

Obituary for Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Luise Schottroff

Luise Schottroff taught us to read the Bible in a new way, to read it closely. She imparted on us the enthusiasm for discovery, which was carried by her joy of theology and life. She was a special teacher, who was always also interested in her counterpart. She conveyed her contents with great human kindness. She taught at the universities of Mainz, Kassel, Berkeley and New York; in 2007 the University of Marburg awarded her an honorary



doctorate. She furthermore taught at many study centers, at the Church Congress, in parishes and everywhere, where she met people who had questions about the Bible and life. It was always an intensive and lively exchange, with long conversations into the night over wine, which always also involved current societal concerns. In her, political engagement and a deep devoutness carried by biblical tradition flowed together. Sit-ins in the Hunsrück in front of the American rockets stationed there in the 1980s were part of her biography just as Bible work with Dorothee Sölle at the Church Congresses and numerous academic publications.

Luise Schottroff had a special talent for friendships. Until most recently her life was integrated in a network of relationships. Those were her “happiness in dying”, the friendships which carried her her whole life. In the time of her illness a network of friends developed, who also supported each other. She knew that she had to die but until the end she didn’t want to give death any power. The fear was outweighed by her joy in life and the knowledge of being contained in God’s wonderful creation. Until the end she was an important teacher for many who met her – on life and on dying.

Luise Schottroff was born 1934 in Berlin, she came from a family which opposed national socialism in the Confessing Church. Her father was a pastor, her mother was shaped by the women’s movement. She educated her children at home as long as possible so that they wouldn’t be at the mercy of the public school system. After her studies of theology, Luise Schottroff worked as an assistant at the University of Mainz and habilitated there. In the late 1960s it was there that she experienced the politically engaged students who infected her with their enthusiasm. In those groups taking the Bible seriously was frowned upon. It was considered conservative and redundant, at best suitable for justifications toward the church leadership when advocating political concerns. Luise Schottroff was looking for ways to combine her joy for the biblical tradition with those political risings. Together with her husband Willy Schottroff, who taught the Old Testament in Frankfurt, she set out to interpret the Bible sociohistorically. An important milestone was the Anti-Racism-Decision, adopted 1970 by the Ecumenical Council of Churches. Luise Schottroff experienced the intrigue against it in the church synods and theological faculties and how students, who were active in getting it realized, were pressured. From the very beginning on, her

sociohistorical access to the texts was tied to the ambition to also be able to answer current questions. In 1978, she published the book “Jesus of Nazareth – Hope of the Poor” together with Wolfgang Stegemann. From then on she became a theologian, who was also known beyond the universities, who influenced generations of students and people in the churches. In 2007, she was awarded the honorary doctorate of the University of Marburg. One of the numerous works which originated in Luise Schottroff’s sociohistorical-liberationist approach was the “Sociohistorical Dictionary for the Bible”, released together with others in 2009.

Much of what Luise Schottroff developed in the decades of her academic, church-, and societal teaching, writing and acting was reflected in the commentary on the first letter of Paul to the congregation in Corinth, published in 2013. In it she shows that the writing of Paul to the Corinthian congregation is directed at concrete people, amongst them not many wise and powerful men or ones privileged by birth, but uneducated, by birth disadvantaged, despised people, the ‘nothings’ of Roman society.

Social history – to her that meant dealing with questions of economy, of violence and children’s mortality. For her social history should not restrict itself only to the historical reconstruction of the real living conditions, but only in that context can theology be at all understood. Social history and theology belong inextricable together in her eyes. Only in their connection can what she called “liberation theology in the context of the ‘first’ world” develop.

In addition, her work was significantly influenced by Christian-Jewish dialogue. The fact that Jesus and Paul were Jews cannot be denied. But there exists a fatal and centuries-old anti-Jewish tradition of understanding them in a way as if they had been simultaneously or only ever the first Christians. Throughout her academic life, Luise Schottroff worked on uncovering what it means for Christian theologies today to read the New Testament as Jewish scripture of the first century. In her 2005 book about the parables of Jesus, the parables are read consistently from their Jewish background. In this context the engagement with rabbinic parables has contributed significantly to questioning the dominant allegoric explanation in Christian interpretation and sermon.

And of course feminist theology was a significant focus of Luise Schottroff’s work, from the external perspective sometimes even *the* focus. Together with others she founded the European Society of Women in Theological Research (ESWTR) in 1986 creating a network which today is indispensable for women theologians of all specialties. In 1991, she co-edited the “Dictionary of Feminist Theology”, in 1998, together with Marie-Theres Wacker, the “Compendium of Feminist Bible Interpretation”. In 1997, she was a co-founder of GrenzgängerIn. Verein zur Förderung feministischer Theologie (Border crosser. Association for the Promotion of Feminist Theology). However, the feminist theology was not an isolated field of work for Luise Schottroff. It was intrinsically connected to a liberation-oriented social history and to the rootedness in Christian-Jewish dialogue. Not for nothing those are the three perspectives that come together in the Bible in a Just Language, of which Luise Schottroff was a co-editor. In it she translated, amongst others, the Gospel of Matthew. Until shortly before her death she was working on a commentary on this scripture, which fascinated her, a project that will now have to be continued by others.

Luise Schottroff died on 8 February 2015 in a hospice in Kassel after a long illness. She leaves behind a large family: her son, grandchildren, students and friends. We miss her very much.

Claudia Janssen

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