

Reviews

JESUS WHO BECAME CHRIST, by Peter De Rosa. Collins, 1975 287 pp. £3.50

This does not seem to me a good book, though I agree with a very great deal of it. But it does raise two basic issues that need regular airing: the physical resurrection of Jesus, and the sinlessness of Jesus. Mr. De Rosa is persuaded that Jesus was *not* physically raised from the dead, and that he was possessed of the normal human ancestral naughtiness: I think he is wrong on both counts and will attempt to say why.

First to the resurrection: my world is, no more than Bultmann's, peopled with angels, demons and miracles. I think I feel the *scandal* of the resurrection as keenly as any: but I do not believe that it is for me to decide *a priori* how God should run his world. If it has pleased him, in his inscrutable wisdom, to puzzle and trouble idiots like myself with a hole in the side of a hill, then so he has. Long may such freedom flourish! De Rosa shows no sign of having really weighed the very careful arguments of R. H. Fuller in his excellent little book: *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives* (London, 1972). The story of the empty tomb has the most serious claim to be as primitive as anything else in the gospel tradition. And after all, a point not made by Fuller, if the so creative earliest christian community had really wished to invent a story about an empty grave, what on earth did they think they were doing in sending an obvious hysteric and romantic like Magdalen to the tomb, since her testimony is worthless precisely because she is a *woman*, and women were not able to witness in court cases in first century Jewish Palestine (for the details see J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*. London, 1969, pp. 374-375).

That a grave was empty of course *proves* nothing; it can at most put us to the question. There is evidence in the gospels themselves that a variety of answers were provided from the earliest times: the disciples stole the body, the gardener was bribed to remove it, etc. (see the neglected but most interesting popular essay by Anton Vögtle, in *The Bible in a New Age*, London, 1969). Nothing could demonstrate the resurrection of the Lord, and so the nannyish Protestant scruple for the vir-

ginal purity of faith (see, e.g. Bultmann's introduction to his splendid *Jesus and the Word*) could not possibly be wider of the mark. Of course it must ever remain within the bounds of historical possibility that Mary got the wrong grave, or that, however puzzlingly (but then our left hand often does not let the right know what it is doing), the disciples first robbed the grave and then proceeded to see the visions of their risen Lord—or vice versa. What, however, we do have, as responsible historians, to say is that the tradition of the empty grave is as old as anything in christianity.

And now to the naughtiness of Jesus: a more attractive picture than that of the apocryphal Jesus, certainly ("But the son of Annas the scribe was standing there with Joseph; and he took a branch of a willow and (with it) dispersed the water which Jesus had gathered together. When Jesus saw what he had done he was enraged and said to him: 'You insolent, godless dunderhead, what harm did the pools and the water do to you? See, now you also shall wither like a tree and shall bear neither leaves nor root nor fruit'. And immediately that lad withered up completely; and Jesus departed and went into Joseph's house. But the parents of him that was withered took him away, bewailing his youth, and brought him to Joseph and reproached him: 'What a child you have, who does such things'." Hennecke-Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol 1 p. 393. London, 1963). But is not De Rosa's Jesus finally a Jesus constructed along the same imaginative line? What is the evidence?

"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." 2 Cor 5:21. "Which of you convicts me of sin?" Jn 8:46. "You denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead." Acts 3:14-15. There can be no possible doubt about the witness of earliest christian tradition to the sinlessness of Jesus: the theological motivations are, however,

equally basic. What then might a historian say?

The first thing that needs saying to Peter De Rosa, is that this is after all a matter that needs argument: bland assumptions are not good enough. When Thomas (and in a superficial and fashion-ridden time I should wish to stand up and be counted some kind of student of Thomas) comes to examine the knowability of the Holy Three, *St. Th. Ia*, 32,1, he states most firmly that the Three-fold One is known to us only through his own self-revelation, and warns us against light-weight arguments: "Secondly, with regard to the usefulness of bringing others to faith. For if anyone introduces non-cogent arguments in order to establish faith he provides occasion for the derision of unbelievers: for they take it that we rely upon such arguments, and believe because of them. Therefore those things that are of faith should not be attempted to be proven except upon authorities, for those who accept authorities. For the others, however, it will suffice to defend the truth that those things that faith proclaims are not impossible." *ib.c.* What then are the *auctoritates*?

The midrashic stories of Jesus' childhood have all too often been glozed over, as recently by R. Laurentin in otherwise very helpful works: *Structure et Theologie de Luc 1-11*, and *Jesus au Temple, Mystère de Paques et Foi de Marie. Luc 2:48-50*. EB 1964 and 1966, in fundamentalist style. This is a pity, since it seems likely that Luke had something by way of genuine report, at whatever hand to work on in his very crafted constructive work. Here I would wish to refer particularly to his story of Jesus in the Temple: between the lines one glimpses a very stubborn, and apparently self-willed child ("Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"), who is very recognizably the Jesus of the later gospels. Luke, above all, has not failed to note the trait of the old

gospel tradition: "Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him for the crowd. And he was told, 'Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see you.' But he said to them, 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.'" Luke 8: 19-21.

The one thing we may, and must say of Jesus is that he went again and again to the outer limits of the permissible: and beyond. Clearly Jesus had learnt enormously from the ascetic John the Baptizer, and yet of Jesus it was said: "But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places and calling to their playmates, 'We piped to you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn,' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" Matt 11: 16-19. If we may risk any statement about the Jesus of history, (and I would wish to risk many,) we must say, in terms of that last shocking (!) saying but also with an eye to the many parables that breathe an unmistakable air of ripeness ("Ripeness is all"!), that Jesus was above all a man who enjoyed a party—in trust of the coming kingdom.

It has been just this aspect of Jesus that I have most missed in Peter De Rosa's book. I will try to forgive him his really horrid pieces of doggerel versification—Bishop Barry in TLS actually seemed to like them; I suppose they were meant originally for children in classrooms: but let me declare a preference for, e.g. The Songs of Innocence, or say, Honey and Gold; children deserve our best, do they not? Let us finally try to share, with Peter De Rosa, as I am sure we do, a mutual devotion to Jesus Lord and Christ.

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A JEWISH UNDERSTANDING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT, by Samuel Sandmel. SPCK, London, 1976. 336 + xxxiv pp. £4.75.

In writing this book, Professor Sandmel, a world authority on Jewish history and religion, aims to provide Jewish read-

ers with a straightforward, yet critical, introduction to the New Testament. Such an undertaking by a Jewish scholar was un-