

The Paradox of the Passion of Jesus

A Response to Joel Kuhlin

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The learned scholarly attempts to synthesize biblical scholarship on the so-called Jesus event with Gilles Deleuze's (1925–1995) concept of event is to be applauded. Biblical scholars of today tend for various reasons to shun the insights of philosophy; likewise, philosophers who claim to interpret biblical texts – often those written by Paul – rarely share the insights of biblical scholarship. Joel Kuhlin's article, and indeed the entire symposium presented in this special issue, provides a possibility to enrich the text-centred and historical readings of biblical studies with sensitive hermeneutical and theological avenues of thinking, without diminishing or misdirecting the multidimensional task of interpreting the signs encoded in the biblical texts. Such thinking makes hermeneutics and theology into something more promising than and substantially different from mere application and re-contextualization or theological apologetics.

Jesus' Death and Resurrection

Kuhlin gives a thoughtful account of the problems involved in too quickly assuming the close interconnection between Jesus' death (crucifixion) and resurrection as a theological dictum. Building on innovative research published a few years ago, he indicates the limited influence of the Pauline schema death–resurrection and insists that this schema is not the core of early Christianity. The soteriological diversity in the New Testament

is clearly attested, and Kuhlin rightly points to the ambivalence of writings such as Hebrews, 1 John, the Letter of Barnabas, the Treatise on the Resurrection, and some other early Christian texts concerning Jesus' death and resurrection.

Kuhlin's over-all argument concerning this ambiguity triggers some reflection. The first one would be the argument from silence. As with many ancient texts, it takes caution to assume that the absence or infrequency of references to resurrection means that the idea was not present to or presupposed by the authors and to claim that they drew from Jesus' death as an isolated and distinct force. After all, if the author of Hebrews and other early Christian writings subsequent to Paul's positively acknowledged letters, the argument needs to be pushed further to indicate that the author actively diminished the importance of the resurrection and maintained the soteriological sufficiency of Jesus' death as a singular event in spite of Paul's emphasis on the resurrected Lord. This is not fully carried out in the present article, and it might not be possible to do so.

Another possibility to consider is that Paul represents and develops the earliest soteriological stratum of the emerging Jesus movement and that his scheme of Jesus' death and resurrection is much earlier and broader than the one present in other (later) writings. I am not sure Kuhlin would deny this, and hermeneutically and theologically we should indeed avoid the naïve idea that what is earlier or original is better. This, of course, also applies to the historical Jesus and the beautiful lines quoted by Kuhlin from Albert Schweitzer's (1875–1965) account of Jesus' destruction of the eschatological conditions by his own death. But from where did Paul receive the scheme? Was it the case that the historical Jesus regarded his death as an endpoint and that Paul invented its intimate linkage to the resurrection?

Probably not. There is indication, not least in the accounts of the last supper,¹ that the historical Jesus awaited some kind of future consummation of God's Kingdom beyond his own death. More importantly, the old hypothesis, going back to C. Harold Dodd (1884–1973) in the early 1930s, argues that the speeches in Acts represent an early kerygma, which is behind the out-line of the Gospel of Mark.² To be noted is, regardless of its possible influence on Mark, that Peter's preaching according to the book of Acts binds a close tie between the one they killed by hanging on a pole and the one God raised on the third day (Acts 10:39b–40). Granted these speeches

1. For further discussion, see Samuel Byrskog, "The Meal and the Temple: Probing the Cult-Critical Implications of the Last Supper", in David Hellholm & Dieter Sänger (eds), *The Eucharist – Its Origins and Contexts: Sacred Meal, Communal Meal, Table Fellowship in Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity*, Tübingen 2017, 444.

2. C. Harold Dodd, *New Testament Studies*, Manchester 1953, 1–11.

are not entirely Lukan, Peter's speech indicates that Paul was not a loner and represented a broader tendency during the earliest period of Christianity to make sense of Jesus' crucifixion by regarding it as the enigmatic but inevitable manifestation of the divine force of resurrection, perhaps with roots in Jesus' own expectation of a final vindication of God's Kingdom.

The Event

Three concepts are crucial to Kuhlin's argument: event, paradox, and obscurity. The expression "Jesus event" has been used carelessly in much English-speaking biblical studies as a way of referring comprehensively to the entire historical occurrence of Jesus, i.e., his birth, activity in word and deed, his death, and the accounts of his resurrection. It has been more theologically and philosophically loaded in the German debate about *Ereignis*, especially among biblical scholars aware of Martin Heidegger's (1889–1976) influential but allusive understanding of the term, developed in the 1930s, as in some way connoting the dynamic emergence or coming into view of Being. This was certainly behind Rudolf Bultmann's (1884–1976) references to the eschatological Jesus event, but the frequent use of the expression today has lost its philosophically loaded connotations and it is, at best, understood in sociological terms, in biblical circles and elsewhere.³

Kuhlin helpfully brings us back to a more philosophically sophisticated use of the concept in that he defines it as a happening that functions as a becoming and thus, when serially connected to sequences of events, constitutes the makeup of a narrative. With this definition, the narrative becomes more dynamic and powerful, encapsulating a series of singular events "in becoming" (*im Werden*), not merely a static textual unit, and moves our understanding of narrative toward something that presents various thematic emphasis in the Gospels as constantly evolving entities, as always "in becoming." This helps us avoid the modern Western temptation of defining theological doctrines where no fixed doctrines are to be found but are "in becoming."

This understanding of event can be elaborated from a more text-oriented, or better, text-pragmatic perspective. Where does the event happen, before, within, or after the text? Is it something that the text refers back to or something within the text as narrative or something after the text is written? The event, however we define it, is in biblical scholarship textually mediated. Kuhlin's Deleuzian definition of the event moves in the direction of locat-

3. For a recent comprehensive sociological study of event, see Robin Wagner-Pacifici, *What is an Event?*, Chicago 2017.

ing it before or after the text, but also, when forming sequences, within a narrative.

In order not to confuse text with event, it might be helpful to clarify that the text is made up of interconnected textual signs such as letters and words and sentences, while the event is either something outside the text, and thus obtainable through the referentiality of the text, or entirely embedded in the codes of text or a textual event. The latter aspect could supplement Kuhlin's indications when linked to the contemporary studies of the various media used to enforce the powerful effect of texts on its audience at the moment of its performance, either from a manuscript or from memory. It is at such oral/aural moments that singular events accounted for in the text can come alive and truly make the event recorded in the text into a creative becoming linked to similar events in the narrative, while at the same time remaining irreducible to other events.

To hear the passion narrative being read aloud from the Markan text or from the memory of the Markan text, for instance, creates another kind of passion event that reconfigures and reincarnates the death of Jesus as a singular event at the moment of reading and hearing. How are we to reconcile this explosive and revitalizing potential of a text, even its smallest iota, as performative event, with Deleuze's event as the expressivity of language as creative and positive and with reference to the becoming-of-things? Reflecting more on this could give us a good starting-point for finding common ground between biblical scholarship and Deleuze's concept of event.

Paradox

Kuhlin's discussion of the paradox of Jesus' death in the Gospel of Mark is to be applauded. He rightly avoids focusing on the use of the infinitive *versus* the finite verb forms to indicate the oscillation between pure and particular events embodying the paradox, instead pointing to aspects in the Markan story that scholars with various success have tried to resolve. He mentions the failure to fulfill the promise of postmortem appearances, the mixture of reasons behind Jesus' death, the pluralities of identities of Jesus, and the difficulty for the audience of knowing what to do with the Markan text with Jesus left somewhere between life and death.

Instead of trying to solve these paradoxes, Kuhlin points to a philosophically intriguing way to leave the paradoxes as they are, so that Jesus' death in Mark escapes fixation and remains an ongoing happening. He refers to Deleuze's emphasis on willing the event by accepting wounds and death when they occur without referring them to some explanatory future. I have no critique at this point. For biblical scholars this is a good reminder that

those things in the Gospel narratives that after a century or so of research remain paradoxical enigmas to us might serve precisely as such and might even have been intended as such, because the language expresses, at least from the audience's perspective, that which is not a closed event.

Obscurity

This links, finally, to Kuhlin's concept of obscurity; he speaks of the "obscure wound" and suggests that Jesus' command to take up one's cross and follow him is a Markan way of expressing the Deleuzian notion of becoming worthy of the event, that is, to share the paradoxical and obscure happening of Jesus' death and (non-)resurrection and to share the event of cross-wounding. While obscurity is a fascinating hermeneutical potential for addressing the experience of readers and hearers of a textual event, and while we are uncertain as to what kind of suspension crucifixion signified in pre-Christian times, we should remember that obscurity was according to ancient Greek elementary training to be avoided in any attempt to communicate convincingly. Among the ways of successfully refuting a rhetorical unit was always the possibility of pointing to its obscurity (ἀσάφεια).⁴ Clarity was the ideal.

The Markan narrative is not entirely obscure at this point but oscillates creatively between clarity and obscurity. The passion predictions in Mk. 8:31; 9:30–31; 10:33–34 do not use the verb "to crucify" (σταυροῦν). It seems to avoid it, perhaps because it was semantically ambivalent. They refer instead to the awaited event as suffering, rejection, killing, and being handed over – and the disciples fail to understand what is going to happen. The term "cross" (σταυρός) here is not Jesus' cross but the cross of discipleship, each one's cross (8:34).

The verb occurs instead for the first time in 15:13–14, when the crowd twice responds to Pilate "crucify him." And immediately after these two occurrences the author states not merely that he was handed over, as he had done previously, but that he was handed over in order to be crucified. The crowd defines in Mark the means of Jesus' death as crucifixion. Read in connection with the passion predictions, it becomes clear that crucifixion has to do with suffering, betrayal, and death.

So there is clarity within obscurity, clarity in the sense that the crowd introduces the verb "crucify" as the means of his suffering, betrayal, and death, obscurity in the sense that this verb is open to various understandings. The author of Mark seems to oscillate between clarity and obscurity in the narrative, but certainly ending the entire story with an obscure silence

4. ἀνασκευαστέον δὲ ἔτι τὰς χρείας ἐκ τοῦ ἀσαφούς. Leonhard von Spengel, *Rhetores Graeci*, vol. 2, Leipzig 1894, 104, lines 15–22. See for further discussion e.g. Catherine Atherton, *The Stoics on Ambiguity*, Cambridge 1993, 347–350.

and openness, and the obscurity of the cross is not so much visible in the enigmatic cross terminology but in that the disciples are to pick up their own cross of discipleship while Jesus' cross signified wound and failure.

The comments above highlight the complexities of close biblical reading. Although some critiques have been levelled, Kuhlin's article is the most focused in the present volume on combining biblical scholarship and Deleuzian philosophy. We still have to find the language and the contours of discourse for continuing this dialogue. Biblical scholarship needs to move beyond its traditional historicism and occasional fear of philosophical hermeneutics; philosophy needs to move beyond its internal paradigms of scholarly debate and hear voices from the outside. Kuhlin's article is a good example of both. ▲