

Apocalyptic Christology--A Review Article

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WOLFHART PANNENBERG in *Jesus — God and Man*¹ has challenged the present humility of systematic theologians concerning the final meaning of the revelation of God in Christ. He has achieved an original and comprehensive exposition in which form critical methods are woven with traditional doctrines into a systematic Christology.

The basic problem for Pannenberg's effort is the meaning of history in the self-revelation of God. He shares with Jurgen Moltmann, who was a colleague at Wuppertal's *Kirchliche Hochschule* and whose *Theology of Hope* has made a similar impact, a concern for the reality of eschatology. His work should also be seen with reference to the other theological interpretations of history such as Gerhard Sauter's *Zukunft und Verheissung* and Dietrich Ritschl's *Memory and Hope: an Inquiry Concerning the Presence of Christ*. Richard R. Niebuhr's *Resurrection and Historical Reason* which was published in 1957, has prepared the way for Pannenberg's assertion of the centrality of Jesus' resurrection for faith. Pannenberg's brief discussion of the Israelite conception of the revelation of God in historic events in his essay, "The Revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth,"² will quickly indicate the context in which Pannenberg himself considers the resurrection.

¹ Pannenberg, Wolfhart. *Jesus — God and Man*. Translated by Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe from the German *Grundzuge der Christologie*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968.

² Pannenberg, Wolfhart. "The Revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth," *Theology of History*. Edited by James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. *New Frontiers in Theology*, Volume III. New York: Harper and Row, 1967. pp. 101 ff.

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Jesus — God and Man opens with the recognition that Christology must formally precede soteriology as its foundation. He argues in turn that Christology begins not with experience but with historical knowledge of the decisive event of God's revelation in Christ. This event is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Pannenberg summarizes the meanings which Jesus' resurrection would have had in the context of first century Judaism: the end of the world had begun, Jesus' claim of God's own authority had been confirmed, Jesus is the Son of Man, God is ultimately revealed in Jesus, Jesus is divine, the Kingdom had been opened to the Gentiles, and the words of the risen Jesus clarify the significance of his resurrection. Pannenberg defines eschatological resurrection as the entrance into the reality of salvation. Thus Jesus' resurrection serves as the guarantee of the individual's future participation in salvation. The argument becomes circular when Jesus resurrection serves as a guarantee within an apocalyptic scheme, a scheme which in itself provides the interpretive framework for realizing the inherent significance of the resurrection. Pannenberg resourcefully suggests that the universal authority of the apocalyptic expectation can be validated from a phenomenology of man's hope to exist after death. He considers resurrection from the dead to be a "philosophically appropriate expression for human destiny" (p. 88). In this he makes use of the argument from experience for establishing the validity of apocalyptic expectation, while he denies its methodological value for Christology.

The normal critical distinction between the appearance tradition and the empty grave tradition is followed in the examination of the historical evidence of Jesus' resurrection. Pannenberg rec-

ognizes that the evidence of the appearance tradition is convincing to those who presuppose that "an element of truth is to be granted to the apocalyptic expectation with regard to the hope of the resurrection." (p. 97) However, the additional support from the tradition of the empty tomb indicates that the reality of the resurrection as an historical event should be accepted. The resurrection should not be prejudged by scientific knowledge, Pannenberg declares. Its reality is a matter for historians alone.

In Jesus' resurrection, his unity with God was retroactively established over his life and his preexistence as the Son of God. The Father-Son relation which eternally belongs to the essence of God received corporeal form in Jesus. Jesus' dedication to the office of calling men into the Kingdom of God was also confirmed by the resurrection. This confirmation revealed what man was eventually destined to become. (p. 226) On this basis, Jesus' humanity is universally significant in providing the possibility of community of men with Jesus and with God. Pannenberg holds that Jesus' message of forgiveness and eschatological salvation imparts creative love to men. The acceptance of this message makes it impossible to live other than as one who seeks first the Kingdom of God. The personal unity of Jesus with God before Easter was in the dedication of Jesus to the Father's will. However, Jesus' sinlessness is not recognized in the uniqueness of his dedication but in the confirmation of God's judgment in the resurrection.

In his interpretation of the meaning of the death of Jesus, Pannenberg gives an exposition of Pauline themes. As the Jews identified the authority of God with the law, they crucified Jesus for the blasphemy of claiming an authority which exceeded the law. Jesus' conflict was not merely with a particular interpretation or administration of the law, but it was with the authority of the law itself. In Jesus' resurrection his author-

ity was confirmed, and those who had complied in his crucifixion were revealed as guilty of blasphemy. Pannenberg associates every Jew who lives under the authority of the law with the guilt of blasphemy, because he would have had to act as the Jewish leaders did if he had lived at that time. Jesus' death as a sinner under the authority of the law and his confirming resurrection reveal that he bore the punishment which his executioners had in fact deserved. Pannenberg defends the vicarious nature of Jesus' death on the basis of the universal validity of substitution in human relationships.

Jesus' resurrection establishes his Lordship over the cosmos, while the nature of his earthly life shows that the goal of his rule is the Lordship of the Father. As the essence of every person is decided by his orientation to Jesus, the Lordship of Jesus specifically includes the creative mediation of men into sonship. This, too, is decided by the event of Easter. "Jesus' resurrection from the dead and thus the incarnation of the Son of God in Jesus is that event in time through which the Son mediates the creation of the world and executes God's royal Lordship." (p. 396)

Pannenberg intends to deduce knowledge of the Holy Spirit not from soteriological experience but from the knowledge of Jesus' divinity. By sharing in the Christ event one also shares in the Holy Spirit, who belongs to the event of God's revelation and thus to the essence of God himself. The Spirit is known to be personal because he brings to consummation the personal character of human action. Although Pannenberg's discussion maintains the conception of the unity of the Spirit with Christ which is found in the New Testament, his deduction of the reality of the Holy Spirit presupposes rather than clarifies a vitalistic role.

Pannenberg has accomplished an ingenious *tour de force* in a reconstruction of evidence in support of traditional doctrines. However, it includes many difficult problems. His identity of the

interpretive framework of the apocalyptic expectation with the "immediate inherent significance" of the meaning of the resurrection jeopardizes the foundation of his Christology. He has defended this as a legitimate historical procedure in other writings, but he fails to be convincing. Even if the apocalyptic theology was as coherent and as positive as Pannenberg believes that it was, he has not justified its definite role. Pannenberg has radicalized the authority of the apocalyptic speculation so vigorously that he has at least succeeded in concentrating scholarly attention on this area more closely.

The treatment of the resurrection of Jesus as a historical event is an oversimplification of a detailed problem of historiography. His reduction of the cognitive value of religious experience in favor of the certainty of empirical evidence is a misrepresentation of the *cognitio dei experimentalis*. The traditional approaches have combined historical probability with the experience of faith. Pannenberg seems to be still reacting from the position taken by Marten Kahler in *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche biblische Christus* in 1896. On the basis of historical information, the evidence he finds is relatively insufficient when compared with the continual human experience that dead people do not rise. Pannenberg claims that resurrection is a metaphorical concept, but his use of the resurrection in Christological development belies the claim. Even if the exegetical problem was resolved a more basic theological problem would be involved. Biblical scholarship has de-emphasized the role of inexplicable occurrences as guarantees for faith and has emphasized the significant interpretation of ambiguous experiences. A fundamental transformation of faith to a less mature level would be required by the novel imposition of a fantastic event. The theological perspective of prophetic interpretation would be replaced by the popular piety which demands the guarantee of a sure thing.

Pannenberg's absolute distinction between scientific and historical knowledge is a bifurcation which is untrue for both the historian and the scientist.

Pannenberg's analysis of the role of the law in the significance of Jesus' death is unjustified. He ignores the variety of resources in primitive Christianity, particularly the substantially different understanding in the gospel of Matthew. His promotion of a single Pauline soteriological motif to definitive rank suggests that Lutheran orthodoxy rather than Paul is his guide.

The general impression of **Jesus — God and Man** is philosophically dazzling. Pannenberg mixes exceptionally erudite insights with common conventions so frequently that they can hardly be distinguished from one another. Further, one has the feeling that he is reading a Cartesian work at one moment and a Kantian work at the next. Metaphysical deductions from ideas taken to be clear and distinct are instantly qualified by the disclosure of their doxological and metaphorical horizon. Contemporary challenges to theology on issues of objectification and verification are ignored. The development of the Christian conscience in the context of personal and social history is replaced by a psychologically naive concept of the acceptance of a message.

The weight which Pannenberg replaces on the Beatitudes and the forgiveness sayings for his deliniation of Jesus' claim to authority will be seen by many as unjustifiable. It is basically dubious that Jesus' definitive activity among men was the assertion of authority. The content of what was being said and enacted in the Beatitudes and the forgiveness sayings was the scandal. The case for the epistemological priority of soteriology to Christology still seems to be more compatible with both the overall development of the biblical experiences and the sensitivities of modern man.

Pannenberg's work is not merely an example of Protestant scholasticism **redivivus**. The historical and doctrinal

insights included in the development of his argument are frequently original and masterful. He has made a contribution which will be lasting. The syste-

matic theology in which his doctrinal insights are successfully developed, however, will be far different from his own.

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