
Introduction

*Karl Ludwig Schmidt, Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu,
Form Criticism, and Gospel Genre*

Schmidt's Life and Career

KARL LUDWIG SCHMIDT CAME into the world on February 5, 1891, the first-born child of working-class parents in Frankfurt, Germany.¹ During his childhood years, there was no reason to suspect that this son of a shoemaker and a farmer's daughter would one day rise to the highest levels of German scholarship, taking his place among the most influential voices in New Testament studies during the twentieth century. On the contrary, the early signs all indicated that this eldest son of Anton Friedrich Schmidt and Johanette Dorothea Schmidt (née Schwanz) would follow in his father's footsteps, learning a trade and leading a quiet life. Yet young Karl Ludwig's academic performance in the local *Volksschule* was of such high quality that, despite his family's modest circumstances, he was offered admission to the prestigious Lessing Gymnasium in Frankfurt. There he finished first in his class every year, excelling in Latin, Greek, and ancient history. Based upon this strong record, the Gymnasium faculty arranged for him to be admitted to university studies at Marburg, where he attended advanced seminars in ancient history and philology, and for the first time also in theology. From Marburg, Schmidt went on to Berlin, at that time the leading theological faculty in the country, where he studied with Adolf von Harnack and Adolf Deissmann. After receiving his doctorate in 1913 with a dissertation on the

1. The biographical section of this essay was substantially assisted by Prof. Dr. Andreas Mühling, professor of history at Trier and the author of the best biography of K. L. Schmidt: *Karl Ludwig Schmidt: "Und Wissenschaft ist Leben", Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 66* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997). Prof. Mühling kindly responded to several important questions, and his understanding of Schmidt's life and work was consistently of value in the work of translation.

problem of the unity of the Gospel of John, Schmidt became *Assistent* to Deissmann, who would remain his most significant influence and mentor. In 1918 Schmidt's *Habilitationsschrift* was submitted to the faculty and published the following year under the title, *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu: Literarkritische Untersuchungen zur Ältesten Jesusüberlieferung*. It was dedicated to Deissmann "with grateful respect."

In Berlin Karl Ludwig Schmidt made the acquaintance of Ursula von Wegnern, the daughter of a government minister whose family line could be traced back to Martin Luther. In view of her family's social and political standing, Fraulein von Wegnern and Herr Doktor Schmidt made an unlikely couple, but a couple they certainly were, and it was during this time in the social orbit of the family von Wegnern that Schmidt's social and political horizons were significantly broadened. His outlook came increasingly into harmony with the broad current of German liberalism, and he identified as a Social Democrat, becoming an active proponent of progressive public policy. A wedding was planned for 1915, but the outbreak the First World War forced an indefinite postponement.

Drafted into the German army on February 15, 1915, Schmidt underwent basic training and was inducted into an infantry battalion as a rifleman. Deissmann later claimed that Schmidt had volunteered for military service, but Schmidt's son Martin has specifically denied that claim. In his role as a rifleman, Schmidt saw combat action on September 13, 1915, during a march along the River Styr in today's Republic of Belarus. The unit had stopped for a short rest, when suddenly and without warning they came under heavy artillery bombardment. Corporal Schmidt, who had become absorbed in the reading of a theological article, did not take cover immediately and was struck by shrapnel in his right hand and in the right side of his head. These wounds were serious, and Schmidt spent the next nine months in a military hospital. Much of the work on *Der Rahmen* was done during these months of healing and recuperation, as he lay in his hospital bed and wrote out the manuscript longhand, using only his left hand. The consequences of Schmidt's war wounds would prove to be long-lasting, and complications and side-effects would plague him for the rest of his life. Never again would he be able to write clearly with his right hand, for example, and chronic headaches would gradually develop into a severe health problem. For his military service, Schmidt was awarded the *Eiserne Kreuz 2te Klasse* (Iron Cross, 2nd class) but no one in his family or circle of friends could recall ever seeing him wear the medal in public.

After his release from the hospital, Schmidt's military service had come to its end, and he returned to his position on the faculty at Berlin, where his academic career quickly resumed its steep upward trajectory.

Over the next ten years he would hold faculty posts at Berlin, Giessen, and Jena, developing along the way both scholarly and personal relationships with many of the most influential theological leaders in Germany at that time, including Paul Tillich, Albert Schweitzer, and Karl Barth. In 1923 he published his Habilitationsschrift under the title of *Die Stellung der Evangelien in der allgemeinen Literaturgeschichte* (The Place of the Gospels in the General History of Literature), an extended essay demonstrating on literary grounds that the New Testament Gospels belong to a genre of oral literature designated by Schmidt as *Kleinliteratur*. With this term Schmidt labeled a genre of literature that was, like the Gospels, the written form of an earlier oral tradition. Scholarly response to the book was positive, and on the combined strength of *Der Rahmen* and *Die Stellung*, Karl Ludwig Schmidt took his place alongside Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann in a scholarly triumvirate of *Formgeschichte*, at that time the most influential method in German New Testament studies. Today these two books comprise the body of work for which Schmidt is most widely known.

During this period in his career, and especially in his new role as founder and editor of the journal *Theologische Blätter*, Schmidt emerged as an influential voice in both academic and popular discussion across a wide range of public issues in theology and ethics. As a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), he was active in political discussions related to the struggling Weimar republic. On the home front, he and Ursula had three children—two sons and a daughter—and his steadily rising salary afforded them an increasingly comfortable lifestyle. In 1929, at the age of thirty-eight, Schmidt was appointed to the chair in New Testament studies at Bonn, at that time widely regarded as the premiere theological faculty in the country.

For Karl Ludwig Schmidt and his family, life was good; indeed, it was very good. Yet two dark clouds were gathering out on the edge of the horizon. The first of these was a rising level of concern among New Testament scholars in Germany about the sharp edge of Karl Ludwig Schmidt's tongue and pen. In his role as editor of *Theologische Blätter*, Schmidt now occupied an academic pulpit of considerable prominence, from which he could and did express himself on a wide range of issues in ongoing theological discussion. Significant concerns were beginning to arise about the manner in which Schmidt was giving voice to his opinions and judgments, especially his pointed criticisms of other scholars. Years later, at Schmidt's funeral, Oscar Cullmann would eulogize him as "a fighter," and that was (as is fitting for a eulogy) putting the matter nicely. In a similar vein, Karl Barth once said that Karl Ludwig Schmidt was his superior "in both erudition and combativeness." The evidence indicates that Schmidt did indeed mean what he said, as throughout his career he consistently regarded frank and

spirited exchange as essential to substantial academic debate. Yet many of his remarks could be (and were) taken *ad hominem*. Perhaps his working-class background was playing a long-term role here, as Schmidt never seems to have quite mastered the full range of verbal sophistications and rhetorical elegances that were customary at the highest levels of German academic and social discourse during that era.

The other cloud on the horizon was the rising influence in Germany of the National Socialist Democratic Workers Party. After the elections of 1930, from which the Nazis emerged as the second-most powerful party in the government, Schmidt began to give public expression to a rigorous and principled theological critique of the Nazi movement. The force of his critique consistently was directed against the Nazis' social and economic policies, and most of all against what he regarded as their unhealthy combination of nationalism and socialism. In brief, Schmidt regarded Nazism as too much nationalism and not enough socialism. In a letter to Martin Buber he wrote: "This 'German,' this 'nationalist' government embarrasses me both as a German and as a Protestant Christian." He especially criticized the Nazi policy of requiring professors of theology to function independently of ecclesiastical authorities, for he regarded an independent theological faculty as an oxymoron, since theology was part and parcel of the teaching ministry of the church.

By January of 1933, Karl Ludwig Schmidt had staked out a position of public opposition to Nazism on a broad array of issues and on both political and theological grounds. On January 14, 1933, a Sabbath day, he appeared in Stuttgart for a *Zwiesgespräch* (dialogue) with Martin Buber, and in the course of that conversation, which took place in a synagogue, Schmidt strongly affirmed the lasting place of Judaism in the history of salvation. Today the views he expressed that evening would be regarded as mildly supersessionist, but in Stuttgart, Germany, during January of 1933, it was an act of moral principle and political courage to participate constructively in a public dialogue with the local Jewish community in their synagogue on Shabbat. Only two weeks later Adolf Hitler came to power, and from that point on, Schmidt found himself increasingly under pressure. He continued to take practical steps against National Socialism—he was elected to the city council in Bonn for the SPD—but academic, ecclesiastical, and political sympathizers with the Nazis repeatedly blocked his efforts. When a National Socialist was elected president of the faculty, the situation became acute. Few of his colleagues rallied to his defense; perhaps Schmidt's sharp pen was coming back to haunt him. A personal low point came when he saw a Nazi flag hanging from the window of the apartment of his *Assistent*, Ernst Fuchs. On November 4, 1933, he left Bonn to participate in a theological conference in Switzerland, and he did not return. Karl Ludwig Schmidt never lived in Germany again.

The financial consequences of exile in Switzerland were immediate and severe, as Schmidt went without income for most of 1933 and 1934. With the help of Karl Barth, he was eventually able to secure a position as the pastor of a Lutheran church, where his salary was less than one-third of what he had been earning in Bonn. His bank accounts remained in Germany, where he had no access to them, and more than once he had to make ends meet by selling books from his personal library. Finally, in the summer of 1935, after almost two years in Switzerland, Schmidt secured a position on the faculty of New Testament at Basel, making it possible for him to bring his family to join him. Yet even this positive development did not fully restore his fortunes. Shortly after her arrival, his wife Ursula began to develop health problems, for which she was hospitalized for several weeks during 1936. At the same time, the ongoing effects of Schmidt's war wounds were now producing chronic severe headaches. In a vain search for relief, he turned to increasingly strong medications, with predictable results. By 1940 Karl Ludwig Schmidt was addicted to narcotics.

When the Second World War came to its end, Schmidt hoped to return to Germany and to reassume his previous academic status and activities. In particular, he looked forward to participating in the writing of a new reference encyclopedia, *Theologische Wörterbuch des Neuen Testaments*. He confided to friends that he hoped to be named to the position of editor of *TWNT*, and thus it came as an especially bitter disappointment when that position was awarded instead to Gerhard Kittel, a former Nazi party member and supporter of the Third Reich. This particular professional setback appears to have affected Schmidt especially deeply, as in its aftermath an air of increasing despondence began to settle over his correspondence. On the personal side, his marriage suffered: he and Ursula became increasingly distant, and although they never divorced, they did come to live in separate apartments. His long-running battle with chronic pain was not going well, and over time his general health began to decline. In 1952, while teaching a graduate seminar, he suffered a stroke. The following year he resigned his position on the faculty, and on January 10, 1956, Karl Ludwig Schmidt died in a hospital in Basel. He was sixty-five years old.

The career of Karl Ludwig Schmidt unfolded during the rise of one of history's most virulent forms of anti-Semitism, and for this reason it is important to observe that Schmidt was among the earliest and most outspoken German academic opponents of Nazism. He consistently criticized as naive those who believed that a political and theological dialogue with National Socialism might be possible. On one occasion, he derided Paul Althaus, whose Nazi sympathies were well-known, as a *psychikos anthropos*. There was, Schmidt maintained, a higher vision of humankind that transcended nation and race. Recalling his own combat experience, Schmidt wrote to

Althaus: “As I lay seriously wounded in a field hospital in Russia, being cared for by Russian prisoners, more than once the thought went through my head: ‘Let’s shoot a few of them first, and then we can make nice.’ Now, thank God, I have come to a different point of view: there is a community that unites us in spite of the human affiliations that may stand between us.”

By 1933, Schmidt was publically defending the rights of Jews. He wrote to Rudolf Bultmann that a church that turns its back on Jews has ceased to be the church. In his *Zwiesgespräch* with Martin Buber, he took a public stance of support for Jews that was stronger than most Christian scholars in Germany at that time. Throughout the 1930s and 40s he maintained close relationships with leading Jewish scholars, among them Hans Jonas, and in 1942 Schmidt was writing about a day when the Nazis would be gone, and when Jews in Europe would be treated as human beings.

Yet the same person who took these courageous and principled stands, for which he was forced to flee from his homeland, is also known to have made occasional anti-Semitic remarks. His personal correspondence from those years includes occasional statements that suggest that he shared the view that Jewishness was a biological characteristic, and an inferior one at that. Perhaps this fact can help to explain why, although he vigorously opposed Nazism, there is no evidence that he was ever involved in practical efforts to protect Jews from the Third Reich. There can be no doubt that Karl Ludwig Schmidt was a man of moral courage and principle, willing to act upon those convictions in substantial and specific ways, to the point that the Nazis hounded him out of Germany. At the same time, however, the prevailing norms of German society, culture, and politics also situated him within a broad social and cultural framework of anti-Semitism. In this regard there are thought-provoking similarities between Schmidt and some American abolitionists of the ante-bellum era, who were passionately opposed to slavery, yet could not quite conceive of African Americans as their political, social, legal, and economic equals.

Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu

In the German university system, the *Habilitationsschrift* is an original work of scholarship submitted to the faculty after the dissertation, certifying that a young scholar has attained the level of competence necessary for teaching independently and for supervising doctoral dissertations. With its careful and thorough application of the form-critical method to the Synoptic gospels, *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu* firmly established Schmidt as not only a competent teacher but also as a scholar at the cutting edge of New Testament research. Reception of the book was strongly positive. The thesis of the work is stated in the opening paragraph of the Foreword: “The oldest