

*Acts of God in History: Studies Towards
Recovering a Theological Historiography*
Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum
Neuen Testament 317

Roland Deines, edited by Christoph Ochs and
Peter Watts

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser anregende Band beinhaltet elf Studien von Roland Deines, welche die Überzeugung verbindet, dass Gott in der Geschichte handelt und dass infolgedessen eine theologisch motivierte Geschichtsschreibung nicht nur möglich, sondern auch nötig ist. Deines bietet nicht nur eine ausgewogene Begründung für seine Überzeugung, sondern zeigt auch deren Vorteile auf. Somit schlägt er erfolgreich die Brücke zwischen historischer und theologischer Wahrheit.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet ouvrage stimulant regroupe onze études de Roland Deines qui ont pour dénominateur commun la conviction que Dieu agit dans l'histoire et, par conséquent, qu'une historiographie motivée par des considérations théologiques est non seulement possible mais aussi nécessaire. L'auteur argumente en faveur de cette conviction et montre quels bénéfices on peut tirer d'une telle approche. Il bâtit ainsi un pont entre la vérité historique et la vérité théologique, de façon convaincante.

SUMMARY

This stimulating volume consists of eleven studies by Roland Deines that are connected by the conviction that God acts in history and that, as a consequence, a theologically motivated historiography is not only possible but also necessary. Deines both provides a reasonable defence of this conviction and demonstrates the benefits. He thus successfully bridges the gap between historical and theological truth.

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This volume is a collection of eleven previously presented and/or published studies by Roland Deines, currently Professor of New Testament in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies in Nottingham. These papers have been gathered under the theme 'Acts of God in History' by two of Deines' former doctoral students, Christopher Ochs and Peter Watts, who were credited with editing the volume, a task which included translating some of the contributions from the original German. The papers have been revised from their original publications to varying degrees. Following the introductory chapter, the collection is divided into three sections: 'Historical Studies' (4 chapters), 'Responses to the God who Acts' (3 chapters) and 'Methodological Probing' (3 chapters). Since it is impossible to do justice to each of the individual chapters in a brief review, we will focus on two chapters.

The opening chapter, 'God's Role in History as a Methodological Problem for Exegesis: Towards a Historical-Critical Assessment of the Conviction that God Acts in History' (1-26), sets the stage and provides the rationale for the development of a historiography that takes seriously the conviction that God acts in history. Deines' overall theological objectives are on full display here, which makes this both a useful introduction to the volume and a helpful interpretive lens through which to read the subsequent contributions. This chapter also allows Deines to situate his viewpoint within modern (secular) scholarship, which has largely embraced a dichotomy of faith and reason. In light of Christian scholars' frequent capitulation to this sharp division, Deines challenges the scholarly community in general to allow space for the probing of what Thielson has called 'transempirical realities' (see p. 2 n. 4), that is, those realities that cannot be tested by traditional empirical methods but which are, despite this, equally 'real'. Differently put, Deines seeks to bridge the gap between historical and theological truth or, to use a concrete example, to reconnect the historical Jesus with the theological Christ. Moreover, he wishes to do so in a responsible and sophisticated manner, which is why he concerns himself with questions of methodology.

The following studies are united by these underlying objectives – although some contribute to the development of the theme more self-consciously than others – and serve either as test cases for the application of a theological historiography or as interactions with other scholars who are wrestling with similar methodological concerns (Joseph Ratzinger / Pope Benedict XVI and Martin Hengel). The interaction with modern scholarship is substantial in all contributions, in particular through extensive footnotes, which contributes greatly to the usefulness of the volume.

In his chapter 'The Apostolic Decree: Halakhah for Gentile Christians or Christian Concession to Jewish Taboos?' (121-188), Deines discusses the position of Jakob Jervell, followed by Jürgen Wehnert, that the Decree in Acts 15:19-21 implies that for Luke the Gentile Christian churches remain, in principle, liable to a form of Torah obedience, despite the exemption for circumcision. In this view, the purity laws of the Old Testament would be reduced to a minimum, in order to establish on the basis of Torah that Jewish and Gentile Christians could live together in the apostolic church.

Deines carefully examines the narrative context, the primary orientation and the four individual regulations of the Apostolic Decree. He shows that idolatry has to be seen as the dominant element in the Decree, inasmuch as idolatry is the most obvious and damaging consequence of having lost the relationship to the one creator God. His conclusion is that 'the Decree obliges Gentile Christians to live a life according to the most basic elements of God's order of creation'. It follows, says Deines, 'that this does not denote submission to the Torah ... but it is an expression of their faith and

their relation to the God of Israel, who has called them in Jesus to be his people' (186).

It is worth considering the following addition to Deines' argument. The decision of the council in Jerusalem was taken in a unique redemptive-historical situation in which two Christian cultures – an older (the mother church in Jerusalem) and a younger (the daughter church at Antioch) – had to match with each other. The younger had to respect the older, the older had to accept the younger. As early Christianity developed, however, things rapidly changed. Jewish Christians became a small minority and the traditional distance between believers of Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds faded away. This explains why, already in the time of Augustine, the need to keep the Apostolic Decree was no longer felt in the Christian church (*Contra Faustum* XXXII 13).

In our opinion, the author has achieved his goal of offering contributions to a theologically motivated historiography that is methodologically open to the conviction that God acts in history. Our own (Reformed) tradition also stresses the importance of reflecting on the past in terms of redemptive history, which is essentially parallel to what Deines explores as 'salvation history' or '*Heilsgeschichte*'. We regret, however, that, despite his acknowledgement of the revelatory character of Scripture (263-308), he speaks disparagingly about scholars who hold the view of the apostle John being eyewitness and author of the Fourth Gospel as fundamentalists (373-374). In conclusion, we think that Deines has provided contemporary scholarship with a reasonable defence of a theological historiography and a way forward in applying this methodology to our study of the past.

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Union with Christ in the New Testament

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Autor untersucht kompetent die Darstellung des Einswerdens von Menschen mit Gott im Neuen Testament. Er legt großen Wert auf vorangegangene Studien und Hintergrundmaterial. Dabei präsentiert er eine tiefgehende Analyse des gesamten Neuen Testaments und zeigt dessen theologische Einheit auf. Jedoch stellt das Buch keinen originären Beitrag dar.

RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur livre ici avec compétence une étude de la conception du Nouveau Testament sur l'union des êtres humains avec Dieu. Il accorde une grande attention aux études précédentes et aux données concernant l'arrière-plan. Il

considère l'ensemble du Nouveau Testament de façon approfondie, montre son unité théologique, mais, finalement, ne propose aucun apport original.

SUMMARY

Macaskill competently studies the portrayal of the union of human beings with God in the New Testament. He gives much attention to previous studies and to background materials. The entire New Testament is surveyed in some depth, and its theological unity shown, but the book does not make an original contribution.

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This is a detailed academic study by an evangelical scholar who teaches New Testament at St Andrews University in Scotland. It is an important contribution to the ongoing debate which is being pursued both in the narrower arena of Reformed theology and also in the wider constituency of Pauline scholarship. This author, however, is not confined to the Pauline evidence but asks questions about the motif of participation in the New Testament as a whole. What does this concept signify? What are the other ways of expressing the relation between God and his people? And to what extent is this particular motif a unifying factor in New Testament theology? The brief Introduction aptly sums up the conclusion that there is 'a remarkably cohesive portrayal of the union of human beings and God' in the New Testament.

The monograph follows the time-honoured pattern of beginning with a survey of past scholarship, paying particular attention to works on Paul from Deissmann onwards and offering brief critiques where required. This panorama broadens out to take in patristic and modern Orthodox theology followed by Lutheran and Reformed theology, with some attention being given to the more Reformed and the more Barthian traditions. The author is particularly concerned with the danger of reading and (mis)understanding the New Testament in the light of these later developments.

A different kind of preliminary to the topic is a critical survey of background material in the New Testament era, especially in the area of speculations concerning Adam, that is often thought to have provided the terminology and framework of thinking, but which the author finds to be of dubious value.

We are now almost exactly halfway through the book and at last get down to the New Testament. If the book has been somewhat tedious so far and the comments brief and not always adequately substantiated, there is now a change in character. The tone and the style do shift somewhat, and the author enters his own area of expertise with a fuller treatment of topics and fresh discussions of familiar passages. He commences with the use of temple and body language, citing Ephesians as a kind of mature example or benchmark, against which examination of the earlier Pauline letters can proceed. He then draws in texts from all over the New Testament which can be understood as expressions of this motif.