

Zeitschrift: Theologische Zeitschrift
Herausgeber: Theologische Fakultät der Universität Basel
Band: 47 (1991)
Heft: 1

Artikel: In Memoriam : Karl Ludwig Schmidt (1891-1956)
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-878132>

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IN MEMORIAM

Karl Ludwig Schmidt (1891–1956)

Vorabdruck eines Artikels für das Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation mit freundlicher Erlaubnis des Herausgebers John H. Hayes und der Abingdon Press, Nashville TN.

I

Born in Frankfurt a. M., February 5, 1891, K. L. Schmidt studied philology and theology in Marburg under, among others, W. Hermann, before becoming assistant to A. Deissmann in Berlin and Privatdozent there in 1918. In 1921 K. L. Schmidt was made professor of NT at Giessen and filled similar positions in Jena, 1925, and in Bonn, 1929, until 1933 when, because of his opposition to the national socialists, he was one of the first deposed from his post and compelled to leave Germany. In 1935, after serving Swiss pastorate, he was appointed professor of NT at Basel until illness forced his retirement in 1953 and death in 1956. From 1922–37 he edited *Theologische Blätter*, and in 1945 founded Basel's *Theologische Zeitschrift* whose editor he remained until 1952.

K. L. Schmidt's numerous books, articles, and sermons (see Works) cluster about two dynamic poles, 1. the Gospels, and 2. the church.

1. In his ground-breaking *Habilitationsschrift, Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu* (1919), he pioneered insights which became fundamental to the emerging form-critical method. Confirming J. Wellhausen – the canonical Gospels were collections of independent smaller units – he demonstrated further that the introductory topographical and chronological details of these more or less fixed units were the “framing” formulations of the collectors of these pericopes, i.e. the evangelists. In general, the frames contain little of historical value and the resulting composite of Jesus' words and deeds is a secondary, nonhistorical life portrait. Thus *Rahmen*, along with the studies of M. Dibelius (1919) and R. Bultmann (1921), drove an even larger spike into the coffin of the ‘life of Jesus movement.’ The Gospels must be regarded, rather, as essentially church productions from living oral tradition units which, varying in form, must be tied genetically to the particular life forms

and functions (esp. worship) of the various church communities (i.e. the *Sitz im Leben*). The Gospels as a whole then should be construed as folk literature (*Kleinliteratur*) and confused neither with the developmental historical thrusts of the ancient *lives* (*bioi/vitae*) and *memoirs* (*apomn moneumata*) nor with the higher literary circles which produced those biographies.

These latter conclusions K. L. Schmidt developed programmatically in “Die Stellung der Evangelien...” in the *Gunkel Festschrift* (1921) (see Works). The closest analogues to the Gospels are the Dr. Faust collections, certain ecclesiastical ‘lives of the saints,’ and medieval legends of the *chasid*. Characteristic of all this “popular” literature are the secondary, nondescript links between the smaller units which almost never play a significant role in the larger presentation and tend to psychologize the relation of one incident to the next (as Luke does with Mark). Hence corresponding to this folk form or format the Gospels are communal productions of faith, cultically and kerygmatically generated, shaped, and refined, whose authors are more editors than distinct literary personalities. He thus turns W. Wrede’s thesis on its head: Mark is not a function of the history of dogma but rather dogma is a product of the multi-layered experiences of the church in which Mark himself stands. Though layers of these traditions (esp. written sources) can be chronologically delineated, these layers bear no intrinsic relation to what is more or less historical. For it is the very nature of folk literature to transcend the objective–subjective continuum of historical authenticity. In his “Jesus Christ” article of RGG² (1929) he adds a theological touchstone: all the Gospel traditions are stamped by church folk convinced that God through the death and resurrection of Israel’s Messiah has appeared on earth to establish the eschatological people of the old and new covenants. He thus initiated much that was to be pursued in later sociological approaches and approximated certain insights of the subsequent ‘new quest of the historical Jesus’.

2. Of his many lexicographical-theological studies of biblical concepts, K. L. Schmidt’s greatest contribution came in the notion of the “church” (*Die Kirche des Urchristentums*, 1927, and subsequent articles – see Works). *Ecclesia*, taken primarily from the LXX, represents the Hebrew *qahal* (Aram. *kenischta*) of Yahweh, the people of God, of which the NT church is the fulfilled OT assembly. Building upon F. Kattenbusch’s analysis, he showed that in the NT in general, a local congregation embodied the whole people of God. This means that the NT church presented itself as a remnant which remained solidly within Israel, yet as its fulfillment. Jesus himself as Messiah gathered his representatives of the twelve tribes and ultimately gave this “remnant” self-understanding over to them and to the subsequent

church. Paul acknowledged the priority of the twelve and of Jerusalem but inveighed against the excessive honoring of human personalities coordinated with the hierarchal structuring of authority. These notions, through which he made the “church” a critical theological category for NT scholarship, remained central in all of his subsequent work on the “city” and “state,” in his dialogue with M. Buber (see Works), and provided a potent counter to the theologians of the Third Reich.

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