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Werner Zager, ed.

Jesusforschung in vier Jahrhunderten: Texte von den Anfängen historischer Kritik bis zur

De Gruyter Texte

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Courses on the historical Jesus or Jesus of history usually begin with history of research, pointing back to pioneers such as Hermann Samuel Reimarus and other protagonists of the Enlightenment and of liberal theology. One can get the impression that following this history of research back to the nineteenth and even eighteenth century requires not only a specialized but a long-established and well-kept library. That is basically true, but Werner Zager now has compiled a collection of classic texts (chapters or excerpts from seminal books, partly even entire articles) that can serve as a sort of compendium with respect to this history, even and especially for those who lack the opportunity to consult a major library.

The collection is arranged in a strictly chronological manner and subdivided into five main parts: (1) texts from the beginnings of historical criticism (Hermann Samuel Reimarus to David Friedrich Strauß [critical and popular editions]), from 1767 to 1864 (1–58); (2) texts from the “liberal” quest for the historical Jesus (beginning with Heinrich Julius Holtzmann), from 1863 to 1876 (59–108); (3) texts that belong to the end of “Leben-Jesu-Forschung” (from Martin Kähler to Rudolf Bultmann), from 1892 to 1926 (109–294); (4) texts representing the “new quest” for the historical Jesus (Joseph Klausner, Ernst Käsemann, Joachim Jeremias, Herbert Braun), from 1952 to 1969 (295–354); and

(5) texts attributed to the “third quest” (reaching from Geza Vermes’ *Jesus the Jew* [1974] to Ulrich B. Müller: “Jesu Heilsverkündigung und das Problem der Gerichtsverzögerung,” *ZNW* 102 [2011]: 1–18) (355–728). Within each part, the texts are numbered consecutively, so that Reimarus’s *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes* bears the number 1.1, while Ulrich B. Müller’s relatively recent article is number 5.19. Each part is prefaced with a brief introduction outlining the presuppositions and the intellectual context of each phase of Jesus research. These helpful introductions are accompanied by sets of essay questions (questions, however, that students can hardly answer after having read the introduction only). This design makes clear that the book is intended as a resource for study, perhaps to be used in a course on the historical Jesus. It could be a nice exercise to read, for example, the excerpts from Arthur Drews (209–19) and Wilhelm Bousset (221–35) together.

The breadth of the material assembled in this volume is immense, and structuring it is a major challenge. Zager has chosen a chronological sequence in conjunction with thematic headings that are meant to characterize epochs in the history of research. This is one possible way of organizing the wealth of scholarship contained in this book. Nevertheless, while generally plausible, this arrangement comes with some problems, as the history of research rarely progresses uniformly in one direction. Two instances may be pointed out. First, the end of liberal “Leben-Jesu-Forschung” is marked by Martin Kähler’s study *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche Christus* (1892) (3.1), which opens the third main part of the collection. But the reader is struck to find an excerpt from Harnack’s *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1900) under the very same heading (3.3).

Things become even trickier in the fifth main part devoted to the third quest. Beginning with Geza Vermes’s *Jesus the Jew* (1974), this part constitutes about half the book. The texts assembled here show the heterogeneity of recent Jesus research and make one wonder about the usefulness of a strictly chronological arrangement in connection with a thematic heading (hence two different, if not conflicting, principles of organization). In other words, can the texts by Richard A. Horsley (5.3), John P. Meier (5.5, 7) and Gerd Theißen (5.12) all be placed under the heading *third quest* merely because all three of them wrote after 1970?

The fifth main part shows that the choice of texts is inevitably subjective, one might even say arbitrary—not to speak of the constraints coming with a manageable page count. There are, of course, good reasons for including the texts that are part of the collection; however, readers working with the book may wonder whether all of them are equally important and whether it would not have been a good idea to include some other texts.

In my opinion, it would have been desirable to include some text from the Jesus Seminar (not in support of its methods or conclusions but for the sake of documentation), as well as some recent texts that go beyond the third quest: hermeneutical reflections about the possibility of any historical quest for Jesus (connected with the names of, e.g., Jens Schröter or Gerd Häfner) and some recent fundamental criticism of historical quests (one might think of Klaus Wengst or Chris Keith).

On the whole, the book seems to be intended for German students. Two texts (no. 1.4, by Ernest Renan, and no. 5.13, by John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed) are given in German translation. The essay questions that come along with the introductions will be helpful in revising for examinations; the phrasing of these questions shows considerable pedagogical sensitivity. With a student audience in view, it would be even more helpful to preface individual texts, too, with brief introductions to outline the historical and/or bibliographical context—certainly “classics” such as Reimarus’s *Apologie* (1.1), Strauß’s *Leben Jesu* (1.2, 5), Harnack’s *Wesen des Christentums* (3.3), or Käsemann’s “Das Problem des historischen Jesus” (4.2).

These remarks may seem extremely critical to the point of suggesting something like a new book. However, they should not obscure that the basic idea behind this volume is excellent. Zager’s collection meets a real *desideratum* in academic teaching: Students can learn about the history of Jesus research not just from handbooks but with the original texts in their peculiar language and agenda. Now there is flesh to the bones of names such as Reimarus, Kähler, Wrede, and Schweitzer. The collection allows not only the analysis of individual texts but also comparisons between different texts from the same period or observations as to how lines of reasoning or criteria for giving certain historical judgments developed over time. To be sure, this is not a book for linear reading from the first to the last page, but it is a most valuable resource that one can (and should) recommend to students. The criticisms made here are meant as suggestions for a second edition, which the book deserves by all means.