

**Volker Leppin – Samuel Vollenweider (eds.), *Mystik*, Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie 38 (2023), Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2024, pp. 503.**

It is really surprising that mysticism, which is one of the most important phenomena related to religious experience, is a rarely studied topic in biblical scholarship. This fact is acknowledged by the editors of the book entitled *Mystik*, which is a volume in the scholarly series *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie*. They write in the editorial introduction to the volume: “Mystik als Thema eines Jahrbuches für Biblische Theologie – das ist alles andere als selbstverständlich. [...] weder Einigkeit darüber besteht, dass Mystik ein biblisches Thema ist, noch darüber, was Mystik denn überhaupt sei” (p. 9).

The book contains 21 essays, which are grouped into 6 sections: religion-study approach; the Old Testament and its reception history; the New Testament and its reception history; Judaism and Islam; Church history and systematic theology; and modern religious culture. They are supplemented with an index of biblical (and extrabiblical) places, as well as an index of concepts and persons. All essays are written in German by prominent biblical scholars and theologians.

The editors of the volume admit that there is much scepticism among theologians concerning the application of the term “mysticism” to the study of biblical texts. For many, “mysticism” is a later interpretative concept, which is barely applicable to biblical text. However, its use may be allowed in biblical theology, for the latter often applies modern concepts to convey the ideas of the Bible to modern recipients. The problem is much greater inasmuch for many scholars “mysticism” is a category which is not only later, but in fact also fundamentally alien to the forms of devotion that are described in the Bible (p. 12).

The authors and the editors of the volume try to overcome this scepticism by passing from exegesis of biblical texts to scrutiny of their reception history, evidently hoping that even if they fail to find “mysticism” in a scholarly responsible way in biblical texts, they will find it in later applications of biblical texts in religious lives of the believers. One may ask

whether such an approach is not too minimalistic. In fact, in the volume in the series dedicated to biblical theology (*Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie*), only less than one-half of its contents (ca. 210 out of 486 pages; 8 out of 21 essays) is devoted to the Bible (pp. 41–248), and what is more, even this one-half contains analyses of not only biblical texts, but also of their reception history. The title *Mystik* in the series *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* suggests something more.

Let us therefore focus on the essays which refer to biblical theology proper.

Alexandra Grund-Wittenberg's essay "Unio liturgica, Gottesschau und Eintreten in Gottes Geheimnisse. Vorstufen des Mystischen in den Psalmen" (pp. 41–62) is devoted to the preliminary stages of mysticism in the Book of Psalms. The author first states that in Protestant theology "religious experience" is often regarded as standing in opposition to biblical theology, which is concentrated on the canonical texts of the Bible. Therefore, in order to find categories of mysticism which could be applicable to the Hebrew Bible, she first analyses *merkabah* and *hechalot* mysticism in early Judaism, and then goes back in tradition history through the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice to the motif field of seeing God in the Book of Psalms, as well as the idea of entering into the mysteries of God in Psalm 73. She concludes that in contrast to later Jewish, more developed mystical categories of entering a heavenly palace, throne, etc., the idea of seeing God in Psalms is much more direct, personal, and bodily, resembling normal sensual contact with another person, even if it is often related to that of entering the holy realm of the temple. According to Grund-Wittenberg, this experience of the closeness of God, understandably expressed in metaphorical terms of physical proximity, can be regarded as a token of mystical experience.

Franz Sedlmeier's essay "Ezekiel als Mystiker?" (pp. 63–86) consciously does not refer to Ezekiel as a mystic because of the ambiguity of this term. Nevertheless, he argues that the great visions of the Book of Ezekiel (1–3; 8–11; 37:1–14; 40–48) depict some kind of mystical experiences. The personal itinerary and inner transformation of the prophet, leading through the exile, judgement, repentance, and renewal to the vision of living in the abiding presence of God, is compatible with personal itineraries and inner transformations of later mystics. However, we can only analyse biblical texts with their dramaturgy, and not personal experiences which would lie behind them. Moreover, Sedlmeier argues that mysticism is not merely an ecstatic phenomenon, but rather a path which is followed and which has some endpoint. However, in contrast to other scholars

(Volker Leppin and Bernard McGinn) Sedlmeier does not interpret this endpoint in categories of some “union” with God, for this category is alien to the Old Testament, but rather as an experience of God’s closeness.

Ludwig Schwienhorst-Schönberger’s essay “Mystik in der alttestamentlichen Weisheitsliteratur” (pp. 87–113) points to the fact that in Christian tradition the sequence of the sapiential books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Songs of Songs corresponds to the three phases of mystical path: learning the virtues, detachment from false attachments, and union with the divine Bridegroom, respectively. According to the German scholar, mysticism can be described as an experience of God’s nearness, which is gained through spiritual exercises and leading to deeper knowledge, transformation of personality, and a form of life that leads to community, perfection, mystical death, etc. The Catholic author concludes his essay with the observation that whereas for centuries it was evident that the Bible should be read mystically, modern biblical scholars and modern theologians in general regarded this form of reading Scripture as obsolete or even misleading. However, the opinion that the basic statements of the Bible are open for mystical interpretation has recently been gaining more and more ground.

Konrad Schwarz’s essay “‘Das Reich Gottes ist in euch’: Ein Jesuswort bei Lukas und seine frühe Rezeption” (pp. 117–137) analyses Jesus’ reply to the Pharisees that the kingdom of God is *entos hymōn* (Luke 17:21). The German scholar argues that the translation of this Greek phrase as “among you” is unlikely for lexical reasons. He opts for the translation “within you” or “in your possession” but highlights the difficulty that the statement is directed to the Pharisees, who are an ambivalent group in Luke’s Gospel. Therefore, it is open to various interpretations. This fact is also reflected in ancient interpretations of this text, which, however, tend to prefer the understanding “within you.” This interpretation has the potential for influencing various forms of Christian mysticism.

Michael Theobald’s essay “‘An der Brust Jesu’ (Joh 13,23) – Christusmystik bei Johannes? Ein rezeptionsgeschichtlicher Zugang” (pp. 139–183) discusses the question whether the beloved disciple, resting at the breast of Jesus, can be regarded as a model example of a Christian mystic, as he was for centuries regarded in Christian tradition. Theobald argues that the narrative rhetoric of the Fourth Gospel, including its use of the Song of Songs, encourages its readers to mature, self-responsible, courageous faith, focused not on humans (the apostles), but on the Gospel, which contains the “word” of Jesus. According to the German scholar, the Johannine “mysticism of the word” has three important aspects: Jesus’ word as the “sacrament” of God’s presence in the Spirit, the presence of these

words in the book of the Gospel, and the quality of the loving answer of the believers. All these aspects of the Johannine “mysticism of the word” are generally positive, but Theobald highlights the fact that it contains a negative aspect as well: it also witnesses the radical absence of the exalted Jesus: “Do not hold on to me!” (John 20:17).

Samuel Vollenweider’s essay “‘Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus’: Albert Schweitzer und sein Vermächtnis” (pp. 185–212) deals with the heritage of the great German theologian, especially his highly influential book *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (German original 1930; English trans. 1931). Having analysed the content, context, and impact of Schweitzer’s book, Vollenweider, following the proposal of Volker Leppin (*Ruhen in Gott*, 15–20), attempts to define Christian mystical texts by discussing seven criteria of its presence (with the last one treated as optional): 1. literary descriptions of individual experiences, 2. intensive experiences of God’s closeness, 3. episodic crossing of borders with the divine, 4. loosening or change of one’s identity, 5. paradoxical or negative formulations of the experiences, 6. contextually conditioned formulations of the experiences, and 7. anticipation of eschatological salvation. According to the Swiss theologian, Paul’s experience described in 2 Cor 12:2–4 fulfils these criteria, whereas the Damascus experience (Gal 1:15–16) does not. This is interesting enough, for my own research demonstrates that both these apparently markedly different experiences are in fact one and the same event. As concerns “Christ mysticism,” Vollenweider argues that the indwelling of Christ in him (2 Cor 12:9b; Gal 2:19–20), although neither episodic nor ecstatic (criterion 3) nor eschatological (criterion 7), fulfils the remaining criteria of mysticism. On the other hand, participation in Christ’s cross and resurrection is not an individual experience (criterion 1), but rather something lived by all Christians, and (*pace* Schweitzer) it merely fulfils the criterion of contextually conditioned formulations (criterion 6). The same refers to Pauline pneumatic phenomena and to the esoteric wisdom talk (1 Cor 2:2–16). It may be asked, however, whether Schweitzer was not right in interpreting also the participation in Christ’s cross and resurrection in terms of mysticism, even if it is a phenomenon that can and probably should be lived by all Christians. Paraphrasing Karl Rahner’s words, are we all not called to be mystics?

Tobias Nicklas’s essay “Mystische Schriften im frühen Christentum? Johannesapokalypse und *Ascensio Isaiae*” (pp. 213–230) examines possible mystical traits of the Book of Revelation and of the Ascension of Isaiah. It approaches this issue with the use of Volker Leppin’s eight criteria for detecting Christian mystical writings. It shows that both writings fulfil

decisive criteria for being understood as mystical texts. In particular, according to Nicklas the Book of Revelation fulfils the criteria of rapture of the visionary, immediate closeness of the object of seeing, difficulty in relating the visions in grammatically correct terms, transformation of the seer's ways of speaking, direct access to the throne of God and the lamb at the end of the book, only momentary character of the visions, but also their eschatological dimension. Therefore, although the work hardly fulfils the criterion of God's spiritual activity, it can be regarded as a mystical writing. The German scholar argues that the mysticism of both early Christian works is not focused on merely spiritual experiences, but rather on pointing to the fact that God's apparent withdrawal and distance from this unjust world is overcome by the vision of God's reign, a vision which can be trusted.

Martin Meiser's essay "Die Himmelsleiter – ein Bild für den geistlichen Aufstieg in der antiken christlichen Rezeptionsgeschichte von Gen 28,12" (pp. 231–248) refers to the scriptural image of the ladder, interpreted in later Christian writings in terms of progress in the knowledge of Scripture, increase in Christian piety, and striving for perfection. The German author notes the interesting fact that from a modern point of view Gen 28:12 is evidently alluded to in John 1:51, although the latter lacks the image of the ladder. In patristic writings, however, the connection between both texts was seen only rarely, and the Gospel text was mainly interpreted in Christological terms. Therefore, development to spiritual perfection was usually analysed by Church Fathers with the use of the Genesis image of the ladder, and not in reference to the Johannine text.

In sum, although some particular ideas expressed in the book can be regarded as raising questions and doubts, the book itself is very insightful. It is a book which was greatly needed in biblical scholarship, and probably also in Christian theology in general. The editors, the authors, and the publisher of the book can sincerely be praised for addressing the issue that is only rarely analysed in biblical theology. Understandably, the book does not offer the last word in the matter of mysticism in biblical texts. It can be regarded as a serious invitation to other scholars to tackle with this difficult issue. However, the question is not a purely academic one. In the more and more laicized world, we need serious guidelines how to read the Bible not only for reconstructing history (historical Jesus research etc.), understanding theological problems (Paul and the law etc.), or addressing modern ideological issues (postcolonial studies, gender studies, etc.), but also, and arguably foremost, for promoting spirituality, including – not to be afraid of this idea – Christian mysticism. Therefore, the book should

find its place not only in every serious theological library, but also on the shelf of every serious Christian theologian.

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