

Conflict in the Miracle Stories. A Socio-Exegetical Study of Matthew 8 and 9, by Evert-Jan Vledder. JSNTSup 152. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997. Pp. 276. \$78.00./£50 (cloth).

With this book Vledder attempts to analyze the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders as the underlying rationale for the narrative in Matthew 8–9. He uses an adaptation of the conflict theory developed from

L.A. Coser and R. Dahrendorf as his major tool of research. The main thesis is that Jesus and the Matthean community acted on behalf of the marginalized, while the Jewish leaders acted on behalf of the Roman rulers as retainers. This presents a conflict of interest that is played out in the whole gospel. Matthew 8–9 serves as an example of how to go about unearthing this conflict. The book proceeds in five chapters. It also contains a bibliography, an index of references, and an index of authors.

Chapter 1 contains two parts. The first deals with social-scientific study and conflict theory in general as the model of hermeneutics. The second part gives an overview of the various scholars who have investigated Matthew 8–9. Vledder shows how the theme of the miracle cycle has generally been assumed to derive from either christological, or ecclesiological concerns. Finally he shows that some scholars, while aware of the conflict in these chapters, have not been using social-scientific methods to analyze it. Thus he establishes the need for his methodology.

Chapter 2 develops Vledder's model of conflict theory from structural functionalism as a starting point. Central to his theory is an analysis of the Matthean situation as a group within a basically agrarian society with its attendant structure of a governing class including its retainers on the one hand and the lower classes with merchants, peasants, and expendables on the other hand. He therefore uses the model of Dahrendorf, based on an industrial society, counterbalanced by the more agrarian model of Coser. Vledder ends with five central statements concerning conflict: (1) All conflicts are based on class interests. (2) The foremost class interest is survival. (3) Conflict derives from classes in power subordinating classes without power. (4) Conflict entails social change. (5) Conflict is a never ending spiral.

Chapter 3 summarizes research on the social location of Matthew. The analysis focuses on the *intra* or *extra muros* debate. Vledder does not take a stand either way but assumes that the discussion with formative Judaism was the main area of conflict for the Matthean community. The discussion was still lively, even though it is not clear whether the break with Judaism was still in coming or had already occurred.

Chapter 4 begins the actual exegesis of Matthew 8–9. He first structures the chapters by chronology and plot into three parts: Matt 8:1-17, 8:17–9:13, 9:14-35. With this structure in hand he provides a running commentary with his conflict theory as the lens explaining these pericopes. Thus he views the conflict with the Jewish leaders already present in 8:1 because in 7:29 Jesus is described as having more authority than the scribes. Even though the leaders are not mentioned in the opening scene, and indeed do not appear as opponents of Jesus until 9:3, "the conflict between them and Jesus (and the community of Matthew) is assumed" (p. 174). One of the items of conflict is control over the crowd. Jesus' actions influence the crowd, the leaders also have a vested interest in them. Thus Vledder aims to read the following

material in view of the reaction of the crowds, but also in view of how the leaders would react to Jesus.

In 8:1-17 Vledder sees Jesus as dealing with ritually unclean, and therefore marginalized people. Jesus is willing to help them and to reintroduce them into the community (8:4). In the section 8:17-9:13 the conflict intensifies. The call of Matthew is the strongest expression yet of Jesus acting against the preconceived notions of the leaders, while in 9:13 Jesus expressly repudiates the Pharisees. The final section has the smoldering conflict 'burst into flames' (p. 212) in 9:34 with the accusation that Jesus does miracles by the prince of demons.

Chapter 5 attempts to tie up loose ends. It summarizes Vledder's position and restates his thesis that the conflict between Jesus/the Matthean community and the leaders rests on the choice of Jesus to take up the cause of the marginalized against the interests of the Jewish governing class and its retainers.

Vledder's analysis of the conflict in Matthew 8-9 in terms of the social stratification is commendable. He rightly points out much of the provocation inherent in the actions of Jesus. Even the miracles contain that seed of conflict through Jesus' care for and call of the marginalized. Yet given this general appreciation of Vledder's work, there remain several problematic issues. First among them is the often implicit nature of the conflict assumed by Vledder. While it is certainly true that much of the actions of Jesus are presented as a challenge to existing social structures the reaction to the challenges are not quite made explicit in the text. When the first open conflict between Jewish leaders and Jesus breaks out, the issue is not the marginalization of the paralyzed, but the "authority to forgive sins" (9:6). Similarly the call of Matthew can be interpreted in the light of forgiveness, while the question of fasting seems to have varying religious practices as topic. While the social critique may be the occasion of the conflict, it is not verbalized in the controversy stories. When the conflict reaches its climax in 9:34 the accusation against Jesus is, at least on the surface, that of being a religious charlatan, not a social revolutionary.

Matthew's call is a good example of this difficulty: Vledder sees Matthew as marginalized because tax collectors were a "particularly despised and degraded" (p. 207) group of people in Jewish society. Yet at the same time, Matthew as tax collector was part of the retainer class and thus associated with the ruling class. Here various modes of stratification intermingle. Perhaps it is for this reason that Vledder emphasizes the theme of forgiveness for Matthew. The religious and the social sphere collide, and it would be good to acknowledge that. It seems unlikely that social stratification can serve as the exclusive model (p. 223) to explain the conflict in Matthew's gospel. The controversy stories beyond Matthew 9 serve as reminder that much of the conflict surrounds the right interpretation of the

law. That this has social implications is clear, but the reduction to conflict on the social level means shortchanging the complexity of Matthew.

Vledder's results are threefold. Firstly, he identifies conflicting interests between the Matthean community and its contemporaries in Formative Judaism. This is not a new insight. Secondly, he clarifies that the conflict had as a corollary a new definition of boundaries for the Matthean community that made the transition into the world of Gentile Christianity easier. Here one would wish for elaboration. Thirdly, he suggests that the implication for the Matthean community ought to be the self-marginalization of their leaders. Here, too, one wishes further information.

The book is quite difficult to read. Vledder needs 167 pages of methodological deliberations before he can begin the exegesis of his chosen text. Particularly chapter 1 is not always easy to follow. Its mixture of a *Forschungsbericht* and preliminary thoughts on the use of models is not a happy one. After talking at length about the conflict between Jewish leaders and Jesus, the reader is relieved to be finally informed who the leaders are during the exegesis of Matt 9:9-13 (pp. 204-5). The final editing of the book leaves much to be desired. Many repetitions, typographical errors in both Greek and English, wrong or ambiguous citations in text (e.g., p. 52, p. 223 n. 235) and bibliography (p. 260), and the overwhelmingly generous use of phrases in parentheses do not endear the book to the reader. When citing multivolume commentaries the author neglects to inform the reader of the volume he is referring to. The table of contents is too short to provide useful access to subsections. The headings of the subsections are not numbered and confusingly arranged.

The premise of the book is a highly valuable one. Unfortunately, it leaves at least this reader dissatisfied.

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