

Obituary: Prof. Dr. Erich Zenger **(5.7.1939 – 4.4.2010)¹**

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On Easter morning of this year, Erich Zenger died suddenly and totally unexpected in his apartment in Münster (Westphalia). With him, the Old Testament scholarship in the German-speaking countries but also extending far beyond them, has prematurely lost one of its most creative and well-known exponents.

Erich Zenger was born on 5 July 1939 in the small Bavarian town of Dollnstein in very humble conditions. He was a child of war who had personally experienced hardship and hunger, as he told me himself. Being an intelligent, bright child, he attended high school in the nearby episcopal city of Eichstätt and subsequently entered the seminary there. His bishop sent him to the Collegio Germanico in Rome because of his great talent and so Erich Zenger studied from 1958-1965 at the Gregoriana (philosophy and theology) and at the Pontifical Biblical Institute (exegesis and orientalistics). He always viewed his years in Rome with ambivalence: he loved the Italian language as well as the Mediterranean lifestyle and cuisine. He was an excellent cook and liked to surround himself with guests and good conversation. How he could enthuse about his frequent visits to musical Verona, since he himself was a man with an excellent melodious voice! However, what remained with him as a negative impression throughout his life was the Roman, pre-conciliar climate of suspicion, of lack of freedom and out-dated norms and rules. Even after already having been ordained as priest, he did not receive a key from the rector of the Germanicum to enable him to enter the house after a concert on the last day (!) of his years in Rome – he spent the night on a park bench in Rome! After that he never set foot in the Germanicum again, even though he was always proud to have been a Germanican, under whose baton even the future Cardinal Karl Lehmann, his good friend, had sung in the Schola (the choir)! He could talk about this in a very captivating and highly detailed manner.

Having mellowed with the years, the deceased had signed up for the centenary celebrations of the Pontifical Biblical Institute (PBI) and would, after

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all those decades, have liked to stay at the Germanicum. Unfortunately that never happened.

The *Difesa*³ of Norbert Lohfink SJ, dated 12 November 1962, shortly after the opening of the Second Vatican Council, had a profound influence on Erich Zenger as young scholar. It was celebrated at the PBI as a public demonstration towards a scholarly opening-up of the Catholic exegesis, similar to the one already enjoyed by the protestant colleagues for a long time.

Erich Zenger also enjoyed his study sojourns in Heidelberg and was very impressed and inspired there by Hans Walter Wolff and Gerhard von Rad. The plan of the deceased had been to become a Classical Orientalist, however, heeding the urging of his bishop, he took up the professorship for Old Testament Studies in Eichstätt in 1972 at the young age of 32. Although he was a Bavarian himself and resided in close proximity to his home parish of Dollnstein, Erich Zenger felt constricted there, and so he changed over two years later to the great professorship in Münster, where he would remain without interruption from 1973 to 2004.

During these years, he assisted in about 30 doctoral theses; his students occupy renowned chairs throughout the German-speaking countries (amongst others Bonn, Erfurt, Kassel, Lucerne, Münster, Osnabrück, Regensburg and Vienna). In his capacity as professor, the deceased not only assisted his own students, but also those that sought him out in Münster from inside Germany, as well as from abroad. In spite of the great number of students, he did not establish an exegetical school, but rather gave impulses which were picked up and are being processed in vastly differing ways.

The first phase of his academic work took place within the field of the Pentateuch, and in particular its Sinai theophany. To place the God of deliverance of Mount Sinai into his historical and literary context, was his major concern, and it was to this subject that he dedicated himself together with his colleague from Münster of almost the same age, Peter Weimar. His interest in the history of religion and archaeology stems from this period in his life, which led him, from a literary historical point of view, to his Pentateuch model (the so-called Münster Pentateuch model). In this initial phase, Erich Zenger was a great advocate of diachronic research, but always with the aim that the historicity of the revelation of the God of Mount Sinai to the tribe of Israel should be of fruitful use to our time and to Christian Churches. During his numerous journeys to Israel and his periods of lecturing at the Dormitio Abbey in Jerusalem, he became a great friend of this country. Increasingly the Old Testament became the First Testament to him, as he used to call it programmatically.

³ The public defence of a doctoral dissertation at the PBI.

His second phase, which made him famous far beyond the borders of the German-speaking countries, was dedicated to the interpretation of the psalms. It was, however, almost accidental that he turned his attention to the psalms, as his former teacher, Josef Schreiner, was no longer able to take on the commentary promised to the Echter publishing house. So he and his first postdoctoral (habilitation) candidate, Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, by then professor in Bonn, started work on the commentary of the psalms for the series: “*Neue Echter Bibel*”;⁴ this they did, using the *Einheitsübersetzung* as a foundation. However, working on the first volume (Pss 1-50), which appeared in 1993, it became clear to both of them that the psalms would have to be interpreted on the basis of a new, critical translation. With this, the idea of a commentary series published by Erich Zenger was born. His “*Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament*” (HThKAT),⁵ encompassing a layout of approximately 65 volumes, and of which almost 25 volumes have been published, was to become his greatest success. It was a matter of great concern to him that not only Catholic, but also Protestant and Jewish authors should contribute towards this Commentary series. As the first psalm commentary in the *Echter Bibel* had gone as far as Psalm 50, Zenger and Hossfeld then commenced with Psalm 51 for the HThKAT and published Psalms 51-100 (2000) and Psalms 101-150 (2008). Volumes in the *Neue Echter Bibel* (Pss 51-100 in 2002; Pss 101-150 [in preparation]) followed in the form of abridged versions which were aimed more at the interested layperson. Finally, the still outstanding commentary to Psalms 1-50 was supposed to be published; this will now be taken over by Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, together with his former student Johannes Schnocks. The maxim of the deceased concerning the interpretation of the psalms was “From psalm exegesis towards psalter exegesis,” by which the compositional arches and connections (concatenatio) achieved great significance, without levelling out the individual psalm, however. The individual psalm is not being annulled, but is rather imbued with a greater theological value, if its integration into the programme of the adjacent psalms and groups of psalms is being considered in the interpretation. Erich Zenger never subscribed to a canonical end-text reading à la Childs; instead he stood for a “diachronic reflected synchrony,” which has as its starting point the end-text and leads back to the end-text. He never departed from diachronic considerations, nor did he want to!

For Erich Zenger, biblical theology is always obliged to honour the results of the historical-critical exegesis. For him, the validity of the biblical text could not be separated from its genesis, which does not mean, however, the reduction of the meaning to its history of textual development. With this, the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the texts increasingly became Erich Zenger’s focus, like for example in the doctoral theses assisted by him on the Septuagint psalter and

⁴ Published by Echter-Verlag, Würzburg.

⁵ Published by Herder-Verlag, Freiburg i.Br.

on the Midrash Tehillim. He was delighted that he was appointed as President of the Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense in 2008, and was given the task to prepare the topic “The Composition of the Book of Psalms.” With his typical dynamism, he arranged the congress and prepared the publication in record time so that he was able to submit all texts to the publisher before his death.

He was an incredibly industrious writer and worker, who managed to get by with only a few hours’ sleep for decades. Right to the end, he wrote all (!) his articles, books and lectures by hand, and his secretary of many years, who was the only one who could decipher these manuscripts, first wrote them with the typewriter and later with the computer.⁶ The introduction to the Old Testament⁷ published by him has reached its seventh edition and a total of 50,000 copies have already been sold. This makes it by far the top-selling theological textbook in Germany – with numerous international translations (amongst others Italian, Brescia 2005).

His editorship of the Stuttgarter Old Testament, his leading work on the current revision of the *Einheitsübersetzung* and his occupation as co-editor of the *Stuttgarter Bibelstudien* (SBS), *Herders Biblische Studien* (HBS) and, for many years, of the *Biblische Zeitschrift* (BZ) must also be mentioned. His lectures in Münster were, during the peak years, attended by about 600 (!) students in the biggest lecture hall of the university – not once, but week after week. At lectures and at German Catholic Days he was always a sought-after speaker and participant in a discussion: abounding with gestures, with an incisive voice, thrustful and energetic. In his capacity as priest he served in a convent of the Münster Sisters for many long years. When he failed to arrive for the Resurrection Mass on Easter morning, he was found dead in his apartment. In him, his students have lost their teacher; he however has found his Lord, to whom he was always very close in the prayers of Israel.

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⁶ Bibliography from 1968-2004 in: Frank-Lothar Hossfeld / Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger (eds.), *Das Manna fällt heute noch. Beiträge zur Geschichte und Theologie des Alten, Ersten Testaments*, festschrift for Erich Zenger on his 65th birthday, HBS 44, Freiburg 2004, 674-693.

⁷ Erich Zenger (ed.), *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, Stuttgart, 2008.