

on the origins of christology. The position it represents is beginning to appear in more recent christologies, such as that of Schillebeeckx. Nevertheless it is helpful to have it so ably summarised by a renowned scholar like Hengel. The discussion is heavily documented for those who wish to

follow up Hengel's argumentation. The only weakness worth noting is some of Hengel's implicit notions about the very earliest chronology of christology (elaborated elsewhere, particularly in the Cullmann *Festschrift*), but these in no way impair the value of this book.

ROBERT SCHREITER

ETHICS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, by Jack T. Sanders. *SCM Press*, London, 1976. 144 pp. £3.25.

The question is how can we use the teaching of the New Testament in making present-day moral judgements? The traditional Christian expectation has been that the New Testament will yield at least the principles which may then be extended and applied by the competent authorities to cases as they arise. But sometimes the problems are so complex (e.g. whether to fight in the Vietnam war) or so massive (e.g. the conservation of natural resources) that even such principles as we may derive from the New Testament appear unhelpful. Or else the problems facing us are quite outside the concern of any of the New Testament writers, issues thrown up only in recent years; so that to wrest guidance from the sacred page is a false and artificial exercise.

Professor Sander's thesis is that the usefulness of the New Testament is to be contested for reasons even more fundamental. The first Christian writers believed the world's End was near, as did Jesus himself. This belief determined their moral teaching: all of it must be read in this light. The seemingly impossible ideals found in the teaching of Jesus and Paul wear a different aspect when their short-term character is recognized: they were not expected to be kept for long in the conditions of this world.

And once the expectation that the End would soon come faded (as it seems to have done, at least in practical terms, towards the end of the period represented by the New Testament writings), then a more conventional moralism entered in. Its character showed few points of distinction from the moral teaching of the surrounding cultures. Christians became, on most points, decent men, like other decent men.

Hence (so the conclusion goes), the

New Testament is no help to us in making moral judgements, for either its focus is wrong (that is, where the End is in view) or its voice is purely conventional (that is, where it is not). With the decks thus cleared, the ancient ghost laid, we may set about our Christian moral thinking more profitably, using more helpful tools. It is not the purpose of this book to tell us what those tools are; the task is left to others by an exegete who recognizes his limitations.

But is the negative conclusion quite so clear? Or, rather, need it be negative in quite this way and to quite this degree? Granted how much Christians need to see that the New Testament will be misread if the circumstances of its writing and their difference from our circumstances are ignored; granted that its moral teaching is formed by situations which are alien to us; still, its moral vision may kindle ours and move us to make our own Christian judgements on our own new and complex issues. This may apply both to the general directions of teaching (e.g. the command to love) and to more specific provisions. We have no need to choose between slavish following and total despair of finding anything that we can use. The moral teaching of the New Testament, for all its diversity and its strangeness, was, in its heart, related to certain directions of belief about God which echo across to us, however much we need, once more, to set them now in the light of fresh circumstances of thought and culture.

This book is an admirable guide to the moral thought of many of the New Testament writers, and particularly good on Paul and the Johannine writings. But it draws from them only one of the possible conclusions.

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