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**Klaus Berger. *Identity and Experience in the New Testament*.  
Translated by Charles Muenchow. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003. Pp. 298.  
\$27.00 (Paper).**

[1] The Bible represents human experience very foreign to modern readers; and so, in this book New Testament scholar Klaus Berger seeks to discover the social-psychological milieu within which the interactions reflected in biblical texts may be properly understood. To that end, Berger employs the methods of what he terms “historical psychology.”

[2] The term “historical psychology” is clarified in the Introduction (chapter 1). Psychology is “the investigation of the interior life” (1); the qualifier “historical” suggests that “both the inner life of the human being and the ways in which it has been understood have undergone far-reaching changes over the course of time” (1). To illumine the NT’s ways of viewing and experiencing the psyche, Berger identifies, first, questions to be posed regarding the vocabulary used when describing the inner life as well as the associations and/or emotional responses that various terms evoke; then, the fundamental categories of experience: time, identity, power and weakness, causality, reality and sign, otherness, tokens of reality, facticity. Analysis of ancient and modern experience in terms of these categories reveals numerous differences.

[3] The first of such differences is evident in chapter 2, which addresses the questions: who is a “person”? and how individualized is a “person”? Whereas moderns think that only human beings have psyches, and so, count as persons, “Judaism at the time of the New Testament . . . saw all areas of creation as being administered by personlike beings” (27). Moreover, the modern concept of personhood is highly individualistic; in biblical antiquity, however, “the only ‘individual’ aspect of a person that gets preserved is his or her name” (28). Both Judaism and the NT also reflect the notion that the essence of one person can return in another, e.g., John the Baptist is Elijah. This fluid, less individualistic understanding of identity is also reflected in Paul’s claim, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20a) and in the New Testament motif of “putting on Christ” as a garment (Gal. 3:27-29).

[4] Demonic possession, the focus of chapter 3, is similar to the idea of the indwelling of Christ or the putting on of Christ as a garment. All presuppose a permeable boundary around the person and reflect the notion that one or more personlike entities can take up residence within a person. In the New Testament, possession by demons is the negative side of a duality that has inspiration as its positive. “The category of the demonic was used to understand experiences of the uncanny, the dreadful, the destructive, the fearsome, the hostile, or the threatening” (55).

[5] Chapter 4, on the experience of body reflected in Pauline texts, treats the relation of body and self, renewal of the body, the relation of the body to others, the body as transferable property, sinning against one’s body, and the corporeality of both salvation and damnation. Distinct from the modern mentality “my body belongs to me,” Paul thinks of the body as “something like a ganglion in a network of nerves” (69), and so, in terms of dependency. The body’s worth is determined by whether or not Christ lives within it; and “salvation comes down to having the Holy Spirit as one’s occupying power” (68).

[6] The historical-psychological issue in chapter 5 is, why do human beings experience an inner, invisible world of the “heart” and also an external one? Is the experience of these two everywhere and always the same? Chapter 6, on perception, treats perceptions of reality, visions, mythical events, journeys to heaven, conscience, death, and alienation. Chapter 7, on the topic of emotions, treats Paul’s doctrine of desire, including its theological and psychological significance, then proceeds to fear and anxiety, terror, worry, disappointed love, groaning and longing, joy and sorrow.

[7] After a brief chapter on suffering (8), chapter 9 treats aspects of religion: faith, Holy Spirit and charisma, sin, prayer, and pastoral care. Chapter 10, on behavior, first addresses the biblical mandates to hate certain persons, such as family members (Luke 14:26), concluding, “The hatred to which Jesus summons his followers is certainly not rooted in embittered resignation” (224); rather, it is “the counterpart in the psyche of the fact that something genuinely new is being established in social relationships” (225). Other behaviors covered include self-love, sexuality, risking and gaining life, possessions, and vengeance. Notes, bibliography, and an index of references to ancient texts are included at the book’s end.

[8] That the writers of New Testament texts understood the fundamental categories of human experience differently than those of us who read them is a point well-taken but one hardly new. The numerous social-scientific studies of the New Testament that have appeared since the publication of the German original of this work (*Historische Psychologie des Neuen Testaments*, 1991) amply demonstrate this. In his use of a “psychological” approach, Berger avoids the inappropriate application of modern psychological theories to the interactions of the ancient subjects reflected in biblical texts. His historical-psychological approach, with its appreciation of the historical specificity of the interpretive activity that is human experience, is a sound alternative. His method, however, at least as deployed in this work produced nearly 15 years ago, is not as methodical as one would like; it appears, rather, to be a method “in development.” Moreover, the treatments of the many biblical themes covered here are noticeably uneven in length and quality. For example, given the centrality of the passion of

Jesus in the Gospels and in Paul, the exclusive focus on 1 Peter in what is a conspicuously brief chapter on the experience of suffering seems oddly partial.

[9] Still, there are many valuable observations in this book. This reviewer appreciated, in particular, those on identity, demon possession, and body, all of which could be recommended to graduate students. Those unfamiliar with the aforementioned social-scientific studies might well find their appetite whetted by this book. This reviewer hopes Berger will continue to develop this intriguing and potentially fruitful approach. Given the number of topics covered here, a subject index would have been a welcome addition.

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