

**Gerhardsson, B 1996 — The Shema in the New Testament**

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**Reviewer: Prof Sj van Tilborg (Nijmegen)**

It is not so long ago that the Conventus of the Students of the New Testament used to ask the participants to describe in a short sentence what they were involved in. In that way, I had the opportunity to read for some years that B Gerhardsson was involved in the study of the *Shema* in the New Testament, the short confession of faith from Deuteronomy 6: 'Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.' There were times when I asked myself how anyone could devote so much time to such a short text. Now that I have read the study — a compilation of articles, the majority of which have appeared in various *Festschriften* between 1966 and 1994 — I do understand completely. I am glad to have had the chance to read this book. Something special happened. B Gerhardsson made a discovery at the beginning of his academic career which he slowly developed during the rest of his life. The discovery was that this *Shema*, in its rabbinical interpretation, can be found in a number of important texts of the New Testament. The rabbinical interpretation says: 'With your whole heart (thereby is meant): with both your inclination, with the good inclination and the evil inclination. With your whole soul (thereby is meant): even if he takes your soul (i e your life); with your whole mind (thereby is meant): with your whole property.' (*Mishna Bera-*

*kor* 9, 5) — in other words completely, also in situations in which your life is at stake, and in freedom to give up your property (pp 15-16). In Gerhardsson's formulation there are six (seven) early Christian *Shema* texts: 1) the long version of the narrative about the testing of Jesus after his baptism (Mt 4:1-11; Lk 4:1-13); 2) the narrative of the climax and end of Jesus' ministry in Israel according to Matthew: his crucifixion on Golgotha (Mt 27:33-54); 3) Jesus' foundation parable in the synoptic gospels: the narrative *meshal* about the sower, or — more exactly — about four kinds of soil (Mk 4:1-9; 13-20; Mt 13:1-9; 18-23; Lk 8:4-8; 11-15); 4) the six narrative *meshalim* which complement the foundation parable of the sower in the Matthean 'parable chapter' (13:24-33; 44-48); 5) the text composition in the Sermon on the Mount about true and false spiritual sacrificial service before God: Jesus' teaching about alms giving, prayer and fasting in Mt 6:1-16; 16-21; 6) the characterization in Acts 4:32 of the Christian mother community of Jerusalem; and, in a slightly different way, 7) the beginning of the hymn of love in 1 Corinth 13:1-3 (pp 303-304, 315).

These texts are discussed in every possible way. Because the book is a compilation of articles there is some repetition, but this is not a real problem, because style and approach are very special. Slowly one is introduced to and, while reading, amazed time and again about the fact that the 'discovery' itself had so little impact on scientific discourse and, as far as I know, has not left any real traces. Maybe that will change now. I had read a number of Gerhardsson's publications and yet I did not have the impression that his research had been linked to this extend to this *Shema* interpretation. I think I know a reason why — also to the surprise of the author — 'hardly any colleague of mine has made my theses and arguments about the *Shema* the object of a serious, thorough discussion' (p 12). His way of reading the *Shema* is literarily-theoretically different in the different texts. In the story of the temptation it lies at the basis of the formation of the story. That may be the case also with the explicative text of the parable of the sower. Is it true also for the passion story in Matthew? In other texts — the rest of the Matthew texts; the text from Acts and 1 Corinth 13:1-3 — something completely different is at stake. Gerhardsson uses the *Shema* there as a reading screen. He reads the texts from the *Shema* and that gives these texts a special unity in meaning, although sometimes it seems that the texts must be 'directed' to it: the fast in Matthew 6:16-18 should then be understood as 'punishing the soul' (p 80); the parables of the mustard and the leaven (Mt 13:31-33) would be about 'to die in order to live' (p 57ff). And not everyone will agree with that interpretation.

A last remark: The articles are written in a unity of style which is surprising because they cover a period of some 30 years. That is a result of Gerhardsson's approach to the text which has not changed from the start: a literary approach which is beyond the exegetical interest of the day. In the seventies his texts are narratively oriented studies *avant la lettre* which do not care about the then current *formgeschichtliche* fashion, but in the eighties something similar happens. He does not try to link up with the narrative studies which were then in vogue. Gerhardsson does his work in his own quiet style, congenial with the texts themselves, with a sense of wonder about the fuss the exegetes create and aware that the best way to stay close to the text is by remaining true to oneself.