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Editorial

Lines of influence – hypothetical and real

Pieter J. Lalleman

In this preface I want to take up a point which is mentioned in the review article by Christoph Stenschke which you find in this issue. He relates how some contemporary scholars, David Dockery and now Dieter Sanger, argue that the proselyte baptism practised by Jews in the time of the New Testament, probably originated later than the baptism of John the Baptist. The way for this view was prepared a long time ago by my famous predecessor as tutor of New Testament at Spurgeon’s College, George R. Beasley-Murray, who in his *Baptism in the New Testament* (1962) showed that neither Philo nor Josephus nor any contemporary Jewish writing mentions proselyte baptism (18–19). Dockery and Sanger now go so far as to suggest that the line of influence may in fact have been the other way round: the practices of John and the earliest Christians may have influenced the development of the Jewish use of ritual washing.

This suggestion reminds me of something I discovered as a by-product of my PhD research. In the Christian apocryphal text that I was studying, the *Acts of John*, I had come across the suggestion that the apostle John healed persons by merely touching them, that is to say, without use of further rituals or aids. Our Lord Jesus had of course done the same (Mark 6:56 // Matthew 14:36; Mark 5:27 // Matthew 9:20–21 // Luke 8:44) and Paul had followed in his footsteps (Acts 19:11–12). But it was suggested that this element of the *Acts of John* showed Hellenistic influence. I found that on the basis of Otto Weinreich’s *Antike Heilungswunder* (1909), it was generally stated in the commentaries that the idea that a simple touch can have healing power originated with the Greeks and had been adopted by the Christians. I was not immediately convinced, however, and checked Weinreich’s evidence - or rather, what turned out to be the absence of evidence. In fact I was unable to find any Greek cases of healings by a mere touch before the rise of Christianity. The Greek material collected by Weinreich and others after him

contains no pre-Christian parallels to the idea of ‘to touch for healing’. So I concluded that this form of healing likely originated with the Christian proclamation about our Lord Jesus, or indeed with our Lord himself, and that the Hellenistic stories about healing by touch were derived from the preaching of the gospel by the early church.

The same is probably true of the idea of resurrection. Liberals have long suggested that the ‘Easter myth’ has pagan roots, that is to say, that the story of the resurrection of Jesus was modelled on Greek stories about dying and rising gods and heroes. Once again we can legitimately ask who influenced whom, because the influence may in fact have been the other way round. Read more closely, the pre-Christian pagan stories about rising persons differ in important respects from the gospel of the resurrection. On the other hand, in the Greek novels from the second century AD onwards we suddenly find heroes rising from the dead. Why is this so and why exactly at this moment in history? The reading of G.W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History: Nero to Julian* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1994) helped me to see that it is not unscholarly to suppose that the Christian gospel early on had considerable influence on the surrounding culture. What this Jewish deity did, the Greek heroes easily and swiftly imitated!

Suggestions like the ones I am making here are necessarily tentative. We should always remain open to new discoveries and we must avoid generalisations. Each case has to be studied on its own, and lines of dependence can in principle point in either direction. It would also be wrong to assume that the oldest or most original conception is necessarily the best or the most reliable. Our God would have been quite capable of revealing himself in a reworking of existing materials, as indeed often seems to have been the case in Old Testament times. Yet the picture which arises from the three cases of baptism, healing and resurrec-

tion suggests that Christianity was not always on the receiving end. The History of Religions School was often correct to see similarities but its presuppositions about lines of influence were not necessarily accurate. I would suggest that more research in this area is required.

I have great pleasure that the present issue contains two articles on very diverse countries of Europe, Russia and Belgium. Each article in its own way makes an important contribution to the authentic flavour of our journal. May many more follow.

STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY AND THOUGHT

Protestant Nonconformity and Christian Missions

Martin Wellings (ed.)

The aim of the book is to explore some of the contributions made by Protestant Nonconformity to Christian missions. The occasion of the conference which gave rise to this volume was the centenary of the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910, but the topics treated here deliberately range more widely, covering missions in Britain and the wider world from the eighteenth to the twentieth century.

'Martin Wellings is to be warmly thanked for gathering such an informative and stimulating collection of papers. They are scholarly and accessible, and deserve to be widely read.'

Alan P.F. Sell, University of Wales Trinity Saint David

'These essays examine with freshness and vigour the changing motives and attitudes, methods and strategies of the various mission agencies and focuses on many of the men and women who carried the Gospel overseas and into the homes and institutions of Britain.'

David Killingray, School of Advanced Study, University of London

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