

Jesus in the New Testament: Just How Real is He?

Colleagues,

In this week's ThTh offering, Crossings colleague Steve Krueger reviews a book by Ernest Werner. Ernest and I were together as students at Concordia Seminary in the early 1950s. I helped him get into trouble by publishing his article "Orthodoxy Against Itself" in the SEMINARIAN, our student theological journal at the sem. It was the last issue of the school year (June 1954), the end of my own last year at the sem. Dick Baepler and I were co-editors.

I don't remember what all happened to Ernie in the aftermath, for I was graduated and gone, and Ernest still had some semesters to go. For Missouri-insiders, this will suffice: he got on the hit-list of fellow-students Herman Otten and Kurt Marquart, his classmates. They outed him to the synod's president John Behnken. And thus, as his daughter told me in her letter accompanying the book, "daddy was ordained elsewhere." In subsequent years we lost track of each other. Until last year when his daughter Lois sent me his book for review.

I asked Steve Krueger—himself an LCMS pastor with scars—to do it. A fair number of his earlier reviews are in the ThTh archives on the website. He persistently goes for the jugular in every review. Steve agreed again and has handed in this empathic and probing review. Even if you have no antenna for signals from those ancient Wars of Missouri, Steve expands the agenda to speak to folks like us today—some (many?) of whom might wonder—every now and then—if that Jesus Seminar crowd might just be right. You'll get the message.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

**A Review of Ernest Werner's ROD OF JESSE.
(Trumansburg, NY: Dwarf Lion Press, 2008).
338 pages, \$14.95 US.**

Helmut Thielicke somewhere compares the Word of God to a little girl standing in front of a mirror. She notices the compelling figure standing before her. The girl stares for a time and then raises her right arm and sees the figure reflect the very same movement. She raises her left arm and the figure does the same. She jumps up and down and the figure before her mimics the same movement until, in an exciting moment of self-conscious discovery, the little girl exclaims, "That's me!" From that moment the child will never be the same. How do you explain or prove such a breakthrough? You really can't. Its truth is self-authenticating. So it is, says Thielicke, with how the Word of God establishes itself in the believing community. You hear the bible's stories about creation and fall, wilderness wandering, conquest, exile and restoration, cross and resurrection, until suddenly, as if before a mirror, you say, "Aha! That's about me! I am Adam. I am Eve. I am faithless Israel. I am Paul the persecutor, Peter the denier, the divinely estranged one in need of redemption and fed by the Word's promise which has as its center Jesus the Christ." Proofs for such a thing only ultimately reside in what faith suddenly sees, nurtured in the believing, confessing community, with faith's gospel or kerygma, as Werner Elert puts it, the "punctum mathematicum," the self-authenticating point, beyond which one cannot go without losing everything.

Paul Tillich says the same as he discusses the "theological

circle." Outside that circle, as faith intuitively grasps the kerygma's truth, you can have historical figures, events, experiences which may be approached by modernism's various scientific quests but what faith sees within the circle evaporates into unknowable mist beyond that circle's boundary. Tillich stood in the legacy of St. Anselm whose "credo ut intelligam" ("I believe that I may understand") echoed the same and Anselm's maxim similarly restated Augustine's "crede, ut intelligas" ("believe, so that you may understand"). Or, as Luther would have it, "Wie glaubst du, so hast du." Finally in the end, "as you believe, so you have."

Since the Enlightenment, however, other approaches to scripture, those from "outside the circle," have been tried. Could the new science of the enlightened mind establish historic faith? What was once taken as objectively true "out there" in an earlier time because unquestioned authority said so, was now seen as having collapsed as the subjective mind began to be thought by Enlightenment sophisticates to organize reality. Luther is even listed by some to be among the early post-medieval culprits, who had such a high regard for subjective faith that it could create both God and an idol and thus construct and organize reality. For Luther, of course, faith's grasp was on the reliable Word and the Reformer never left the theological circle.

Yet, students of the Reformation's influence and of Luther's thinking, like atheistic Feuerbach, were quick to notice how the claim to faith, that it "made both God and an idol," could just as easily be seen as constructing a fiction for the alienated human personality. Thus entered onto the scene of scientific modernism new quests to establish what might be reliably known to the modern, scientific mind. If the Gospels, like the rest of Scripture, could be studied with modernism's critical, scientific, historic assumptions, was there any claim which faith had apprehended and believed that could stand? The most

urgent quest which emerged was the one for the historic Jesus, the ultimate object of the Christian faith. Could something of a historic Jesus be known scientifically to satisfy the demands of the modern, scientific mind if the theological circle could no longer stand the scrutiny of modernity?

When I entered Concordia Seminary, St. Louis in 1971 from the Missouri Synod's feeder system, that quest, with its attendant names like Strauss, Schweitzer and then later, Bultmann, had been generally relegated to the trash heap of history, worth noting as a footnote and having reached generally a dead end after over two centuries of searching. Newer, better waves of scholarship, less enamored with Continental Liberalism and its links with modern historicism, had grown attentive again, especially with Barth's new approach, to listening to scripture as proclamation in the pilgrimage of the historic community of faith. Were those scriptures historically mediated? Yes, of course. The New Testament especially, including the Gospels, were rich in the meanings and the symbols of Jewish apocalyptic, given the reality of the destruction of the Temple, with the scriptures being presented as proclamatory documents of faith to speak to those times in their context. Yet, if you wanted to know about Jesus, you would have to look at how he was being believed. To try to extract a Jesus from outside that circle of faith, was to move to a bankrupt place without meaning. It was asserted once again that Jesus and faith could never really be separated. During my seminary era, despite Missouri's battles of the time, the fact was that modernism was treated as yesterday's news by most of us.

Yet, apparently, at that same Concordia Seminary of an earlier era that had not always been so. A generation before, McCarthy-era right-wing ideologues apparently still got mileage out of finding modernist heretics everywhere, including among their classmates, ready to pounce on the unsuspecting faithful with

modernist doubt about biblical myths and legends. One of those targets became the author of ROD OF JESSE, Rev. Ernest Werner, whose seminary preparation for ministry was interrupted when he was turned in and removed from Concordia's student body. Rev. Werner's journey took him to another body of Lutheranism and eventually into the Unitarian Church tradition.

ROD OF JESSE is Werner's recent self-published book, the obvious result of many years of reflection on the question of the historic Jesus and what, if anything, can reliably known about the one called the Christ. Self-published materials are, in and of themselves, already mildly curious, even in an age of desktop publishing. They can be, like the unfiltered internet, about anything and of any quality, not having been tested and refined by the publication process involving publishers and editors. They can range from the tracts and books the fellow in the soiled overcoat passes out on the subway to save your soul to the elegant JESUS AND THE NEW AGE commentary by F. Danker on the Gospel of Luke. In my opinion, some of the flaws in ROD OF JESSE can be attributed to the lack of a formal editorial hand, making the book difficult to recommend to contemporary readers.

The work immediately immerses its reader in a world of the modernist quest for the historic Jesus without explaining why the search ought to matter in this post-modernist day and age. It is as if a conversation is being picked up from a half-century ago, perhaps one which might have been heard in seminary dorm bull sessions between fundamentalists and modernists, and then transposed into this day and time with little regard for the waves of biblical scholarship and insights which have transpired over at least two generations. Authoritative names such as Käsemann, Conzelmann, Dieter-Betz (any serious exegete after Bultmann, actually) are simply conspicuous by their absence. This serious lapse is compounded by a stream of consciousness style of anecdotal writing leaving its reader

bouncing around from the earliest questers for the historic Jesus like Erskine and Dupuis, Schweitzer and Bultmann to the bizarre theories of a John Allegro and his book THE SACRED MUSHROOM AND THE CROSS, from which the author's somewhat vague label of "Negative Critics" emerges. It is apparently these voices the author sets up as his debating partner as he asks if the Jesus of the Gospels is real and, if so, how? Forty or so pages into the book, the author lets his reader glimpse why any of this should matter :

"In the Altoona [Pennsylvania] Public Library, which was then housed in a mere wing upstairs of one of the public schools, I discovered THE QUEST OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS as a young pastor in that Pennsylvania railroad town. Although Schweitzer had barely figured in our classes at Concordia Seminary, I read his autobiography there, OUT OF MY LIFE AND THOUGHT, which was published in an attractive 35-cent Mentor book, and now I was drawn to the QUEST. Clearly, the English title of this book reminds us of the common phrase, 'going in Quest of,' so that this contraband of the higher criticism is being smuggled under the flag of a skillful literary allusion to a Grail Quest. In England theology is a timid affair where literary people and a few philosophers have done their thinking for them, but who invented this skillful title? It was FC Burkitt, an excellent scholar, who saw the value of this book, but I think we owe this title to the translator. A plain German sentence early on Mr. W. Montgomery, BD, translated as follows: "This dogma (namely, of the unity of the two natures of Christ, God and man) – this dogma had first to be shattered before men could once more go out in quest of the historical Jesus.

"What a suggestion of pilgrimage! What an invitation to pilgrimage, whereas in German Schweitzer had written 'ehe man den historische Jesus wieder suchen konnte.' His words are very plain. The idea is not that of MEN setting out on a Quest for

the Holy Grail of solid fact, but only of one's looking for the Jesus of history after a shattering of dogma, which means a collapse in the very supports of belief (p. 44)."

The passage is a good sampling of the author's writing style and of his rationale. What the author never answers is why this ought to matter to the rest of us for whom the quest had been long ago disposed of as futile. A good editor of a recognized publishing house might have asked, "Could you possibly be answering questions no one is seriously asking any longer?" While recognizing that ROD OF JESSE may be the culmination of a mind's life's work (thus, genuinely desiring to honor it as such), I find it difficult to see who its intended audience is, especially as post-modernism has now seemingly supplanted skeptical modernism as dogma. The very spirituality modernism critiques now defines the contemporary "zeitgeist."

Parts Two through Six of the book represent a somewhat uneven but interesting walk through the various synoptic pericopes along with the Fourth Evangelist. The author works out of the standard priorities of most of us trained since the 1960s with Mark's priority fairly well established along with Q as source for Matthew and Luke. That journey is arguably worth the price of admission (\$14.95) because each of the pericopes is thoughtfully considered from the perspective of the modernist skeptic.

His would be but one voice sitting around the table in the weekly ecumenical pericope study of local clergy, replicated hundreds of times over every week in most any community today. My voice would be respectful but certainly different, as I would point out how the various texts play out within the theological circle of the believing community of faith and the author probably wouldn't (although, he too, wonders and acknowledges

how the Gospels' words elicit faith).

Back in seminary days, Frank Beare's *THE EARLIEST RECORD OF JESUS* functioned much for us in the same way, methodically looking at each pericope through the lens of the synoptic tradition and speculating on why each Evangelist enlists the sources to paint his portrait of Jesus. Extended discussions by Rev. Werner on demons and the Messianic secret used by Mark are interesting and helpful but certainly neither new nor fresh and frankly dated.

The great themes of the post-Bultmannians such as Käsemann, that apocalyptic is the mother of New Testament theology linked to the great event of the destruction of the Temple, are missing in action in the author's treatment. One wonders if one of the problems with *ROD OF JESSE* is that its Unitarian author spent too little time with his Trinitarian counterparts over the past decades and may not have realized that what he undoubtedly thinks as eyebrow-raising isn't anymore. Most of us had similarly dealt with Bultmann, Wrede and the host of higher critical issues long ago, too. Yet, while he surely has a place at the table along with everyone else nowadays, that he ought to have gathered his thoughts in a book remains the question I would ask.

Well, that's not entirely true, either. There is the element of the bizarre one is not likely to get elsewhere. This is especially true in the protracted section which discusses the raising of Lazarus as an "archetype" of phallic deity (Part Four, pp. 181-217). If such a claim intrigues the reader, how the cult of Osiris may have informed the resurrection of Lazarus account, this is the book for you.

The author concludes with a considered claim that modernism's quest (the Negative Critics) really does lead to a dead end.

Using modernism's assumption, there is nothing reliably that can be known about the Jesus of the Gospels.

For a modern interpreter it is almost a duty to try to extract a 'historical Jesus' from his myth and present him as a winsome human being, a man of kindly impulse spreading encouragements, bolstering faith, and filled with insights-Hebrew insights. It cannot be done...The man is out of sight. A sort of rumor has replaced him (p. 321).

Indeed. Yet, had that been the point all along? The author seems to say so. To him, faith creates the myth of the Gospels in which resides the persistent, perhaps even compelling rumor around which a community continues to gather. To be sure, with the author, it is a rumor obscured through the controlling of ecclesial power, but a dangerous rumor nonetheless to change people's lives.

It is this rumor that a better book could have been about. What would rehabilitate this book is a major rewrite, under the scrutiny of an editor who knows how to organize and write, and that is in touch with the past 30 years of biblical scholarship. There the rumor is revisited, often with the canonical believing community in mind, and noting the persistence of faith.

Pastor Stephen C. Krueger