

Reviews

THE DEATH OF THE MESSIAH FROM GETHSEMANE TO THE GRAVE. A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels by Raymond E. Brown, S.S. *Geoffrey Chapman*. 1994. Two Volumes, xxvi and xix + 1608 pp. £60, in The Anchor Bible Reference Library.

This massive work of scholarship, the result of ten years study, seemingly inaugurates a supplement to the Anchor Bible commentaries and Dictionary. On a wide range of subjects the volumes will present the cutting edge of the most recent scholarship 'for the broadest possible readership, ranging from world-class scholars . . . to general readers, who may not have special training or skill in studying the Bible.'

Scholars will know how to find their way about this book, but the less expert will need guidance. Here is a full-scale commentary on the Passion Narratives (PNs) of the four Gospels. It surveys an enormous mass of writing about them and brings together scattered views and proposals in order to explain in detail *what the Evangelists intended and conveyed* to their audience. In each episode it tries to assess what belongs to historical fact, what to old tradition, and what to theological construction. Fifty seven pages are required to explain the presumptions that appeared in the course of the study and now underlie the presentation of the results. For example, Markan priority, with some recourse to orality, works in practical exegesis. Indeed Mark offers a good summary of the main lines of the Jesus tradition, familiar to the major Christian communities from the earliest preaching. Mark's PN selected, compressed, simplified, sharpened, and dramatised the material, as happened in oral tradition — and the case for a pre-Markan PN is not made out. A vein of popular tradition supplies Matthew's special PN material, and his anti-Jewish tone reflects the struggle between Jewish and Christian-Jewish synagogues. Luke had no PN independent of Mark, and John's PN draws on pre-Gospel tradition but not on Mark, Matthew, or Luke.

Then after twelve pages of general Bibliography the commentary begins. The PN is presented in four Acts (Gethsemane, before the Jewish authorities, before Pilate, crucified and buried); each Act has one or two scenes, and each scene has its sectional bibliography, detailed comment, and sometimes analysis. There are appendixes on the Gospel of Peter, on dating the crucifixion, on passages difficult to translate, on Judas Iscariot, on Jewish groups and authorities, on the sacrifice of Isaac, on the Old Testament background, on Jesus' predictions of his passion and death, and (by M.I. Soards) on the question of a pre-Markan passion narrative. The book ends with an index of authors, of subjects, and of passages alongside translation of the four PNs.

To show how this works, I will outline the ten pages of commentary on Mk 14:33B-34. First 'He began to be greatly distraught and troubled.' The Pss describe the suffering of the just who plead with God. *Ekthambeisthai*

indicates a profound disarray, a shuddering horror; *Ademonein*, to be in anguish. These words are omitted by Luke 'who would never attribute psychological dismay to Jesus.' Matthew softens *ekthambeisthai* to *lypeisthai* 'be sorrowful'. Why this distress? See Ps 55:5–6. In Mark and Matthew it is not yet said that Satan has entered Judas, so that is not the cause. Was it anticipation of physical pain? Or being abandoned by all close to him? Or enduring a cursed death (Gal 3:13)? Or becoming sin (2 Cor 5:21)? Or the abandonment of the Son of Man who is also the Suffering Servant who finds himself without the good that could fill his life? Or because of uncertainty about the value or meaning of his death? 'In my judgement Jesus' distress must be related to the eschatological context of his suffering and death, to be established by 14:53–58 as Jesus prays for deliverance from the hour and the cup and warns about trial (p.154 — but that reference should be 35–38).

'My soul is very sorrowful unto death'. Cf. Ps 42:6. What is the meaning of 'unto death'? (a) sorrow on a level of that produced by awareness of imminent death? (b) Sorrow bringing him close to death? (c) Sorrow leading to desire for death? (d) Sorrow lasting till death? Since (c) and (d) are banal, the meaning must lie in (a or b). Jesus is the weary prophet because he foresees his disciples scandalised and scattered by his arrest and death, after they have betrayed and denied him. Why are the three told to watch? Perhaps (a) as part of the Passover watch (but unlikely), or (b) to witness his prayer and suffering, or (c) as protection against surprise by enemies, or (d) as a companionable gesture, or (e) — this is the preferable answer — as an attitude required by the eschatological context of Jesus' death.

The corresponding Lukan words (Luke 22:40) are: 'keep on praying not to enter into trial'. Jesus is not in distress but in command. Luke refuses to describe Jesus' inner suffering: he is so at peace with God that he cannot be distraught by suffering inflicted on him. He is the model for Christian sufferers and martyrs. Sorrow in face of suffering is irrational, sinful, and the mark of one out of control. Total avoidance of *peirasmos* is a Lukan theme. *Peirasmos* means solicitation to evil, trial, testing by affliction, or some specific danger. There are temptations in ordinary Christian life that test one's fidelity to God but here a more specific meaning is needed, namely the great eschatological trial of which the agent is Satan.

The Analysis that surveys all five parts of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane admits that some regard the episode as discreditable, agrees that the scene was composed from previous sources that are now irrecoverable, and yet identifies probably early tradition — namely that Jesus, before he died, struggled in prayer about his fate. It is improbable that early Christians retained accurate memory of the wording he used but they understood his prayer in terms of the hour and the cup, and fleshed it out with words from the Psalms. Each evangelist knew different forms of the tradition and each developed it differently, as did the writer of Heb.4:14–16. In conclusion: 'That, in the last days of his life in Jerusalem as the leaders of his people showed unremitting hostility . . . Jesus would have struggled in prayer with God about how his death fitted into the inbreaking of God's kingdom is, in my judgement, so extremely plausible

as to warrant certainty' (p. 234)

That precis may perhaps indicate the thoroughness of the treatment, but it cannot display the immense range of knowledge, the sensitive care, the patient building up of possible conclusions or, sometimes, the frank admission of uncertainty. Only a year-long advanced seminar could offer a judgement on the whole work. But already certain impressions begin to form. Professor Brown is respectful of the long pre-modern traditions of biblical exegesis, but he is thoroughly engaged with the modern tradition that began in the eighteenth century by asking 'How do we know?' when theological statements were made, and did it really happen like that? when historical statements were made — refusing to be content with the reply 'so the Church has always taught and believed'. This is the historico-critical tradition in which I myself was trained, to which Catholic scholars in recent times have notably contributed. But it has two drawbacks. First, on most important questions reputable scholars are divided in their conclusions — as this book shows. In Appendix II it is decided that the Synoptic Gospels and John give irreconcilable chronologies, that the Synoptic dating of the crucifixion on 15 Nisan should be treated with utmost caution, or given up; and that Jesus died on 14 Nisan when the paschal meal was eaten. So John was right and Mark was wrong. I relish the remark (in another connection, p. 1312) about narratives where 'there is neither internal nor external evidence to cause us to affirm historicity.' In other words, despite the modern desire for 'historicity', our Christian convictions depend not on assurances about what really happened but on what happened plus what the evangelists made of it. Perhaps the uncomfortable results of this modern demand may dispose us to give a hearing to post-modern exegesis. Professor Brown declines to follow structural and/or literary criticism — which he dismisses (p.12, n. 11) by quoting a grotesque jargonistic example — but some way of approaching the Gospels is required when the pre-modern reading is discredited and the modern historic-critical exegesis leaves the Gospels and the scholars divided. I am in full sympathy with the methods of this book, but what shall I now say to a listening or a reading congregation?

In full sympathy — but not necessarily in full agreement. In so energetically appraising the work of others, Professor Brown often allows them to decide the terms within which a passage is to be discussed. For example, in the section outlined above, he allows Satan to appear (without warrant) in the background. He introduces the currently fashionable (though not easily justifiable) martyrdom theme. He gives the stock interpretation of *peirasmos* as 'temptation' but forgets that in Jewish writings it often means 'provocation' as (in my opinion) it does in the Lord's Prayer and here also. And he persistently refers to the eschatological context of the Gethsemane prayer — meaning that Jesus was just about to undergo the great cosmic conflict with ultimate evil. Surely that must sound preposterous to anyone who has read accounts or seen pictures of the Holocaust or lost relatives in it; to anyone who subscribes to Amnesty International. The word 'eschatological' should be kept for the possibly violent, possibly sudden ending of a long-established, possibly well-defended state of society. Jesus was deeply disturbed in Gethsemane because he was embarked on a high-risk strategy which, if it went wrong,

might destroy the Jewish people whom he intended to save.

The PNs in their basic similarity and remarkable diversity, in their narrative and figurative language, in their reference to Roman and Jewish judicial procedures, present some of the most strenuously disputed questions in New Testament scholarship. Here they all are, woven into the Commentaries and Analyses, treated with patient care, each brought to a judicious and usually unemotional conclusion or sometimes to a suspension of judgement. For example: What was the Sanhedrin? Not the body described in the Mishna, nor administering Mishnaic rules. (But Professor Brown seems not to know Martin Goodman *The Ruling Class of Judaea* (1987) which first persuaded me that the Sanhedrin of the PN was a Roman-appointed quango of wealthy priests and laymen.) What were Sadducees and Pharisees, and what part did they play? Could they impose the death penalty, at least in some cases? Is there persuasive evidence of Jewish involvement in the death of Jesus and could it be said that they were not guilty but responsible? The hostility to Jews in the PNs requires six pages of comment (pp. 391–397). The strange roles of Annas and Caiaphas in John. Was Jesus against the Temple? And why was the testimony against him said to be false? What were the meanings of Messiah, and the Son of God, and of Son of Man if it was or was not a Jewish title? There is no real evidence that claiming to be Messiah was blasphemous; perhaps Jesus was condemned for being a false prophet or for arrogantly claiming prerogatives and status properly associated with God. Further, what information is needed about Roman administration, Jewish and Roman trial procedures? And Herod's involvement, the historicity of Jesus Barabbas, the so-called Passover release, and the special features of the trial before Pilate in John? What was the manner of crucifixion and its physiological effects? How to understand the various and non-agreeing words from the cross, and the extraordinary phenomena accompanying the crucifixion?

Scholars will turn to all this with gratitude and sharpened attention. Non-professionals, in my opinion, had better begin by reading an Analysis, then turning back to the preceding Commentary, before re-reading the Analysis. The Analyses are to be found in paragraphs 11, 16, and 24; and at the end of paragraphs 26, 27, 29, 32–36, 39, 41–44, and 46–48.

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CONFUSIONS IN CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ETHICS: PROBLEMS FOR GENEVA AND ROME by Ronald H. Preston, London, *SCM Press*, 1994. Pp.202. £12.95.

Ronald Preston is the doyen of British Christian social ethicists. Through a series of significant contributions down the years he has defined the subject of 'Ecumenical Social Ethics', and made it his own. His new book usefully describes the major events and documents of Christian social ethics of recent times, both from the Vatican and from the largely Protestant ecumenical movement. Preston then presents on his own behalf, and as a leading spokesman for the group of 'friendly critics' of the World Council of Churches' recent work on social ethics, a disturbing account of the present state of the art in the WCC and (to a lesser extent)