

BOOK REVIEW

Dunn, James, *Jesus According to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019). xv + 211 pp. Pbk. \$20.00.

New Testament scholar James Dunn's recent book, *Jesus According to the New Testament*, is a concise and reflective synthesis regarding how Jesus was understood by his earliest followers. It moves systematically from 'Jesus according to Jesus' (Chapter 1), to 'Jesus according to the Synoptics' (Chapter 2), John (Chapter 3), Acts (Chapter 4), Paul (Chapters 5–6), Hebrews (Chapter 7), James, Peter, John and Jude (Chapter 8), and finally 'Jesus according to Revelation' (Chapter 9).

Although the territory is quite familiar to anyone involved with Christianity, and some of the conclusions are not necessarily nuanced or original, it is clear that Dunn's conclusions are his own, earned from a long career of scholarship and reflection. Few secondary sources occupy the book's space, resulting in a laser-beam focus on the New Testament writings and the traditions and events behind them. The first chapter sets the tone for the book by bringing together 'a number of emphases and priorities that we can say with some confidence the first followers of Jesus attributed to Jesus' (p. 2): 'The Love Command', 'Priority of the Poor', 'Openness to Gentiles', 'Women among His Close Followers', 'Openness to Children', 'Relaxation of Food Laws' and 'The Last Supper or Lord's Supper'. Dunn then summarizes distinctive features and themes of Jesus' ministry, such as 'the Kingdom of God', Jesus as 'Teacher', 'Teaching by Parable', 'Exorcising Evil Spirits', 'Concentration on Galilee' and 'Submission to High Priestly Authorities'.

Dunn intentionally compares popular views in New Testament scholarship regarding what can or cannot be known about Jesus to his own established conclusions. His approach is like that of the rest of his work at large (and of others, like Anthony Le Donne, *The Historiographical Jesus* [Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009]), which focuses on how Jesus was remembered, thus questioning views that dogmatically insist that much of the New Testament's content was projected back into the 30s from the late first and early second

century. Dunn argues that if historians and scholars look at the preconditions for second- and third-generation Christianity—that is, look at *effects*—the New Testament writings make sense within their own probable historical date of authorship, and there is no need to resort to theories about a mass conspiracy occurring in the early second century.

For example, Dunn notes how Jesus had the common title of ‘teacher’, and that in Mk 1.27, 6.2 and 11.28, his authoritative teaching is the point of focus:

It is all the more striking ... that this emphasis on Jesus as a teacher is not retained among the earliest churches. Of course, Jesus was remembered as far more than a teacher in the earliest churches. But that very fact makes it all the less credible to argue that the references to Jesus as a ‘teacher’ were read back into the Jesus tradition (p. 13).

Similarly, the use of ‘Son of Man’ as a self-identifying title in the Gospels was never used by Jesus’ disciples and was not part of subsequent Christological reflection. This suggests that ‘Jesus himself was more influenced by Daniel 7:13 in the way he envisaged his ministry working out than were his immediate and subsequent disciples’ (p. 23). The early use of ‘Christ’ as a proper name suggests that ‘the claim that Jesus was (the) Messiah was already deeply rooted at the beginnings of Christianity and entirely reflective of the messianic claim that Jesus’ own mission embodied’ (p. 20). ‘Jesus is ... remembered as going willingly and knowingly to his betrayal and death in Jerusalem’, and ‘the way in which the evangelists set out their accounts of the good news, beginning with the baptism by John, subsequently executed, and with early warning indications (such as Mark 3:6), shows that the characterizations of the gospels as “passion narratives with an extended introduction” faithfully represents a ministry that climaxed in submission to the Jerusalem authorities’ (p. 17). This suggests that these were ‘features as distinctive of Jesus’s actual ministry—none of them first read back into the Jesus tradition at a subsequent date, but each of them truly remembered by his disciples, having made a lasting impact on them, and providing core features of their retelling of the story of that ministry’ (p. 18).

The bulk of the book, however, is more constructive in nature and draws together connections in a way that avoids superficiality and embraces complexities. For example, in line with his whole approach, Dunn states that the ‘I Am’ sayings were not uttered by Jesus but were John’s reflections on Jesus. He also clearly lays out the fact of multiple Christologies, which he neither overemphasizes nor glosses over. Much of the book consists of pointing out

oddities in synoptic studies, which are particularly helpful for any reader who has not spent a lifetime devoted to New Testament studies. For example, this reader learned that ‘[m]ost astonishing is the fact that the word “love” (both noun and verb) occurs not at all in Acts, whereas it was integral to the messages of Jesus, of the Pauline epistles (108 times), and of the Johannine epistles (95 times)’ (p. 96). Dozens of small observations like these prompt readers to think critically about early Christianity and how people tried to understand and construct frameworks of interpretation around Jesus.

If one could summarize a key feature of the book, then, it would be unity and diversity. Each chapter brings out the pluriform perspective of Jesus’ followers but also their shared experiences and ideas. The book is, in some ways, a fine introduction to ‘Christian Origins’, especially given the critical insight Dunn brings to the discussion each step of the way. He often leaves interesting questions unanswered to spur readers toward further research, which makes it difficult to complain about what was excluded since the concise format and small size of the book is one of its best features.

Dunn also frames the discussion in terms of his other works, like *The Living Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2nd edn, 2009). ‘If the present volume has any appeal’, he writes in the preface, ‘there is no reason why other volumes should not follow’ (p. xv). The reflection and experience of Jesus should continue all the way into the present. Dunn has similar views regarding the role of the Bible in *The Living Word*. Against the common idea that the canon is closed and that the Bible is finished and fixed, Dunn argues that it cannot be contained—and should not be. Its power and dynamic force always extends beyond the pages and the centuries in which it was written. The same is true for the Christ event and the writings around it. In fact, Dunn ends *Jesus According to the New Testament* with the following charge: ‘Jesus for today! Jesus according to us! Who’s for it?’ (p. 188). It is clear that Dunn takes seriously the need to apply the dynamic, creative, universal and inclusive spirit of the early experience of Jesus.

Dunn’s analysis has a way of keeping readers and curious thinkers awake. Topics that should be stale are sprinkled with surprises. The book would not be very useful for those who already think they have Christianity ‘figured out’, assume everyone in the New Testament had the same theology and only treat the Bible as a finished collection of authoritative texts. But for those non-New Testament specialists who are curious about what a more critical reading of the Christian scriptures would yield for the question ‘Who was Jesus?’, *Jesus According to the New Testament* is a real gem.

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