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The Resonance of Praying in Early Christianity and its Ancient Contexts

Basically, religion is a form of communication (Rüpke 2016, 20 and *passim*) between human(s) and the divine, but of course also a horizontal communication by which humans affirm their own self–world relations. Prayer is one of the most important rituals of religious communication, and in its felicitous performance it is a typical moment of ‘Verflüssigung der Selbst-Welt-Beziehung’ (Rosa 2016, 441). The proposed dissertation topic asks how prayer in the early Jesus tradition (Synoptic Gospels and Sayings Gospel Q) and in the letters of the apostle Paul function as ritualised, social communication. In Q, for instance, we find the Lord’s Prayer (Q 11:2b-4) which is followed by a short commentary which emphasises the certainty that the fatherly God will answer petitions made to him (Q 11:9-13). In the context of the commandment to love one’s enemies, in Q 6:28 Jesus commands his hearers to pray for their persecutors.

The investigation of the Jesus tradition can build upon a network of scholars – mainly, but not exclusively connected to the International Q Project – who convened in Graz 2017 for an international conference on ‘Prayer in the Sayings Gospel Q’ (Smith and Heil 2019). Comparisons with ancient Jewish and Graeco-Roman literary texts as well as documentary papyri conveyed a strong connection of prayers from the early Jesus tradition to the daily world of villagers and their concerns. This study of the historical, social and rhetorical meaning of prayer texts from Q should be expanded to other New Testament prayers texts in order to evaluate their potential for resonance with ancient and contemporary persons.

The project will bring in evidence from early Christian prayer into a ‘lived religion approach’ to ancient prayer (see Patzelt 2018a; Patzelt 2018b). Without mentioning the ‘lived religion approach’, Kloppenborg and Bazzana argue in the above-mentioned volume ‘Prayer in the Sayings Gospel Q’ that the prayers in Q require individually embodied competence for performing them. Like Patzelt they propose that the individual competence of performing prayer in Q results from rhetoric skills which must be analysed in context. Kloppenborg and Bazzana suggest finding this context in the documentary papyri from Egypt (Bazzana 2019; Kloppenborg 2019).

The same questions can be asked regarding prayers in Paul’s letters. Compared to the Jesus tradition, his prayer language is more intensively coloured by the prayer language of the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint, but also Paul conveys elements of ‘lived religion’ enhanced by individual rhetorical competence.

It seems worthwhile to investigate the prayers in the Jesus tradition and in the Pauline letters from this point of view in order to describe the active resonance they created in the history of their reception.

References

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