; it functioned as a bank—it thus was at the very heart of the system of economic exploitation—but was first of all the place where people could discharge their common debt to God who gave the Land to them and their personal debts incurred by their sins. Actually the peasants in Galilee were permanently in debt to the Temple because they could not pay their tithes after having paid taxes to King Herod and the various landlords who could use violence while the Temple authorities only disposed of persuasion. Being in debt to the Temple meant being unclean as well. The story in *Mark* 2, 1-12 shows Jesus as someone who acts as a priest: he announces God's forgiveness and restores to the sinner his identity as a child of God. Jesus has stepped into the role of a reliable 'broker' of the forgiving God. What the Temple has failed to do, Jesus declares done. Whatever happened at the so-called 'cleansing of the Temple', it announced that the Temple and the sacrificial system would come to an end, to be replaced, not by a new Temple, but by unconditional

forgiveness. It was not a 'cleansing' but a prophetic sign of God's judgement, a prelude to the coming justice of the reign of God.

Here I should like to add a remark. According to my own theological research, forgiveness was indeed the core of Jesus' religiosity. In my opinion his forgiving activity did not only concern the relationship of the poor to the Temple but referred as well to the often impossible situation which tax collectors and other 'sinners' were in. They were asked by the Torah to pay back the money they had extorted from both the rich and the poor and to give compensation at that, but though they may have liked to do so, they often were not capable of doing so, having spent the money already. Their situation was hopeless. Jesus ate with those people and this meant that he accepted them in spite of their debts. God was in his eyes a God of both the just and the evildoers. In this way he invited the victims of extortion to offer forgiveness to those sinners so that they would be converted. Jesus' eating with sinners was more than a profanation of the Pharisaic project of eating meals in a state of ritual purity, 'as if one were a temple priest', as Herzog proposes. Jesus' attitude to those enemies of the poor (and thus his enemies) must have puzzled the ordinary Galilean peasant as well. He may have been less popular in Galilee than Herzog assumes.

Many of the controversies of Jesus with the Sadducees, Scribes, Pharisees and Herodians were conflicts between the representatives of the 'great tradition' which served the interests of the ruling elites and Jesus representing the 'little tradition' rooted in the countryside. They concerned the two codes of the Torah, purity and debt. From the Galilean context Herzog is able to shed new light on controversies over purity, 'korban' and the sabbath, on stories such as the meeting with the rich ruler and on the parables of the mustard seed and the sower. Both parables say more about the movement around Jesus than about an eschatological future. The kingdom of God sayings are not statements about the end of the world but announce events that bring a phase, a chapter, of Israel's story to a close.

The ruling elites condemned Jesus, not as Jews, but as people who wanted to maintain their position. According to Herzog the resurrection validated Jesus' work. It is an event that happened to Jesus who was raised into a transformed existence. Christology and the historical Jesus cannot be separated: Jesus would become a desiccated figure, Christology an abstraction. Herzog concludes his inspiring book: 'A shadowy figure begins to emerge from the mists of the first century, standing on a far shore, beckoning the inquirer to come closer. Try as we might, we cannot approach the shore, but remain at sea, on the face of the deep, too far removed for a closer look. The mists thicken, and the figure disappears, leaving only the memory of his appearing. It is all we have to work with, but it is enough to encourage us to cast off from the distant shore and risk the voyage once again'.

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