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Stefan Alkier, ed.

Antagonismen in neutestamentlichen Schriften: Studien zur Neuformulierung der “Gegnerfrage” jenseits des Historismus

Beyond Historicism – New Testament Studies Today 1

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The volume under review is the documentation of a conference that took place in November 2019 at the Johann-Wolfgang-von Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt am Main. At the same time, it is the programmatic first item of a new series that comes with the pointed (some might say antagonistic; see below) title “Beyond Historicism – New Testament Studies Today.” The prefaces by the series editors (xi–xii) and the volume editor (xiii–xv) sketch the basic intention of this series as a forum for research that is critical, interdisciplinary, and hermeneutically and semiotically conscious of the difference between data, interpretations of data, and facts. The series is meant to comprise genuine contributions to research that generate new knowledge in an intersubjectively intelligible way, for example exegetical studies of a quality that colleagues from neighboring disciplines (classicists, historians etc.) can take seriously. However, the prefaces do not specify what is the “historicism” that the series wants to overcome. Is it just a straw man from the nineteenth century?

Some answers come from the introductory essay by Stefan Alkier: “Auf dem Weg von der ‘Gegnerfrage’ zur neutestamentlichen Konfliktforschung” (3–44) that opens section A, “Grundlegungen.” What Alkier wants to overcome is exegesis in the footsteps of Johann Salomo Semler, Johann Ernst Christian Schmidt, and Ferdinand Christian Baur, whom he blames for proceeding “from history to text,” that is, for deducing the interpretation of New Testament texts from a preconceived global theory of the history of earliest Christianity (or of history in general). Contrary to this, Alkier wishes to maintain the primacy of the text (“Primat des Textes”) and proposes “abductive reasoning” as a way of generating

knowledge that meets the standards of responsible science (“wissenschaftlich”). Few would object to this. This general ethos is then broken down to the concrete subject matter of the volume: the polemics and conflict-laden texts in the New Testament will be studied in their own right, using the appropriate categories from political- and social-conflict studies. This widening of the perspective allows a more precise understanding of the different kinds of conflicts. There are *agonistic* (rule-based, as in sports) competitions with *opponents*, and there are *antagonistic* (existentially decisive) confrontations with *enemies* that typically do not allow for a peaceful settlement. This will feed productively into exegetical conflict research (a field of exegesis has often suffered from a lack of hermeneutical sophistication).

Eckart Reinmuth’s “Positionen im Konflikt” (45–70) seconds Alkier’s theoretical underpinnings of the volume and makes the connection to political-conflict studies more explicit. The distinction between agonistic and antagonistic conflicts is traced back mainly to the work of Chantal Mouffe, coming from political-conflict studies. Mouffe’s studies raise awareness for the inevitable antagonisms in every society. But Reinmuth also provides an overview of criticism of Mouffe’s work.

After these two foundational contributions, the main part of the volume (section B: “Fallstudien,” 71–485) turns to application. Almost every writing in the New Testament is studied with regard to the conflict(s) fought or represented in it. The first part (73–215) is concerned with epistolary literature: Michael Rydryck on Paul’s uncontested letters (which, by the way, is a historicist category); Tobias Nicklas on 2 Thessalonians; Werner Kahl on Colossians and Ephesians; Korinna Zamfir on 2 Timothy; Jisk Steetskamp on Hebrews; and Anni Hentschel on James). The second part (217–357) is on narrative literature. “Synoptische Evangelien und Apostelgeschichten” includes Reinhard von Bendemann on Mark; Kristina Dronsch on Judas in the Gospel of Mark; Michael Schneider on Matthew; Mogens Müller on Luke-Acts; and Tobias Nicklas on apocryphal Acts of Apostles (the only contribution on a noncanonical topic). The third part (359–485), however, is not defined by a formal literary criterion but by a traditional authorial ascription, the “Corpus Johanneum”: Dominic Blauth on the Johannine Epistles; Christos Karakolis on “Jews” in the Gospel of John; Luca Ganz on Apocalypse of John (Rev 2:12–16); and Stefan Alkier on the Apocalypse of John. Unfortunately, there is no explicit reflection on how the genre of the texts in question (narratives versus epistolary literature in the broadest sense) affects the kind of conflicts to be found in the respective writings and possible methodological differences in approaching these different genres. It seems that the application of Mouffe’s categories works quite well for epistolary literature, while, generally, the authors working with narratives seem to have a harder time fitting their texts into the volume’s outline. The ambiguity of the term *antagonist* here becomes evident: either the adversary in an antagonistic conflict (as in conflict studies) or the opposite of the protagonist (as in narratology). This ambiguity, however, is not addressed.

Some of the authors connect their textual studies commendably with the volume’s overarching questions: Michael Rydryck, in “Paulus als kontroverser Mediator” (75–102), working with the entire corpus of Paul’s undisputed letters, analyzes the role(s) of the apostle in different conflicts and extends the theoretical grid to three categories (“Wettstreit,” “Streit,” “Widerstreit”). His essay concludes with

some further reflections on the ethics of conflict and of interpretation. Korinna Zamfir's "Antagonisms and Identity-Construction in 2 Timothy" (162–73) most seriously engages Mouffe's political theorizing in view of the textual material present in 2 Timothy; her focus is especially on the role of suffering (brought about from outside or from within a given group). She eventually questions Mouffe's basic assumption that "antagonisms are ... intrinsic to all human communities and to any collective identity" (171). Dominic Blauth's "Streitigkeiten in der Familie? Konstellationen von Konflikten in den Johannesbriefen" (361–85) also successfully integrates theory and concrete exegesis of writings that feature partly fierce polemics and have seen several attempts to make sense of the polemics. Blauth applies not only the categories from conflict studies, but he also takes seriously the concept of constellation(s), which emphasizes, among other things, the relevance of the observer's point of view. In the Johannine Epistles, he states a basic antagonism, although some conflicts (esp. in 3 John) can be identified as agonistic. Ultimately, agonistic conflicts become antagonistic when the question of salvation is touched.

As a whole, this volume opens up some important avenues into the field of conflict studies, and all the contributions show that this field can provide profitable insights for studying the many conflicts that appear—in one way or the other—in the writings of the New Testament. Here we find hermeneutical tools to approach these (traces of) conflicts in significantly more nuanced way. At the same time, however, the volume's outline shows how difficult it is to move consistently "beyond historicism."