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**Klug, Florian: *Beyond the Visible Church*. The Motif of the *ecclesia ab Abel* from Augustine to James Alison. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press 2024. (XVIII) 426 S., kt. \$ 79,95 ISBN: 979-8-4008-0009-2**

“What defines the Church?” This is the central question taken up in *Florian Klug’s* ambitious study *Beyond the Visible Church: The Motif of the ecclesia ab Abel from Augustine to James Alison*. The study attempts to “conduct a rereading that puts modes of a homogeneous interpretation into question, and opens up the possibility of divergent explanations on how to understand the Church” (xvii). The *ecclesia ab Abel* motif serves, in this case, as a key biblical and post-biblical “metaphorical image” that works within Christian history through its “constant surplus of potential meanings” (xvi). Largely bracketing the findings of biblical scholarship, Klug attempts instead to recover the interpretive richness of the motif through a targeted historical engagement set against the background of modern hermeneutical and literary theory (i. e. Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, Jean-François Lyotard and Terry Eagleton). The study thus presents itself as a work of both historical and constructive theology.

Chap. one begins with an investigation of the motif among early Christian authors, centered around Augustine of Hippo’s use of it in the early fifth century. The author is clear to argue, however, that this usage can only be understood within the earlier context of Patristic thinking about the universality of the Church considered more broadly, and figures including Ignatius, Polycarp, Tertullian, Cyprian, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Ambrose appear as witnesses to the “conceptual breadth of Catholicity in the early Church” (18). This is a key dimension of Klug’s argument, and he tries to prove that Augustine’s paradigmatic usage of the Abel motif reveals an ecclesiology “which is not and cannot be a coherent system because it depends on time, evolves from dialogue, and avoids one-sided extreme positions” (50).

Offering general vignette sketches of Augustine’s polemics with Manichean, Donatist, and Pelagian interlocutors, Klug highlights Augustine’s relevant references to Abel, providing ample quotations to demonstrate that “he uses the motif of Abel as a rhetorical *topos* for different functions and for different purposes” (66). Thus, Abel appears in the *Contra Faustum Manicheum* (12.9; 22.17) offering true sacrifice in humility of heart, and yet, in the early controversy with Pelagius, as a figure whose righteousness is a testament to God’s grace and not to the strength or virtue of his nature (*De natura et gratia*, 38.45). The study dwells longer on Augustine’s debate with Julian of Eclanum concerning Original Sin and the latter’s accusations of lingering Manicheanism in Augustine’s thought, points which Klug argues “cannot be completely dismissed” (96). The most important text for the motif of the *ecclesia ab Abel*, Augustine’s *De civitate Dei*, sits somewhere between these two

interpretative poles, identifying Abel as one who appears precisely as a “pilgrim and stranger in the world [...] by grace a pilgrim below, and by grace a citizen above” (*civ.* 15.1). Klug rightly argues that Augustine “emphasizes the ambiguity of inner-worldly phenomena” (59) and the interplay of the two cities, while emphasizing that Abel represents those who “live *according to the spirit*, and [whose] lives are subject to the love of God and neighbor” (61, italics original). This is completed in the chap. with an evaluation of Abel as a fundamental type or “paradigm” for faithfulness and justification in the thinking of Gregory the Great.

Chap. two enters the era of medieval theology with a consideration of the thought of Bonaventure and James of Viterbo. In the former, the Abel motif appears primarily as a way of identifying the continuity of salvation history, particularly relating the righteous of the Old Testament to the Church, since “Bonaventure sees faith in Christ as substantially identical at all times” (156). This flows from Bonaventure’s “eschatological and contemplative orientation” (170) and indicates a universal understanding of the Church that is taken up in James as a means of justifying the subordination of all forms of secular society and rule to the spiritual society and rule of the Church (181). Abel, as exercising the first priestly functions through his humble sacrifice and innocence, demonstrates the primordial priority of the Church’s extent and power (187). It is here that Klug’s overall thesis begins to appear more distinctly: “With Abel’s innocence as an example, it is fair to conclude that Church belonging does not only begin with the confession of faith because God’s salvific will is universal and therefore includes more persons than the visible institution indicates” (191).

Chap. three develops this thesis in relation to the “modern age,” beginning, however, with Jan Hus (*De ecclesia*), before proceeding to Martin Luther (*Lectures on Genesis* et al.) and arriving finally at Francisco Suárez (*De necessitate fidei, De ecclesia*) as a representative of ecclesiology in conflict with the horizons opened up by the discovery of the New World. In these authors, the figure of Abel is developed at greater length as a paradigm of the faithful, just, and righteous person, who begins to be an “everyman” representative of the individual believer.

Chap. four concludes the historical portion of the study by investigating the ecclesiological significance of the inclusion of the Abel motif in the second paragraph of the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. As in the first chap., this is contextualized through a broader consideration of ecclesiological developments from the time of Trent to Vatican I, and into theologians of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (most importantly through the influential retrieval of the *ecclesia ab Abel* motif in the work of Yves Congar). For Klug, this development finds its completion in the thought of James Alison (after a brief consideration of Rahner’s “anonymous Christian”), for whom the dynamics of Girardian scapegoating find in Abel the beginning of the Church “from God’s solidarity with Abel as the first innocent victim,” thereby showing that through Christ it can exist “as a realm of solidarity that provides a space for a community that does not rest on exclusion” (355–356).

Chap. five provides a helpful repetition and summation of the historical course of the study attempted in the prior chap.s, and the general reader can profitably turn here for its main points. The final, constructive theological application of the Abel motif is offered in conversation with contemporary hermeneutical and literary theory, but the main conclusion appears before this as a claim concerning its fundamental ecclesiological openness. For Klug, the meaning of the idea of the *ecclesia ab Abel* is that “instead of favoring only one single approach to understanding the Church in her Catholicity, the Abel motif rejects overly strict limitations and definitions, and provides ecclesiological plurality in theological unity” (377).

In evaluating Klug's conclusions, it seems fair to consider whether the historical dimension of the study adequately supports its constructive argument. Methodologically, the investigation of selected theologians offers helpful contextualization of the references to Abel as the first of the just. Nonetheless, questions may arise concerning the general exclusion (save occasional mention in the footnotes) of some authors such as Irenaeus, much of the Greek Patristic tradition, Thomas Aquinas, and Henri de Lubac. Focusing on broad historical and theological vignettes of each author requires perhaps too much dependence on the secondary literature for such framing (visible, for instance, in a sketch of Augustinian ecclesiology that largely avoids discussion of controverted topics such as predestination and the *massa damnata*). Klug's study does succeed, however, in inviting further attention to the biblical foundations of ecclesiology and in this it will hopefully spur continuing historical and systematic retrieval of this fundamental theme.

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