



Take up the cross (Mark 8 : 34 and par.) : the history and function of the cross saying in earliest Christianity

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Abstract

The principal contention of this thesis is that the earliest Christians viewed the crucifixion of Jesus as paradigmatic for discipleship, confirmation of which can be found in the history and function of a particular saying ascribed to Jesus, namely the 'cross saying' (Mk 8:34 and par.). To verify this claim, I explore both the literary tradition and material culture of early Christianity as they relate to the cross saying, explicating the various ways that "taking up the cross" functioned to ensure unwavering loyalty to Jesus. Taking a traditional exegetical approach, I also engage recent work on sapiential literature (mainly Q) and Historical Jesus studies, observing the diverse ways in which the first several generations of Jesus' followers adapted this saying—both as an aphorism for inclusion in gospels, and in the development of cognate versions useful in more theological settings (e.g., Gal 2:20). Proceeding diachronically via a textual analysis of the cross saying in Q, the Synoptics, and then the Gospel of Thomas, I trace the ways in which the composers of these texts addressed the different social situations of their audiences in an effort to secure commitment to Jesus (or, in the case of Gos. Thom., conformity to his enlightened teachings). Then, turning from the literature to the social and political environment of the New Testament, I note the radical reversal, occurring early in Christian thought, which transformed the crucifixion of Jesus from a shameful social experience into one of honour, and worthy of emulation. Even more significant in terms of current research, I break from the opinions of several New Testament scholars in finding little evidence that the cross saying (presuming it was dominical) functioned as a call to political insurrection. Rather, as evidenced in Christian material culture from the second and third centuries (symbols, the orant prayer posture, making the 'sign of the cross,' and so on), the association of crucifixion with discipleship was understood primarily in terms of religious devotion to Jesus.

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