Daniel Wanke

Das Kreuz Christi bei Irenäus von Lyon
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This book is a revision of Daniel Wanke’s dissertation submitted in 1996 to the Protestant theological faculty at the University of Mainz and supervised by Gerhard May. Part 1 examines the interpretations of the “cross” in the school of Ptolemaeus and by Valentinus, Mark the Magician, “Basilides,” other “Gnostics,” and Marcion (10–90). These initial analyses are both thorough and valuable for the light that they shed on a variety of second-century understandings of Jesus’ crucifixion. At each point the author asks what Irenaeus can reveal about the actual views of those criticized. Wanke is well aware, moreover, that Irenaeus may not fully disclose—or understand—that which his Demonstration (Epideixis) and work Against Heresies (Adversus haereses) deem “heretical.” For example, his discussion of “Basilides” (75–82; cf. 110–11) builds on the conclusion of Winrich A. Löhr (Basilidcs und seine Schule: Eine Studie zur Theologie- und Kirchengeschichte des zweiten Jahrhunderts (WUNT 83; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck [1996], 255–73) and others that Irenaeus’s testimony (Adv. haer. 1.24.3–7) is of dubious value for reconstructing the views of the historical Basilides (fl. 120–140 C.E.). Wanke notes correctly that whatever material Irenaeus (or Irenaeus’s source) mistakenly attributed to “Basilides” is, nonetheless, significant for the distinctive view that Simon of Cyrene (cf. Mark 15.21 par.)—not Jesus (!)—suffered on the cross.

Part 2 considers how Irenaeus responded to his various theological foes (91–142). For Irenaeus the problem is not that numerous “heretics” fail to acknowledge Christ crucified (Adv. haer. 5.18.1: ipsi autem haeretici crucifixum confitentur; a notable exception is Irenaeus’s “Basilides”). Rather, Irenaeus objects that they construe the crucifixion and its theological significance differently from the way he does (141). Irenaeus especially criticizes certain “gnostic” interpretations that summon the crucifixion to contrast the goodness of God with the evil creation, for which God is not responsible and in which Christ thus suffered and died. Both the similarities—such as the vested interests in Jesus’ death—and the differences between the theologies of Irenaeus and his assorted opponents strike this reviewer as equally intriguing and worthy of further research.

The third and longest part of Das Kreuz Christi bei Irenäus von Lyon examines the cross in Irenaeus’s theology (143–415). Here the author discusses Irenaeus’s approach to scripture as informed by a particular “canon of truth,” according to which God’s plan of creation and redemption is revealed (365–79; cf. the important article by Annette Yoshiko Reed, Evangelion: Orality, Textuality, and the Christian Truth in Irenaeus’ Adversus Haereses,” VC 56 [2002], 11–46, which appeared subsequent to the volume under review). According to Wanke, moreover, Irenaeus’s theology links together christology,
soteriology, and cosmology: Christ the divine Logos suffered within God’s (good) creation, which God will redeem at the end of time. Irenaeus likewise connects christology and soteriology with ecclesiology: the Church both receives and attests to God’s plan of salvation, in which Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection play a central role. One could, of course, respond to Irenaeus that this last point is tantamount to mandating that one [imagined] part of Christianity’s experiences become normative for all others, but this is an issue separate from Wanke’s astute analysis.

In terms of the book’s organization Wanke is to be commended for giving separate attention to Irenaeus’s opponents, to his criticisms of “heterodox” views, and to the cross in Irenaeus’s own theology. Any two (or all three) of these inquiries can so easily be conflated in an analysis of anti-heretical literature. Unfortunately, parts 2 and 3 in this study do not completely avoid this pitfall. Moreover, the author’s segmenting of his analysis leads (perhaps inevitably) to some repetition. In this reviewer’s opinion the book is far too long and repetitive. Additional editing, i.e., shortening by the author, especially in the third part on Irenaeus’s theology, would have made for a less cumbersome volume without detracting from its main points.

One of Wanke’s more noteworthy accomplishments is his demonstration that the cross does, indeed, play an important role in Irenaeus’s writings. Yet Jacques Fantino has objected that the author exaggerates the significance of the cross as an essential element in Irenaeus’s theology (see Fantino’s review of Das Kreuz Christi in the Revue des sciences religieuses 76 [2002], 103–4, here 104; cf idem, “La Théologie d’Irénée: lecture des Écritures en réponse à l’exégèse gnostique, une approche trinitaire [Cogitatio fidei, Paris: Cerf [1994], 180]). Fantino’s criticism may, however, be unjustified since Wanke acknowledges that at least in Irenaeus’s main work Against Heresies, “das Kreuz . . . nicht im Vordergrund steht” (412). A more apt critique of Wanke, I believe, concerns his not assessing the relative importance of the cross within Irenaeus’s theological system as a whole. Christ’s crucifixion certainly receives more attention from Irenaeus than it does, for example, from Justin Martyr, as Wanke himself notes (2–3). Yet, to what extent Irenaeus would have chosen to discuss the cross without the task of responding to “heretical” interpretations remains unclear. An inquiry into this matter which builds on Wanke’s important and otherwise comprehensive study could indeed be fruitful.

The volume includes three tables indicating references and uses of key terms in Irenaeus’s writings (ἀνακεφαλαίωσες, ὁρος, σταυρός crucifigo, etc.), a bibliography, and indices of ancient passages and modern persons (416–500).

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