Focusing on Paul, Homer and Jesus: Professor Karl Olav Sandnes as a New Testament Scholar

Reidar Hvalvik
Professor emeritus, MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society
Reidar.Hvalvik@mf.no

In connection with the 65th birthday of Karl Olav Sandnes – one of the most eminent professors at MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society – the New Testament department has decided to arrange a seminar where colleagues from home and abroad speak about issues related to his research interests. In his self-presentation on MF’s website, Sandnes writes as follows: “My research is on the New Testament with focus on Paul and Jesus. The reception of early Christian texts and the Christian preaching within an ancient setting is a major interest of my research.” For that reason, we have put “The Gospel in the Graeco-Roman World” as the headline for the seminar.

I have been given the task providing a presentation of Karl Olav Sandnes – primarily as a New Testament scholar. This I do with great pleasure. I have known Karl Olav since we were students in theology here at MF, and he has been my close friend and colleague for most of my working years at the same institution. Karl Olav is an extraordinarily friendly and gentle person, a person who makes me think of the title of a screenplay by Bertolt Brecht, *The Good Person of Szechwan* (German: *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*, 1941). There are few similarities between the main character of Brecht’s drama and Karl Olav, though there is an interesting link to China – something to which I will soon return.

Karl Olav grew up as a son of a medical missionary in Cameroon. It has left important traces, not least because it gave him an international horizon even as a child. It is, therefore, no surprise that he – in addition to having been a teacher at MF and at the School of Mission and Theology in Stavanger – has served as a theological teacher overseas, namely in China – or to be more precise, at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Hong Kong. He was a visiting professor there for two years in 1992–1993. Besides that, he was also visiting professor at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary for one year in 2013. This can be seen as an indication that Karl Olav Sandnes has not only been interested in the communication of the gospel in

1. This paper is an expanded version of the short lecture that introduced the seminar; the original oral form has not been changed.
2. In 2016, the school (in Norwegian: Misjonshøgskolen) merged with other institutions and became part of VID Specialized University. Sandnes was teacher at the School of Mission and Theology 1984–1991.

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the ancient Graeco-Roman world, but also in our own time and in other cultural contexts. Today, however, we will focus on antiquity since that has been the framework for most of his scholarly contributions. When, in the following, I take a look into these works, I have to narrow it down somewhat. Sandnes has a considerable production of scholarly books and articles; for reasons of time, I will mainly deal with his seven major monographs.

Sandnes’s first monograph was a slightly amended version of his doctoral dissertation from 1988: *Paul – One of the Prophets? A Contribution to the Apostle’s Self-Understanding*, published in 1991.3 When the book was published, it was praised for “careful exegetical method throughout” and it was noted that “the author reveals a familiarity with scholarly research over a broad range of issues.”4 David Aune wrote that Sandnes had essentially substantiated his thesis that Paul conceived of his apostolate in prophetic terms, but noted that there were a number of issues that remained problematic. The first was Sandnes’s definition of an Old Testament prophet, which “seems designed to fit Paul’s self-conception” – emphasizing the call narratives. Aune also questioned Sandnes’s focus on Sirach 44–50 (*Laus Patrum*): “While Sirach 44–50 reflects one strand of Jewish conceptions of Old Testament prophets in the second century BC, other texts such as the *Vitae Prophetarum* from the first century AD would have provided more proximate temporal data.”5

One thing to be emphasized in connection with Sandnes’s dissertation is the original choice of topic – something that in many ways characterizes his scholarly works. At that time, few if any had paid attention to this topic, i.e. that Paul seems to have understood himself in light of the Old Testament prophets. Moreover, there are few who later have dealt with this subject in any depth. In an article written some 20 years later, the German scholar Tobias Nicklas writes that the only monographic treatment he knows about Paul as a prophet is Sandnes’s study.6 A few years later, in 2012, a new dissertation appears, with the title *Is Paul also among the Prophets?* The author, Jeffrey W. Aernie, writes: “Perhaps the most influential work with regard to the aspect of Pauline studies is that of Sandnes, whose thorough analysis provides a sustained depiction of the way in which Paul’s apostolic self-understanding developed with respect to the prophetic tradition manifest in the Old Testament.”7 It comes as no surprise that Sandnes was one of the examiners when the dissertation was defended in Aberdeen in 2011. He was then an established authority in the field.

*A New Family: Conversion and Ecclesiology in the Early Church with Cross-Cultural Comparisons* was the title of Sandnes’ second book. It was published in 1994 in a series called “Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity”8 and shows signs of the author’s experiences from Hong Kong in 1992–1993. In a prologue to the book, Sandnes writes that meeting Chinese Christians made him aware of the fact that the congregation as a fellowship played a much more significant role than it does for West Europeans. One of the reasons was that conversion to Christianity often could cause a break with the biological family. Here

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5. Ibid., 221.
Sandnes finds striking parallels to conversions in early Christianity. Based on insights from the sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, Sandnes points out how vital the social setting is for the persistence of a conversion. Conversion means a reconstruction of identity. It is, therefore, crucial that one is in a milieu that is able to reconstruct the family where the upbringing and the primary socialization typically take place. In this milieu, there is a fundamental need for an emotional dependence upon persons holding significant positions, so-called “significant others”. From a sociological point of view, this is essential if the conversion shall succeed. It is also quite vital that the milieu confirms the convert’s new identity.

Against this background, Sandnes investigates a large number of New Testament and other early Christian texts related to conversion, family, fellowship and friendship. It is a well-known fact that the church may be called God’s family or household; in Greek οἶκος τοῦ θεοῦ (Eph 2:19), and that the members of the congregation are referred to as brothers or siblings. According to Sandnes, it is crucial that this fellowship of siblings was something more than a spiritualization of the biological relationship. He writes as follows: “The family vocabulary was not only a matter of language; it was put into practice. The Christians considered themselves brothers and sisters, and lived accordingly.”

Sandnes’s next monography was Belly and Body in the Pauline Epistles. When the book was published – in 2002 – a reviewer noticed that this was his “third thought-provoking book to the discipline of NT studies.” Sandnes starts from two single verses in Paul. First, Philippians 3:19 where Paul refers to some people he characterizes as enemies of the cross of Christ: “Their end is destruction; their god is the belly” (NRSV; Greek: ὁ θεὸς ὁ κολλάκτω). The second text is found in Romans 16:18 where Paul warns against people who “do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly” (NKJV; Greek: τῇ ἐκτὸς κολλάτῳ). What does it mean to have the belly as god or to serve one’s own belly? A look at the commentaries reveals that the exegetes are far from sure. Some admit that they do not know. It was precisely this that triggered Karl Olav’s curiosity.

In order to find an answer to the question, Sandnes undertook a thorough review of a number of Graeco-Roman texts, especially moral philosophical discussions about mastering the desires. There he found that the stomach or belly was a catchword for a life controlled by pleasures. The stomach became a topos in contrast to self-mastery, which was considered to be one of the highest virtues. In his treatment of the Graeco-Roman texts, Sandnes includes a chapter about the ancient critique of Epicureanism, a rather popular philosophy that had put pleasure to the forefront. In a fragment from Epicurus, we read: “The beginning and the root of all good is the pleasure of the stomach…” (Fragm. 409). Then follows a look at Jewish-Hellenistic texts; they clearly show that a life controlled by the stomach is regarded as a characteristic of paganism and foreign to Jewish piety.

With this as the backdrop, Sandnes turns to the Pauline key texts and argues convincingly that they have to be interpreted in light of the Graeco-Roman topos: having the belly as a god is a pejorative expression used of a life characterized by gluttony and excessive drinking, often followed by sexual debaucheries.

In my opinion, this book – perhaps more than anything else Karl Olav has written – established him as an international New Testament scholar. The book got many positive reviews. Charles Talbert wrote: “This is a mature, carefully argued case, a model of careful scholar-
ship.” There is no doubt that Sandnes had delivered a significant research contribution. Troels Engberg-Pedersen wrote: “The book is … well researched. Sandnes genuinely knows his material. He situates himself within the latest developments in Pauline studies; he has a solid grasp of the methodological issues; and he is to be strongly commended for bringing in a wealth of highly relevant Graeco-Roman material without for a moment forgetting that Paul was (also) a Jew (and Christian).”

Despite this praise, the last-mentioned reviewer was not entirely convinced about Sandnes’s conclusion. In earlier research, strongly influenced by Johannes Behm’s article on the stomach (κολαχίας) in Kittel’s Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament, it was common to think that in both Phil 3 and Rom 16, Paul had Jewish dietary laws in mind. This is rejected by Sandnes, inter alia with reference to Philo, who claimed that the dietary laws were a means of controlling the unruly belly. Therefore, Sandnes concludes: “For obvious reasons, Jews would never consider observance of dietary laws as belly-worship.”

Engberg-Pedersen, for his part, thinks that Paul could have turned this perception on its head and claimed that the Jewish preoccupation with dietary laws could have been a way to serve the belly. Besides, Engberg-Pedersen believes that the patristic material, which constitutes the last main part of Sandnes’s book, supports such an interpretation.

Without taking a stand on this question, it is beyond doubt that with this book Sandnes filled a gap in Pauline scholarship. Moreover, it seems to me that this book set the course of Karl Olav’s future research. The interest for Paul was present from the very beginning in his doctoral dissertation, but then the backdrop was the Old Testament. In A New Family, Sandnes to a certain degree looked into the Graeco-Roman world, and in Belly and Body, he did so to a considerable extent. Besides, he explored the patristic literature. This was the trail he would follow in his next monographs.

First among them was The Challenge of Homer: School, Pagan Poets and Early Christianity, published in 2009. The challenge referred to in the title was the one Christians in late antiquity faced towards the school system. According to the author, this is a most fruitful field to investigate if one wishes to explore the cultural encounter between Christian faith and Greek culture. The first part of the book (pp. 1–80) is devoted to the school system in the Hellenistic world; it also includes a chapter on Philo of Alexandria and his view on Greek education, often referred to as the encyclical studies. Through these studies, every male citizen could acquire knowledge about everything that was worth knowing. In these studies, Homer played a most central role. His epics constituted the backbone of Greek education. It is probably adequate to say that Homer had an almost canonical status in Greek culture and that his works were regarded as divinely inspired. If we take into account that Homer’s writings not only contained problematic mythology, but also told about immoral conduct by deities and heroes, we can imagine the challenge faced by Christian parents. Could they let their children be exposed to such questionable influence? It is this challenge Sandnes writes about in Part 2 (pp. 81–243) – which constitutes the heart of the book, where he gives his most specific research contribution.

Sandnes reviews a number of early Christian texts, from Justin to Augustine, and reveals various strategies chosen in the face of the challenge from the encyclical studies. The one extreme was represented by the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, a writing that advocated the view that Christians should avoid pagan literature altogether. At the other end of the scale, we find Clement of Alexandria, Origen and the Cappadocian fathers. They thought that Christians could and should take part in the encyclical studies. The rationale was often rooted in a theology of creation that emphasized that the wisdom of God was spread among the Gentiles – albeit in an imperfect form. In the same way as Paul could speak about the Law as a *paidagwg* for the Jews, Clement claimed that the philosophy could be a tutor escorting the Greeks to Christ.

Somewhere between these two positions, we find Tertullian, among others. He was very critical towards the myths and gods of Homer, and he sees a sharp distinction between the Christian revelation and the Greek literature. For that reason, he discourages Christians from *teaching* encyclical studies. With regard to young Christians, he is more pragmatic: he thinks it is essential that they get an education.

In the third and last part of the book, Sandnes looks for traces of the central issue in the New Testament. Reviewers\(^\text{16}\) have pointed out the problems by reading the New Testament in light of much younger writings, and they have not been convinced by Sandnes’s conclusion: “We can therefore safely assume that the *challenge* which first-century Christians faced in terms of education is rightly understood in the light of later sources.”\(^\text{17}\) This conclusion includes a methodological problem that the author is aware of, but which he – according to some critics – seems to downplay. Besides, there are two reasons to doubt that school and education were such a significant challenge.\(^\text{18}\) Firstly, one has to take into consideration that most Christians in the first centuries were converted in adulthood; this means that education was a thing of the past when they came to faith. Secondly, the pagan cults were ubiquitous in the environment of most Christians, and Homeric education was hardly their most disturbing challenge. Regardless of such objections, the book must be considered a most valuable contribution. Even if the book was published in the series Library of New Testament Studies, I think it is right to judge it primarily as a patristic study in which Sandnes appears as “an outstanding patristic scholar” – to quote from Jakob Engberg’s review, referred to above.\(^\text{19}\)

In Sandnes’s next major book, Homer is also an important figurant: *The Gospel According to Homer and Virgil: Cento and Canon*, which was published in 2011.\(^\text{20}\) The background for this book was that the American scholar Dennis R. MacDonald had argued in several publications that Homer lays behind New Testament writings, in particular the gospel of Mark and the Acts of the apostles.\(^\text{21}\) In other words, these New Testament texts are, according to MacDonald, imitations of the Homeric epics, i.e. *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. This means that, e.g.

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18. For the following, see Engberg, *Patristica Nordica Annuaaria*, 103.
the gospel of Mark is a purely literary product that has little or nothing to do with a possible historical Jesus figure or traditions about him.

An important argument for MacDonald is the existence of the ancient centos. The Latin word *cento* refers to a carpet or a garment sewn together by patches from older textiles. In a literary context, it is used about a poem that is entirely made up of verses lifted, verbatim or with only slight modification from older texts, namely Homer and Virgil, and in this way a new text with a new content was created.\(^{22}\) Are these centos proofs of MacDonald’s thesis? Or to put it another way: Is the origin of the centos an analogy to the origin of the gospels? This is the question that Sandnes seeks to answer in his investigation.

He examines two centos: one Latin text from ca. 362 based on words from Virgil, and a Greek text from the first half of the fifth century, written by Empress Eudocia, based on words from Homer. Both are a retelling of the Jesus story, but exclusively using words and phrases from Virgil and Homer, respectively. In these cases, however, the content is taken from the Christian tradition while the words are taken from the Graeco-Roman tradition. That is something else than what MacDonald claims with regard to the gospel of Mark: according to him not only the words, but also the content of the story is taken from Homer.

The same year that Sandnes’s book was published, MacDonald wrote a rather positive review.\(^{23}\) He admits that Sandnes had shown that the centos are no direct parallel to the gospels: “one must be careful, as I apparently have not been, about using the centos as analogies to the use of Greek poetry in the New Testament.”

With this book, Sandnes provided significant input to an on-going debate. Besides, and just as importantly, he made the relatively unknown centos known to a greater number of scholars dealing with early Christian literature.\(^{24}\)

Sandnes’s next major monography came out in 2016 and was called *Early Christian Discourses on Jesus Prayer at Gethsemane: Courageous, Committed, Cowardly?*\(^{25}\) As seen from the title, the topic was Jesus’s prayer at Gethsemane in which he asks God to take this cup away, i.e. that he could get away from imminent death. This is an episode in the synoptic gospels that was regarded as problematic early on, something that can be traced already in the Gospel of John. The fourth gospel does not reproduce the Gethsemane episode, but after his entry into Jerusalem, Jesus speaks about his imminent death in the following way: “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour” (John 12:27 NRSV). The initial words in John 12:27 show significant similarities with the Gethsemane text in Matthew 26 (v. 38), but the rest of the verse is in obvious tension to the story in Matthew and the other Synoptics. In this way, a problem is indicated – a problem that is central in the reception history of the Gethsemane texts, and this history constitutes an essential part of Sandnes’s book.

In order to clarify his question – whether Jesus is painted as courageous, committed or cowardly – Sandnes takes as his starting point the ancient ideal of masculinity, where being brave or courageous was a crucial issue. A key figure was Socrates, who – in the face of death – was courageous and fearless. Without hesitation, he drinks the poison cup. This ideal was essential in the Graeco-Roman culture, and it is reflected both in Jewish and Christian texts, e.g. Second and Fourth Maccabees and the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. In the Christian martyr

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acts the masculine ideal is consistent – both with regard to men and women. What then about Jesus, who asks to elude death? In the gospel episode, the hero does not live up to the cultural standard of masculinity and noble death – something that ancient critics of Christianity did not fail to mention.

After this introduction, Sandnes looks into the Gethsemane text in all the gospels and the letter to Hebrew and pinpoints the characteristics of each of them – before he reviews texts from the second to the fourth centuries where the Gethsemane episode plays a central role. He deals with texts from e.g. Justin, Tatian, Origen, John Chrysostom, and Jerome. Once again, Sandnes turns out to be a competent reader of patristic texts. It is, however, probably more important to note that a large part of the book deals with gospel texts (pp. 98–196). As noted in the introduction, Karl Olav Sandnes presents himself as a New Testament scholar working particularly with the apostle Paul and Jesus. None of his monographs before this one has, however, had a focus on Jesus and the gospels. If one were to try to be funny, one could say that finally, the New Testament professor had discovered Jesus, but that would not have been entirely fair. Sandnes had dealt with Jesus and the gospels in several minor works, though not in his larger monographs before this one. Jesus is, however, essential in two books Sandnes has written in co-operation with Jan-Olav Henriksen; firstly, Jesus as Healer: A Gospel for the Body26 which appeared in 2016; secondly, in a book on the resurrection yet to be published.

In Sandnes’s seventh and most recently published monography from 2018, he is back to Pauline studies: Paul Perceived: An Interactionist Perspective on Paul and the Law.27 In this book, Sandnes enters a storm centre in Pauline scholarship, namely the debate about Paul and his attitude to the Law. This is a debate that has been going on for decades, earlier connected with the so-called “New Perspective”; more recently the debate has been inflamed by the trend called “Paul within Judaism.” In this book, Sandnes approaches the question by looking at how Paul’s theology was perceived by others. We find traces of this already in the apostle’s own letters, where Paul quotes rumours and criticism directed at him. Included in the reception-oriented perspective are also the texts about how Paul was penalized in the synagogues and the picture of Paul in Acts.

According to advocates of “Paul within Judaism”, the picture of Paul in Acts shows that Paul had no problem with the Jewish law. Sandnes, for his part, shows that the picture of Paul is more complex: Several times Luke records that Paul is accused of speaking against the law. In other words, Paul faced trouble for his view on the Torah.

The same is evident from 2 Cor 11:24, where Paul says that he has been punished in the synagogues several times. This shows that he was regarded as a Jew; he was not an outsider, but an insider in need of correction – and in all probability, this was related to his view of the law, which in his theology was given a subordinate role. While advocates of “Paul within Judaism” often argue that Paul primarily addressed himself to gentiles, Sandnes emphasizes that Paul, without doubt, saw it as a necessity to proclaim the gospel first to the Jews (Rom 1:16; cf. Acts 13:46).

On several issues, Sandnes delivers an important and necessary corrective to prevailing views within the “Paul within Judaism” camp. In my opinion, this book may turn out to be Sandnes’s most important one – especially since it so clearly enters a critical debate.

As this short presentation of Karl Olav Sandnes’s major publications shows, his authorship is rather broad and reveals a considerable mastery of ancient sources, both Graeco-

27. Published as WUNT 412; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018.
Roman, Jewish, and early Christian. The centres of gravity have been Paul, Homer and Jesus – so far precisely in this order. If I know him right, there are reasons to believe that further readable books will appear, and they will reaffirm what we see already today – that Karl Olav Sandnes is in all probability the most productive New Testament scholar in Norway through the ages. On behalf of Norwegian and international New Testament colleagues, I thank you for your many and essential contributions to scholarship, and I wish you good luck with your future projects.