

Bruce W. Longenecker, *Hitler, Jesus, and Our Common Humanity: A Jewish Survivor Interprets Life, History, and the Gospels*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014. 188 + xiii pages. \$18.40.

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For many of its practitioners, Scriptural Reasoning often begins as an academic exercise. A desire for greater understanding of other religions may encourage charitable readers to join together in a college community or urban book group to hear what sacred scriptures mean within distinct traditions. The practice may arise within a specific context—for example, moments of interreligious conflict—but the model seems to precede the effort. The goal may remain amorphous or abstract, and the end result may suffer.

The power, beauty, and usefulness of Bruce Longenecker's short book—a text of just over a hundred pages, with sixty pages of diary extracts and appendixes—is a careful reversal of this abstract, nearly deductive approach. The title, *Hitler, Jesus, and Our Common Humanity*, appropriately points toward both the historical moment (of the Holocaust) and a universal emphasis (human nature) in an example of a personal reasoning with the meaning of Scripture. The subtitle—*A Jewish Survivor Interprets Life, History, and the Gospels*—suggests both the novelty of this case study and its importance as an example of Scriptural Reasoning. Longenecker describes a Jewish reading of Christian scriptures pursued in the concrete particularities of extreme inhumanity (a response to genocide), as a spiritual response encouraging love among all.

Born in late 1927 to Conservative Jewish parents in Krefeld, Germany, Rolf Gompertz vividly remembers the violence of *Kristallnacht* in early November 1938, when the Nazis almost arrested his father. Rolf and his parents relocated to the United States in 1939 and settled in southern California, where he still lives after retiring as a publicist for NBC television and teaching with UCLA's Extension program. Longenecker characterizes Gompertz's significance:

Ultimately he would come to see his whole life, not just his contributions within it, as being an “answer to Hitler,” a refutation and negation of all that Hitler and his Nazi collaborators had sought to achieve. More specifically, Rolf's answer to Hitler is found in his life as a Jew—in fact, a Jew who has not been beaten down by evil but who loves others as an expression of the presence of the divine spirit within him. (58-59)

Gompertz published several works in mid-life, most significantly *A Jewish Novel about Jesus*, in which the Nazi “will to power” “is paraded front and center..., where it is exposed and ‘answered’ by Rolf's vision of ‘our common humanity’” (67).

This work grows from what Longenecker calls “redemptive remembering,” which “keeps the hated moments of hatred intact while seeking nonetheless to find a redemptive alternative that does justice to the moments of evil without allowing them to determine or erode the character of one's own life” (46). Gompertz's Jesus-novel enacts this remembering through a

creative close reading of the Christian gospels, specifically the passion accounts. Longenecker summarizes:

The bloodthirsty and megalomaniacal Roman Pilate prefigures the bloodthirsty and megalomaniacal Nazi Hitler. Similarly, Jesus the Jew, who was persecuted by the power-hungry Roman regime, stands as a precursor of the Jewish Holocaust victims who were persecuted through the power-hungry Nazi regime. (74)

Gompertz's Jesus counters Roman violence with godly love and Jewish *shalom*. He is not himself the messiah "precisely because the eschatological age of messianic peace had not been established by Jesus" (78). Instead, "messianic identity is universalized rather than particularized. For Gompertz, all of humanity is called to live as the messiah (or messiahs) of the world by doing good in their indigenous settings" (78). In Gompertz's reading, Pilate is a "despicable" powermonger, while Caiaphas is a pawn whom Pilate manipulates into duping the Jewish public for Rome's benefit. Longenecker concludes:

Gompertz's narrative choices might not be definitive for all novel depictions nor does it exhaust all narrative options, but he has notably crafted a storyline that takes account of certain neglected features of power relationships of the first-century Judean landscape and of historical realities of Jewish-Christian relations throughout the centuries. (98)

The objective value of Gompertz's "redemptive remembering"—his "answer to Hitler" with the universalized messianic response of sacrificial love—comes from its inspiring combination of his modern, personal Jewish experience of racial hatred and violence and his creative rethinking of the ancient Christian scriptural narrative. For advocates of Scriptural Reasoning, Gompertz represents an idiosyncratic yet plausible interaction with the sacred text as a response to existential evil. He starts from a need different from those often behind shared readings. Rather than seeking a common ground of understanding between different religious traditions, working from general principles to specific conclusions, Gompertz begins from a childhood commitment on *Kristallnacht* to stand with his threatened father, then deploys a creative reading of "Jesus the Jew" to address Nazi hatred and violence (and, by implication, later similar forms of hatred and violence) with an appeal to a common humanity. The result is compelling.

The reconstruction of Gompertz's efforts is nothing short of masterful. Mirroring Gompertz's creative approach, Longenecker's first section begins with a gripping reconstruction of Rolf's trauma on *Kristallnacht*. Part Two puts the event in its broad historical, political, and social contexts. Part Three describes Gompertz's literary corpus and contextualizes the Jesus-novel. The heart of the book, Part Four, analyzes Gompertz's chief ideas as a response to genocidal hatred and violence. The next section describes Rolf's popularization of his ideas through public speaking engagements in America and Germany. Longenecker concludes with "an appreciation" of Gompertz's efforts. He summarizes:

[Gompertz] does not perceive it to be his job to resolve all the great theological and philosophical riddles. His job, instead, is to involve himself in the divine process of giving and receiving love, and to do so on the basis of Zech[ariah] 4:6: “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.” (116)

This assessment conveys the potential power behind the creative reading of sacred texts. Such reading can provide fruitful responses to concrete needs in particular contexts.

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