
Under the auspices of the "Interuniversitair Instituut voor Missiologie en Oecumenica" Johannes Nissen, lecturer in New Testament at the University of Aarhus (Denmark) has given a clear and well-balanced picture of the attitudes towards poverty and riches found in the writings of the New Testament.

Nissen writes as a New Testament scholar utilizing all exegetical and historical tools at our disposal. All along he asks, "Who has written the text? What did he in fact write? In which context was he writing?" as well as "What is implicitly assumed to be the common ground between writer and reader?" (n. 2). The emphasis, if anywhere, lies on the sociological analysis of the New Testament material, a comparatively new phenomenon in N.T. exegesis.

This means that the author distinguishes carefully between the different layers in the tradition embodied in the New Testament. In doing so he always takes into account the literary and the social context(s) of the various sayings, parables etc. His first chapter, "The Beatitudes and the Ministry of Jesus", discusses the Beatitudes in their most original form and in their most primitive setting. Next follows a chapter on "The Mission of Jesus and his Disciples", dealing with material in Q (the common source of Matthew and Luke) and significant parallel traditions in Mark. Chapters 3 and 4 are concerned with the gospels of Matthew and Luke (with Acts). Two smaller chapters, one dealing with the Epistle of James and the other with I Corinthians, conclude the exegetical - historical section.

In this first part of the book the author gives a good survey of the questions involved and the answers which have been and may be given. He takes into account numerous recent studies by exegetes and others, and gives a well-balanced picture of the various options. He leaves his readers in no doubt as to his own opinion, but is fair to others. While based on a "technical" assessment of exegetical and historical evidence, this survey reads very well; also non-specialists can see what is at stake and pursue certain issues further with the help of the literature mentioned in the notes.

The author, of course, does not write in a vacuum. His undertitle is "New Testament Perspectives on a Contemporary Theme" and - as Professor
Marc R. Spindler of the Department of Missiology of the "Interuniversitair Instituut" points out in his Preface to the book - his task was to place recent missiological developments in the perspective of biblical scholarship. To quote Professor Spindler: "He does not enter directly into the missiological discussion but offers a responsible exegetical and hermeneutical study which has something to say to his peers in biblical scholarship as well as to missiologists and missionary leaders" (p. ii).

Nissen's approach of the exegetical and historical material in part I of necessity required the hermeneutical reflection given in Part II of the present study. If texts can only be properly understood in their respective contexts, changes in context must be assessed carefully before one is able to say anything about the meaning of biblical texts in the situation(s) of to-day. All theology, all Christian ethics is "situational" as well as "traditional", and already the New Testament writings themselves illustrate this phenomenon with regard to the historical changes reflected in them.

In this section Nissen deals with subjects such as "Identifying the Poor - Identifying with the Poor" (chapter 8); "Theological and Ethical Motivations for the Identification with the Poor" (chapter 9); "Spirituality as Sharing in God's Compassion" (chapter 10); "The Poor, the Rich and the Good News" (chapter 11). In all chapters he gives, again, a careful assessment of the many issues involved, and numerous suggestions as to the implications of the N.T. texts for Christians and groups of Christians in the present-day world.

Precisely in its combination of exegetical and historical study and hermeneutical reflection this book may render invaluable service in the missiological and ecumenical discussion in progress. Because of its emphasis on the narrow connection between text and context it does not favour one-sided solutions or sweeping statements. Its emphasis on the radical "solidarity with the 'nobodies' of this world, the 'discarded people' " (A. Nolan quoted by Nissen on p. 22) which is found in all layers of the N.T. tradition precludes, however, all forms of theological and ethical escapism. This study is to be commended highly.

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