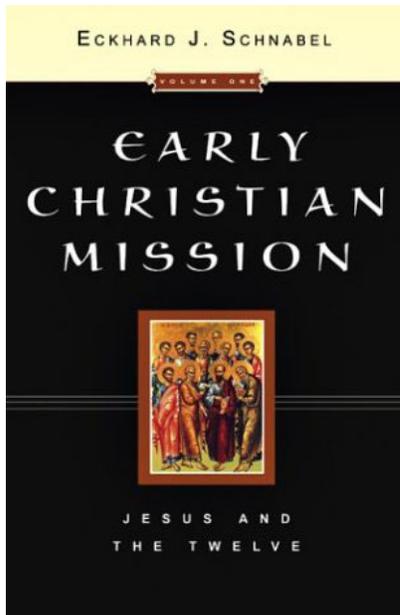


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**Schnabel, Eckhard J.**

***Early Christian Mission***

Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004. 2 vols.  
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The publication of the present volume in English constitutes a major event in the missiological exploration of early Christianity (the work originally appeared in a one-volume German edition in 2002 and was translated by the author himself). A full century after Adolf von Harnack's *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, Schnabel's work, over 1,900 pages in length, fills a major gap in the missiological literature by providing a treatment of the early Christian mission that not only considers the mission theology of the biblical material (as does P. T. O'Brien's and my *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Missions*, also published by InterVarsity Press) but sets the early Christian mission in its full-orbed historical and geographical context. Overall, Schnabel's work is characterized by a magisterial command of the secondary literature. It truly represents an amazing achievement, especially in a day of specialization when it has become exceedingly difficult for any one person to master the vast amount of material that continues to be generated.

In the two-volume format, volume 1 is devoted to the missions of Jesus and the Twelve, while volume 2 is taken up with the missions of Paul and the early church. After an introduction covering methodological issues and laying out a basic chronology of events, Schnabel, who teaches New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, commences

his work by surveying the relevant teaching of the Old Testament and the Second Temple period (part 1: "Promise"). He concludes that (1) there was in Old Testament Israel no overt mission program with the aim of converting foreign nations or even individual polytheists; and (2) in the centuries prior and subsequent to Christ's birth there was no direct Jewish mission that pursued the aim of converting non-Jews to faith in Yahweh. After this Schnabel turns to a treatment of the mission of Jesus (part 2: "Fulfillment"; a presentation of the mission theology of each of the canonical Gospels is provided toward the end of the volume). He draws on information from all four Gospels, excelling particularly in providing extensive geographical information on the various locales in which Jesus ministered.

A chapter on the mission of the Twelve is followed by a discussion of Jesus' mission and non-Jews. Here Schnabel contends that Jesus neither explicitly sought nor avoided contact with non-Jews, healing them and responding to their pleas for him to heal their relatives or friends. At the same time, Jesus' contact with non-Jews was not a major part of his mission. While he focused his overt activity on Jews and did not engage in an active mission to Gentiles, Jesus' ministry did attract non-Jews, thus anticipating the post-Pentecost Gentile mission of the early church. The next section discusses the mission of the early church. Schnabel draws attention to the surprising nature of Jesus' mission command in light of the Old Testament expectation of the nations' eschatological pilgrimage to Jerusalem (part 3: "Beginnings"). This command to engage in active missionizing, according to Schnabel, is grounded in the removal of the exclusive importance of the temple and of the Torah: non-Jews need no longer become Jews but can be integrated into the messianic people of God as representatives of the nations (part 4: "Exodus").

Volume 2 commences with an extensive treatment of the mission of the apostle Paul (part 5: "Pioneer Missionary Work"). According to Schnabel, Paul's mission is shown to follow a recurring pattern: (1) his arrival in a given city with several associates; (2) contact with Jews in the local synagogues, who can provide him with work and/or accommodations; (3) initial preaching and discussions in the synagogue in recognition of the Jews' salvation-historical preeminence; (4-5) after initial success and the making of converts, opposition mounts, which usually (though not always) leads to Paul's moving to different venues; and (6) the gathering of converts in house churches, which meet regularly for worship, biblical instruction, and mutual edification. Schnabel observes that Paul did not call his churches to "world mission"; this was primarily the role of the apostles and of other church-sent gospel messengers. Nevertheless, churches are to contribute actively to making the gospel attractive to both Jews and Gentiles.

After a treatment of the centers of early Christian mission activity (Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome) Schnabel summarizes the mission theologies of Matthew, Mark, Luke-Acts, John, and Peter (part 6: “Growth”; a discussion of Paul’s writings was already included in the section on Paul). This is followed by a concluding summary of the self-understanding, practice, and message of the early Christian mission, as well as a discussion of the early Christian mission and mission in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (part 7: “Results”). Here Schnabel is properly critical of using the term “incarnational” as conveying a missionary paradigm (contra John Stott and much of contemporary mission literature), favoring instead terms such as “contextualization” or “inculturation.” The volume is rounded out by 42 maps and figures, a 167-page, virtually exhaustive bibliography, and well over 100 pages of indices of names, subjects, geographical locations, and references to biblical and extrabiblical literature. As Schnabel himself acknowledges in an interview with Dan Reid (IVP’s *Academic Alert* 13/3 [fall 2004]: 5), it remains for patristics scholars to complement his work on the first-century church’s mission with a study of mission in the second, third, and early fourth centuries (in keeping with the scope of Harnack’s work).

In his major contentions, Schnabel represents a coalescing consensus in recent thought and literature on the subject: (1) the role of Old Testament Israel regarding mission (largely passive); (2) the missionary nature of Second Temple Judaism (largely nonexistent); (3) the question of whether or not Jesus engaged in an active Gentile mission (he did not, although he attracted numerous individual Gentiles); and (4) the question of whether or not the New Testament warrants speaking of an “incarnational paradigm” of mission (it does not). Schnabel’s personal engagement in mission—a native German, he is a former missionary to the Philippines and has taught at Asian Theological Seminary in Manila, Philippines, and the Freie Theologische Akademie in Giessen, Germany—is both apparent and appealing. Clearly, for him mission is more than merely an academic field of inquiry. Schnabel’s knowledge is encyclopedic, his discussions consistently thorough, and his judgments judicious and well-informed by all the available data and literature. *Early Christian Mission* is the new mint standard for works on mission in the early church and will remain so for a very long time to come.