

Joel L. Watts:

*Jesus as a Divine Suicide*

*The Death of the Messiah in Galatians*

(EUGENE, OREGON, WIPF AND STOCK PUBLISHERS, 2019)

In his book, Joel L. Watts analyzes the death of Jesus, using a rhetorical-critical method. He divides his work into two parts: in the first Part, he examines the social contexts of Paul's letter to the Galatians (Chapter 2) and Jewish views of death by choice (Chapter 3). In Chapter 4, he examines the concept of *devotio* (see below), while the next Chapter offers an introduction to the early Christian views of self-death. Chapter 6, then, is a summary of these views, whilst the last Chapter summarizes the whole book.

The introductory section briefly enumerates the events the interpretation of the letter to the Galatians underwent in the first four centuries AD. The function of this detour is not necessarily understandable in terms of the structure of the book, whose main purpose is to interpret the death of Jesus through the epistle, not to review its exegesis. The author then turns to his main research questions: How does Paul present the self-sacrifice of Jesus in this letter? How can the death of Jesus be interpreted on a transcendent level, in an area and domain where self-sacrifice was a known phenomenon? How does part 3, 1–14 of the letter depict the death of Jesus? Does applying a correct *devotio* model – a contractual self-sacrificing type of suicide – help us understand the epistle and the death of Jesus?

After analyzing and excluding various other models (involuntary sacrifice, suicide, martyrdom), Watts works out a cosmic interpretation and points out the significance of the death of the Jewish Messiah, on the basis of the Roman idea of devotion.

In the second Chapter, the author analyzes the social context of the Galatian letter. In this respect, he points out that the syncretistic religiosity of Celtic peoples under Roman rule was not uniform, despite opinions voiced to the contrary. According to Watts, the pagan roots of Celtic religiosity had manifested themselves in many forms and qualities, making it difficult to speak of them as a unit. Paul and his audience were greatly influenced by Stoicism, which he was also able to use to enhance his teaching. In Watts's view, Stoicism and Christianity, especially as formulated in the Epistle to the Galatians, discussed several similar topics, such as the original unity of humanity, formative forces, and the concept of virtue. The

culmination of his analysis is an account of Cato's death, which he sees as the embodiment of the Stoic suicide. Astonishing as it may seem, the devotional explanation of Jesus' death, for Watts, relies on Stoicism, more specifically with Cato's death as a prefiguration.

The third Chapter deals with the Jewish approach to voluntary death. Martyr death is usually associated with early Christianity, while noble, voluntary death is considered Roman. Between the two, a peculiar Jewish theory is positioned. Prior to the Rabbinic period, suicide was not explicitly prohibited by any law (perhaps because of its naturalness). After exploring that, the writer lists canonical and non-canonical self-inflicted deaths, with some annotations. In conclusion, he argues that selfishness is an act against God unless it is carried out for religious reasons (*qiddush ha-shem*), for which one can receive eternal life. In the Maccabean martyr tradition, Watts believes to discover a Greco-Roman trace connected to the *devotio* model. The religious aspect is common in the death of Jesus and in the *qiddush ha-shem* theory, although the Jewish theory does not imply any further relevant aspects of messianic death.

The fourth Chapter deals specifically with the *devotio* model, which in some respects can be considered the culmination of the book. The author applies the concept of *devotio ducis* to the Jesus's death. According to that concept, a member of a vulnerable community voluntarily assumes the role of deputy victim to reconcile the Transcendent and bring It to action. In a rite, the victim accepts their role, possibly makes a vow and, eventually, their voluntary death leads the community to victory, restoring the cosmic order. The last characteristic of the model is the deification of the sacrifice. This happens because when order has been established, the supernatural force accepts the sacrifice, which thus becomes a divine mediator. Watts presents the theory through several Roman examples, but as he has pointed out in the second chapter, Cato's death is the most decisive among them. Cato the Younger laid down his life with his own hands to avoid being humiliated, but later, he was seen as the saviour of the people as his death ended the civil war. He accepted his sacrificial role, and after his self-death, order and peace awaited the people.

In the fifth Chapter, the author examines the role of self-inflicted death in various forms such as suicide and martyrdom through early Christianity from the Apostolic Fathers until Augustine. Here, Watts notes: "There is a general consensus that death was to be avoided unless for the cause of Christ, but even then there is some smattering of discussion as to what counted for a death for Jesus. Why? Because the founder of the cult died a voluntary death and any straight-out condemnation must always be weighed against the death of Jesus."<sup>1</sup> At this point,

<sup>1</sup> Joel L. Watts: *Jesus as Divine Suicide: The Death of the Messiah in Galatians*. Pickwick Publications, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, Kindle Edition, 3393.

the author claims that before Augustin, death by choice existed only as a distant possibility. He emphasizes that the Christian Church's stance on the death of Jesus has changed alongside that of its view of self-inflicted death.

The sixth Chapter revisits the concept of devotion and applies it to Jesus' death. For the Romans, *devotio* was an act of suicide committed with the intention that such a death could change the cosmos in times of great anguish, when they or whatever was entrusted to them (a city, an army, a nation) were slated by the gods to be vanquished. The Romans committed this act by their own free will, if not by their own hand. The author points out that this model is distant from other New Testament authors but is certainly reused in Paul's writings, for the early Church celebrated the death of Jesus as a suicide by a divine Son because they believed it had accomplished exactly what it was meant to accomplish. – In the last short chapter, then, Watts recapitulates his work.

The reason why I consider this volume to be outstanding is that it defines *devotio* in such a way as to include apotheosis. As we have seen, the *devotio* is a specific Roman manner of suicide, used by Paul to justify the death of the Jewish Messiah. At the end of the day, Watts answers the main questions he proposed to himself at the outset of the book, and his responses are supported both by authoritative literature and his own ideas. From the very beginning, Jesus's self-sacrifice has been, and continues to be, addressed by theologians. The novelty of the present work lies with the fact that it interprets the death of Jesus through the analysis of the Galatians, by dint of the rhetorical-critical approach.

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