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Eberhard Jüngel and Existence: Being Before the Cross, by Deborah Casewell. Routledge, 2021. Pp. 196. $128.00 (hardcover); $39.16 (ebook)

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Eberhard Jüngel—who died this past September—was, together with Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, and Dorothea Sölle, one of the most important German Protestant theologians of his generation. That he remains less well known than they is due partly to his lack of obvious political program or controversial positions, partly to the density and difficulty of his writing. He has, however, begun to find English language interpreters in recent years (although, as has been often pointed out, he himself engaged little with Anglo-American theological work). His biography (from a childhood in atheist East Germany to Tübingen, via studies with Ernst Fuchs, Gerhard Ebeling, and Karl Barth) has been told often enough; his theological reputation rests on a small but solid body of monographs, chiefly *Paulus und Jesus* (1962), *Gottes Sein ist im Werden* (1965; *God's Being is in His Becoming*, 2001), and above all *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt* (1977; *God as the Mystery of the World*, 1983), and many essays and sermons. Like Fuchs and Ebeling, and also like Rudolf Bultmann, his work may be considered hermeneutical in approach and, like them, was influenced by Heidegger. German twentieth century theology was not sparing in its borrowings from philosophy, following Origen's advice that Christian theology should "despoil the Egyptians" in helping itself to the resources of secular thought.

This relation of Jüngel's work to philosophy—especially to Heidegger—is the chief concern of Deborah Casewell's new book. Theology and philosophy have long had close relations in Germany; many philosophers, like Hegel and Nietzsche, grew up in ministers' homes and the strong inheritance of Idealism means that even atheistic thinkers like Adorno referred centrally to theological motifs. Drawing on philosophical influences can, however, be theologically risky. Bultmann, who was the first to show the influence of Heidegger, was frequently attacked for this—most famously by another existentialist philosopher, Karl Jaspers (*Die Frage der Entmythologisierung*, 1954; Engl. *Myth and Christianity*, 1958), but also by his erstwhile ally Barth, who saw Bultmann's existential interpretation of Scripture as an unwarranted anthropological reduction. Jüngel's own work has itself sought to mediate between these last two figures: roughly speaking, between Barth's insistence on the priority of revelation over

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natural theology and human reason, on the one hand, and Bultmann's attempt to ground faith in human existence on the other.

Casewell's book is divided into two large parts. The first surveys three figures she sees as crucial to Jüngel's project: Luther, Hegel, and Heidegger. This is already a particular choice, since *God as the Mystery of the World* has chapters on Nietzsche, Fichte, and Feuerbach (as well as on Hegel); Casewell's rationale lies in reading Luther himself almost as a proto-existentialist and, more importantly as the founder of a *theologia crucis* she believes central to Jüngel's thought. The key role played in theology by several modern Luther renaissances supports her choice, as would Jüngel's engagement with Luther (remarked on by other commentators like Ivor Davidson). The second half of the book is also divided into three main chapters, each devoted to an aspect of Jüngel's theology: "Sin, Death and Nothingness"; "The Call and Response of Faith"; and finally "Community and Love." The footnotes and bibliography give solid evidence of the author's knowledge both of Jüngel's writings (including those not yet translated into English) and of secondary literature on him in English and German.

In a book of less than two hundred pages, this amount of material is sometimes covered in rather condensed form. The Luther chapter is a mere six pages, thus not much more than a thumbnail sketch, but does manage to do some useful linking to Jüngel via Gerhard Ebeling's work on Luther (44). The Hegel chapter concentrates on Hegel's discussion of the death of God (commented and developed by Jüngel in *God as the Mystery of the World*), which has been a favorite topic of many modern thinkers, as recently as Žižek. In Hegel, this topic is connected with dialectics, negation, and historical narrative, especially in the *Phenomenology of Mind*: Jüngel's own reading of it thus sees Hegel as an anticipation of Nietzsche's idea of the death of God. Casewell (57) emphasizes Hegel's well-known correction of Kant's purely ethical and formal conception of religion.

With the Heidegger chapter, we begin to approach the heart of Casewell's argument. In only ten pages she must both offer a rapid survey of a difficult thinker and also argue that he is ultimately Christian in inspiration, and finally point to Jüngel's debt to him. This is perhaps more than can be done in such a short space. Although the genealogy of *Angst* in *Being and Time* from Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Dread* and thence to Luther's *Anfechtung* makes sense, it is not so evident that Heidegger's "thought also utilises the logic of the cross" (77). After mentioning Kierkegaard, Casewell goes on to Heidegger's notion of authenticity, which as she correctly emphasizes is achieved only alone (relations to others are, in *Being and Time*, only inauthentic distractions from authentically solitary care and being-toward-death) and then to his "destruction" of the history of ontology (79). Despite Heidegger's theological training (he wrote his *Habilitation* on Duns Scotus), Casewell must admit that his "turn away from Christianity involved seeing the call towards authenticity not as coming from God, but from being itself" (81; Being should have

been capitalized here). Being is, as Heidegger repeatedly emphasized, no synonym for God. It is thus not clear how the "logic of the cross" should remain central for him. (In a separate article on this, Casewell is clearer: "Contrary to Heidegger, Jüngel's starting point is the event of the cross" ["Reading Heidegger through the Cross," *Forum Philosophicum* 21, 1 (Spring 2016): 95–114, 103].) In the latter parts of the chapter, Casewell shifts gears to refer briefly to Sartre's and Lévinas's critiques of Heidegger's lack of social dimension (or emphasis on intersubjectivity); this might have been done more economically with less reliance on Lévinas, since Casewell must then argue that Jüngel's later work will effectively be "answering" Lévinas's critique of Heidegger, which feels like a roundabout way to get at the problem. There is also more than occasional rocky writing in this book, with many sentences beginning with dangling modifiers or awkwardly structured: "This event of overcoming nothingness further determines the being of God as love, in that God's being submits itself to perishability because God involves Godself in nothingness and as God is love, love now by definition submits itself to nothingness" (143).

The introduction to part II occasionally seems forced, as when Luther, Hegel, and Heidegger are lumped together by claiming that "in all three thinkers, there is a need to destroy a previous understanding of existence in the world and in relation to God" (95). How did Hegel "destroy a previous understanding of existence," building as he did on Kant and on the work of his contemporaries Schelling and Hölderlin, and—most crucially!—relying on his central appeal to the legitimacy of *Sittlichkeit* or custom, surely a "previous understanding of existence" if ever there was one? (It was Kant's corrosive criticism more than Hegel's reconstructive hermeneutics that was "destructive.") The introductory section also leaps around rather quickly from Moltmann to Sölle to Bonhoeffer in a small space (97); this was also a problem in the introduction to the entire book, where, in many cases, important thinkers (Hans Küng, Erich Przywara, Wolfhart Pannenberg) get glossed in one paragraph each. The impression this makes can occasionally feel a bit touristic. There is not much marking of the different phases of Heidegger's career, which have been drawn on in distinctive ways by Jüngel's teachers; thus Bultmann referred more to the early Heidegger of *Being and Time*'s existentialism, whereas Fuchs and Ebeling preferred the later work. Casewell does not discuss the touchy question of Heidegger's Nazi sympathies, although she comes close to them at one point when briefly mentioning his "*Kehre* [turn] . . . away from the individual to a people" (81). "The people" here was the Nazi *Volk*, defined biologically as fated community (*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*); as Chris Thornhill has noted, for Heidegger, "no meaningful opposition to this fate is possible, and fate can in principle justify all modes of political order" (*Karl Jaspers: Politics and Metaphysics* (Routledge, 2002), 115). John Macquarrie's belief that Heidegger was no anti-Semite (*Heidegger and Christianity* (Continuum, 1994), 112) has since been decisively refuted by

the publication of his so-called Black Notebooks in 2014. One wonders if his standing among so many theologians will remain unaffected by this.

In chapter 6, the book reaches its center: the comparison and contrast of Heidegger's and Jüngel's view of existence and its modern confrontation with nothingness (which Heidegger had brought to the fore in his 1929 inaugural lecture, *Was ist Metaphysik?*). Casewell usefully contrasts Jüngel's reference to this problem to Barth's in the *Church Dogmatics*. In Jüngel, "Nothingness comes to not be through the act of *creatio ex nihilo* . . . creation, in setting out what being is, also sets the bounds of that being. Creation out of nothing gives rise to its antithesis, to nonbeing, that which is antithetical to being, as well as humanity as receptive to the Word of God. The act of creation also evinces Jüngel's Hegelian understanding of God as a being in process that engages with negation as a moment in the being of God" (122).

This is indeed correct, but it is not quite the whole story. A curious feature of Casewell's book is the absence of any discussion of hermeneutics; although she recognizes that "it is from Heidegger that Jüngel draws his understanding of language" (77), the word hermeneutics is only mentioned in two footnotes (in quotes from other writers). Hermeneutics is, however, absolutely central to both Heidegger and Jüngel. In the German context, existentialism is closely linked to it. In Jüngel's work, the cross is also a question of *interpretation* of God's being, thus of hermeneutics and creation itself has, in turn, to be "interpreted" by faith. As Jüngel writes in *God as the Mystery of the World* (Bloomsbury, 2014, henceforth *GMW*):

> The experience with experience which emerges from the encounter with nonbeing can also take shape as gratitude. This happens whenever being is experienced as something out of nothingness and as such preserved from it, as something which is gifted to be, as creation. (32)

In other words, nothingness must be reflexively (re)*interpreted* by faith as creation; faith must *respond* hermeneutically to creation (to borrow Casewell's own idea of "faith as response"). It must do so via analogy, due to the inadequacy of human language to describe the divine. Creation, for Jüngel, is not just "there" as a brute fact, immanently given without interpretation (this would be natural theology or the *analogia entis*, something Jüngel, as a Barthian, can not accept); yet the subjectivity of experience as interpretation has to be founded in God's revealed act (or Jüngel would be a fideist). The term "experience with experience" (*Erfahrung mit der Erfahrung*, a formulation taken over from Ebeling) is thus something of a juggler's trick and seeks to hide or bridge over this difference with a kind of second-order reflexivity. The inherited tension, going far back in Christian tradition, between the subjectivity of faith (emphasized in Catholicism, as by Newman and Blondel) and faith as acknowledgment and obedience (emphasized in Luther and in Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*) makes itself felt here. Barth himself seems already to have skirted around it in the *Church Dogmatics*, as several scholars (Dieter Lührmann, Martin

Seils) have noted. So, too, some critics (Garrett Green, Oliver Pilnei) have faulted Ebeling and Jüngel for the equivocacy of their notion of faith as "experience."

Similarly, our necessary engagement with nothingness goes even further in Jüngel than Casewell mentions. In his book on death, Jüngel notes that renewed man "is not created from the void that was at the beginning, but from the nullity and annihilation resulting from the self-destructiveness and guilt that man effects" (*Tod* (Kreuz Verlag, 1982), 140). We must, like the Prodigal Son, go "into the far country" (as Barth's famous phrase has it) before being renewed. As Jüngel puts it: "nothing is worse for man than for him to cease to be a mere man" (*GMW*, 334). Redemption cannot mean divinization or release from humanity. As opposed to the view of earlier twentieth century theologians, who saw faith as offering security against existential anxiety before the void, Jüngel's God is one who, quite precisely, *takes away our security*, our illusion of secular autonomy (*GMW*, 170). And the existentialist emphasis on existence over essence applies not just to humans, but also to the Divinity: "God *de facto* can never be thought "per se" . . . The coming in which God's being is, is God himself" (*GMW*, 384, 388). Thus "the *essence* of God is to be thought as being absolutely identical with his *existence*," and "God *exist*s in this struggle" (with nothingness) (*GMW*, 217, emphasis author's). Jüngel is thus doing a great deal more than merely "mining philosophy for statements on human existence," as Casewell suggests early on in the book (6).

All of these points do not contradict Casewell's central thesis, but rather confirm and strengthen it (by further developing the contrast with Barth she sketches in). Is the hermeneutical aspect of Jüngel's work now, in fact, its most dated aspect, as his student Ingolf Dalferth, who has mediated between continental and analytic traditions in theology, recently argued (*Radical Theology*, (Fortress Press, 2016))? Pannenberg and other critics have noted hermeneutical theology's risk of minimizing the historical reality of revelation; Ivor Davidson thinks a narrative theology could correct this. Casewell's work has the great merit of taking Jüngel's claims seriously and not carping at him for his specific focus (as supposedly "narrow" in its Paulinism), as some have done in the past. Her book manages to engage with the substance of Jüngel's argument while not shying from criticism, as here: "love, as the mark of existence and of ontology, is where Jüngel's Hegelianism grapples most extensively with his existentialism" (143). While summing up her discussion of Jüngel's anthropology, she notes: "Revelation challenges and contradicts the world and particular philosophical anthropologies but in doing so it acknowledges that within the limits of the world, those analyses of human existence may be correct" (146). This is an accurate statement of the relation of theology and philosophy in Jüngel's work.