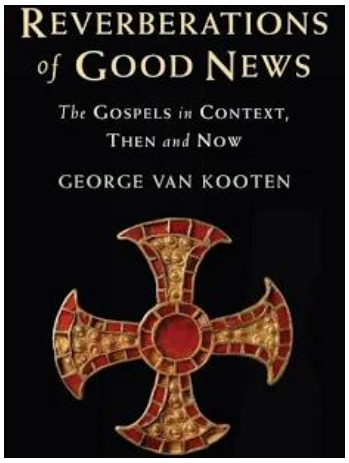


George van Kooten: Reverberations of Good News

Just over a year ago at a Rogation service in Broomfield, I was chatting to a random holiday-maker who had joined us. It was clear he a=had an interest in New Testament scholarship and at some point I lamented the parlous state of continuing education among the clergy and said I was looking for something new on the gospels. "I'm writing a book on them now," he said. "I'll let you know when it's out. Little did I know, it turns out he was an academic from the Netherlands, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Cambridge.

Sure enough, earlier this year he emailed offering to send me a free copy. I thanked him but said I was happy to buy one. And I did. And it was very good.

As I was coming towards the end of it, the *Church Times* did a review – which was a bit critical, I thought.

I found the book refreshing and challenging. You may remember the feeling when, as a child, one of your teeth fell out and as you ran your tongue round inside, your mouth felt both familiar and different at the same time. This book was a bit like that.

Van Kooten stands within a relatively recent tradition that places John's gospel early. (See also Bauckham, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses reviewed earlier). The more established tradition is that Mark is primary (c.60 AD), used by Matthew then Luke as a source some 20 years later. John then comes out of the blue with a completely different account some 15 years later still.

Van Kooten posits Mark and John as independent but contemporary sources (c.70 AD) which Luke and, to some degree, Matthew used as sources. Luke, he is convinced, is very late – maybe 130 AD – as he may have access to other material we know wasn't written til about then.

Mark is probably a Roman and his aim, van Kooten suggests, is to reassure his Roman audience that Jesus is not part of the Jewish rebellion which is being harshly supressed by the Empire. He emphasises that faith and politics are very different things – so no danger here. He also gives an exonerating account of the crucifixion for similar reasons. Mark's source is the apostle Peter, so the perspective is Galilean but he needs to explain some Jewish customs to the Roman audience and wants to impress on them that what Jesus taught was radical and new. It is a teaching that will grow with careful nurture.

There is a shorter chapter on Matthew (a Jew) who, writing at a time of tension between East and West wants to emphasise harmony (the magi and the Great Commission at the very end of the gospel.) Matthew organises Jesus' teaching into logical chunks and is writing for the Jewish communities in farthest Syria. Hence the many references to fulfilling the Torah.

The only jarring comment for me was van Kooten's suggestion that the author of the gospel is the Matthew numbered among the 12. Why would he need to copy so much of Mark if he was an actual witness and Mark was just reporting from Peter?

So, then, to Luke. A Greek, writing in the great libraries in Rome maybe as much as a century after Jesus, he has access to all sorts of documents and histories which, he admits at the start of the gospel, he is having to sort through. He sees faith as a journey – a Way to be taken. He deliberately undersells the newness of the teaching, trying to show how it can be easily incorporated into normal 'modern' life and Jesus appears more stoic than suffering – and possibly even less 'divine' than in Mark. Luke himself is far away from events in both time and space, and some of his history and geography are questionable.

One annoying habit of Luke's for me (which strengthens the idea that he has had a good long look at the traditions) is that he gives his interpretation of Jesus' parables, either before or after the parable, thus domesticating its meaning and leaving no freedom for modern listener.

And finally, to John. This gospel, van Kooten assures us, is written very much like a Greek play giving a sweeping pattern of Jesus' descent to earth and ascension to heaven. Jarringly, the ascent begins at the Last Supper and so the cross is part of the ascent, giving a very different feel to the crucifixion.

John is likely to be not the Zebedee but a junior Jewish member of the Temple staff – he knows his way around that particular block, but is writing for those who need Jewish customs explained. For him, faith is not a Way, but we participate in the divine insofar as we accept the Logos, the Word of God, imitating that descent. He is the likely author of the Letters of John, known in the Early Church, as John the Elder.

The *Church Times* felt van Kooten stated too many things with little evidence. I can't comment on that. I loved being introduced to the gospels in a slightly different way. My only other thought, though, is there is no reference to the ways in which the actual physical texts evolved (see Parker The living texts of the gospels reviewed earlier). I am told there are some examples of Mark 'copying' Luke and the others, in the sense that a later edition of Mark incorporates bits it knows from other sources. The obvious one is the ending of Mark, but there are others.

But that's a minor quibble. An excellent book. Clearly based on unimpeachable scholarship but delivered in an accessible manner. A refreshing perspective.