



Den Hertog, GC & Peels, HGL (editors) 2012.

Vreemdelinge en bijwoners: Opstellen rond een urgent theologisch thema

Apeldoorn: Theologische Universiteit Apeldoorn

ISBN: 9789075847376

Reviewed by Esias E Meyer

With a title like ‘Strangers and sojourners’ this collection of essays from Apeldoorn seems like an extremely relevant book in the light of many international developments, including the movement of people into Europe as a result of the Arab Spring. It sounds like a book that somehow anticipated what would happen in Europe in 2015. Yet this title is not about asylum seekers looking for hope in Europe, but more about a Reformed church in a post-Christian Europe, which is confronted by the fact that they as a church are dying out and that *they* are becoming the strangers in a secularised society. The *Angst* seems palpable in the book. The essays in the book engage with this problem from the perspective of the early pre-Constantine church, early Judaism and the Bible, although discussions of the latter are very limited.

Peels offers an essay on the rather famous passage Jeremiah 29:4-7 (pp 85-104). Like the exiles in Babel, modern-day Christians should not withdraw from the world, but should participate in building a better world by searching for peace in this world, in the hope that the time of being strangers will pass (p. 100). TM Hofman presents an essay on the importance of the “oikos” concept in the Gospel of Luke (pp 121-149) and another essay on how the Samaritans are presented in the same Gospel (pp 201-228). Apart from the interesting essay by MC Mulder on “Jewish reorientation in the post-temple period” (pp 105-120), most of the other essays engage with the early church. The temple that Mulder refers to is the second one destroyed in 70 CE and he describes the move in Judaism away from being centred on the temple to focusing on the reading of the Torah in the synagogue. It provides a fascinating overview of how service to the poor and prayer took the place of the temple.

Most of the other essays in the book are concerned with the early church. A Baars offers the longest essay on the pre-Constantinian and early post-Constantinian church (pp 11-65). Baars provides a description of four kinds of 'strangeness' in the early church, which could be translated with *forced* (gedwongen), *recruiting* (wervend), *radicalising* (radicaliserend) and *ritualising* (ritualiserend). The first category has to do with how outsiders viewed early Christians and the well-known perceptions of Christians as atheists, cannibals and incestuous are described (pp 15-24). The second kind of strangeness has to do with the effect of Christians dying as martyrs during the growth of Christianity (pp 25-34), which includes an overview of the contribution of Tertullian to Christian theology. Radicalising strangeness is actually about how the church responded to becoming the state church at the time of Constantine, which saw a growing trend of withdrawal from the world into the desert to focus on prayer and meditation (pp 34-41). The idea of monasteries and cloisters goes back to this period and the fascinating thing here is that when the early church lost its strangeness in the world, some Christians rediscovered it again by withdrawing from the world. Ritualising strangeness was also mostly done from the post-Constantinian period and the discussion includes a description of the *disciplina arcani* as well as other liturgies and rituals practised by early Christians.

Other essays include one by JJ Oosterhuis-den Otter on the letter to Diognetus (pp 57-64), an essay by AJT Ruis also on Tertullian (pp 65-83), an essay by GC den Hertog on the ethics of the early church (pp 151-180) and a further essay where J van 't Spijker compares the contemporary situation of the church in a secularised world with the position of the early church (pp 181-200). Van 't Spijker retells the story of the early church and describes all the well-known drawbacks for the church of becoming state church, when the church changed from a small but dynamic community of volunteers to a state institution that everybody was forced to join. Van 't Spijker then asks whether there is much to learn now that the church is leaving the yoke of Constantine behind as a result of secularisation? Are we somehow going back to the pre-Constantine period? Van 't Spijker is actually careful in making these comparisons, since post-Christian and post-modern humans are totally different from pre-Constantinian Christians and 'de crisis waarin de kerk is terechtgekomen, van een totale andere orde is dan welke

andere crisis daarvoor' (p 196). The current challenge for the church is thus something new and looking back cannot always help us, but all is not lost. Van 't Spijker concludes on a more positive note with the insight of the late David Bosch (p 197) that to be 'crisis-free' was actually an abnormality in the history of the church, which means that experiencing a crisis means returning to normal.