

BOOK REVIEW

James D.G. Dunn, *A New Perspective on Jesus: What the Quest for the Historical Jesus Missed* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). v + 136 pp. Pbk. US\$12.99.

With his book, *A New Perspective on Jesus*, James D.G. Dunn attempts (or begins) to bring a corrective to longstanding assumptions regarding the development of the Jesus traditions predating and eventually leading to the written Gospels, traditions that almost exclusively adhere to a paradigm of literary development. In his introduction, Dunn states his conviction that the quest for the historical Jesus is seriously flawed.

Quite proper concern to strip away later accretions has failed to distinguish the effect Jesus (must have) had from the subsequent evaluation of him. There has been too much looking back at Jesus through the lens of a long established literary culture and too little appreciation of how the impact of Jesus would have had a lasting effect in an oral society (p. 12).

The three chapters that make up the body of the book contain what Dunn sees are the 'threefold failings' of the quest and provide a new perspective on Jesus, 'a perspective that takes it as an axiomatic starting-point that Jesus must have made a considerable impact on his disciples'.

In the first chapter, 'The First Faith', Dunn argues that the Quest has forgotten that which was of first importance, that being the impact Jesus made upon his followers. For Dunn this is the 'fundamental given and indispensable starting point' for any such quest. As it began, the Quest focused on the antithesis of the 'historical Jesus' and the 'Christ of Faith'. The 'God-man' or remote *pantocrator* encountered in Scripture was no longer acceptable or believable to the modern rationalist mind. Thus ensued the quest to get behind the dogmatic

Christ, whose image had been shaped by later faith in order to encounter the 'historical Jesus', and to move from a religion about Jesus to the religion of Jesus. The net result was a Jesus very different from the one encountered in the Gospels. The Gospels themselves were no longer viewed as historically reliable accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus but as witnesses of the theology of their authors. This led to the development of form criticism and the search for the individual *Sitz im Leben* which influenced the development of each of the various forms. However, priority was given, not to the life-situation of Jesus, but the life-situation of the church that produced the written saying. This led to the inevitable conclusion that the historical person was so obscured by later faith expressions that one could not hope to have any success in the search for the historical Jesus and could only speak of the various situations or communities that gave rise to these faith expressions. The most recent expression of this Quest is found in the work of the Jesus Seminar.

In all these attempts to recover the historical Jesus, Dunn sees a common thread that views faith as a hindrance to the goal of the quest: 'the perspective of faith obscures and deceives'. For the quester, 'Faith is bad, history is good'. For Dunn, however, this skepticism misses one of the most important historical realities of Jesus: 'An inescapable starting point for any quest for Jesus should be the historical fact that Jesus made a lasting impact on his disciples. It can be regarded as one of the most secure of historical a prioris that Jesus made a deep impression during his mission' (p. 22).

Jesus' life and teaching changed the lives of his disciples to such a degree that they left all they had to follow him, not just for a day or even a week, but for several months (if not years). Thus they already had made a faith commitment before the Easter event. Even though it was different than the post-Easter faith, it was faith, nevertheless. They were disciples before Easter, not after. Certainly Jesus' disciples were talking about him and his teachings with others and amongst themselves before his death and resurrection. Therefore the traditions were in a state of development before those events. In addition, this repetition of the events of Jesus' life and his teaching prior to Easter is itself indicative of faith. Dunn distinguishes this 'disciple faith' from the (post-) 'Easter faith' in content and development. But this does not take away from the fact that it was faith.

Dunn also challenges the notion of a 'Q' community in Galilee that held a view of Jesus as a teacher of wisdom and was at odds with the preaching of the cross and resurrection espoused in Mark's Gospel. He argues that the Q material took shape in Galilee prior to Jesus' death and resurrection which explains its provenantial focus and lack of a passion narrative. Based on this Dunn sees 'Q' as further evidence of the 'faith-creating impact of Jesus' ministry'. Ultimately it is impossible to separate faith from the tradition since faith was the impetus for the formulation of the tradition at its earliest stage. Dunn characterizes the entire quest as a 'will-o'-the-wisp'. The quester begins with the a-priori assumption that the 'historical Jesus' must be different from the Christ of faith. But instead of discovering this elusive character the quester finds only a reconstructed Jesus that is expressive of his or her own individual agenda.

In Chapter Two, 'Behind the Gospels', Dunn challenges the dominant literary paradigm used in the development of theories which seek to explain the formulation of the Jesus tradition. Western thinking has become exclusively literary in the post-Gutenberg era, so much so that we can no longer conceptualize a culture where oral traditions and methods of learning were dominant. Dunn provides a brief synopsis of the development of the two-source document theory and its rise to dominance. Later theories that seek to challenge the two-source theory do so based on a literary paradigm that emphasizes copying from one written source to another. With the advent of form criticism the literary default setting could not be broken. Even when oral tradition is acknowledged, analyses approach it from the same literary paradigm as though the rules of one apply to the other. Recent developments in theories regarding Q maintain the literary default setting as scholars attempt to discern and peel back its compositional layers. Again, when oral tradition receives consideration, it is still conceptualized in terms of a literary process. This brings Dunn to what he sees as the second major flaw of the quest for the historical Jesus: it is too tightly constricted by the literary paradigm imbedded in scholarship; it is unwilling to take seriously the question of whether oral tradition would have functioned like literary tradition; and it has a negative evaluation of the reliability of oral tradition. The net result is an inability on the part of the quester to say anything about Jesus with confidence.

Ultimately the root of the problem lies in our inability to imagine the oral period. However, Dunn finds an answer to this deficiency in other

areas of current research. The first area is research in the field of Homeric and Yugoslavian sagas. Another is research into the way memory works. However, both face several difficulties which he outlines. More important are theories of 'social memory' and 'cultural memory'. Here the emphasis is on the creative character of memory rather than its retentive character. Still, Dunn finds reason for criticism in that the theories are framed in a literary culture. His primary hope lies in research that explores how oral traditions are passed down in contemporary oral societies. To this end he draws upon the work of Kenneth Bailey who has spent thirty years working in Middle Eastern villages. He believes these are culturally similar to the villages of first-century Galilee. While Bailey's work is primarily 'impressionistic and anecdotal' it may still provide useful information regarding how oral traditions are created and passed down.

Next, Dunn provides what he believes are the characteristic features of oral tradition. First, oral performance is not like reading a literary text. It is an event. It is not like a written work to which one may reference back; it is evanescent. Second, oral tradition is communal in nature. It continues in existence because there are communities for whom the tradition is important. Third, within the community there are one or more recognized individuals who are responsible for maintaining and performing the tradition. Fourth, oral tradition subverts the idea of an 'original' version. Each performance is an 'original'. Fifth, oral tradition is a combination of fixity and flexibility.

In the third chapter, 'The Characteristic Jesus', Dunn tackles an issue to which he has previously alluded, that being the desire of those participating in the quest for the historical Jesus to find a distinctive Jesus. Liberal Protestantism has sought a very non-Jewish Jesus based on the old notion of Christian supersessionism. This Jesus stood in stark contrast to the Judaism of his day. Functionally, this approach finds the historical Jesus in those aspects of his teaching that distinguish him from his contemporary Jewish counterparts. However, recent discoveries (in particular the Dead Sea Scrolls) have allowed scholars to reconstruct a view of Judaism in the first century that is marked by a great deal of diversity. We may now have a clearer picture than ever before of the religious context in which Jesus lived and ministered. This opens up what he calls the third quest. This quest represents a shift from a search for the distinctive and different Jesus to a search for the characteristic Jesus. This Jesus shares many common

traits with the Jewish culture and religion of his time instead of the rather odd Jesus who is at odds with all things Jewish.

The first mistake of the earlier quests was to search for a non-Jewish Jesus, 'the second mistake has been to make success dependent on identifying some key saying or action whose historicity can be demonstrated with high probability'. This results in the quest for criteria by which a specific saying may be recognized as having come from Jesus. One of these criteria is that of dissimilarity, where only those sayings that bear no resemblance to Christianity or Judaism are accepted as authentic. Others are the criterion of characteristic style traceable back to Aramaic styles, the 'criterion of embarrassment', and the criterion of historical plausibility. In all this Dunn sees a danger of 'inverting the pyramid' where the portrayal of Jesus is based upon a single verse.

In response Dunn argues that we should cease to search for the distinctive Jesus and begin to search for the characteristic Jesus, 'both that which was characteristic of Jesus as a Jew and that which is characteristic of the Jesus tradition as it now stands'. This new quest seeks those teachings and acts of Jesus that made a lasting impact upon his disciples. This approach recognizes the Jewishness of Jesus as he engages in debates with the Pharisees, the predominantly Galilean provenance of his ministry and the Synoptic tradition, the kingdom or royal rule of God, and the son of man/Son of Man tradition. In addition are the clear traditional elements of Jesus the exorcist, his distinctive use of 'amen', the universal recognition that Jesus' mission had a starting-point with John the Baptist, and the motif of judgment on 'this generation'.

Dunn concludes with a three-fold summary of his thesis. First, Jesus made an impact upon his disciples long before his death and resurrection. Secondly, the mode of oral performance and oral transmission of these formulations means that the force of that original impact continued to be expressed through them. Thirdly, the characteristic features running through and across the Jesus tradition give us a clear indication of the impression Jesus made on his disciples during his mission.

Dunn concludes his book with a lengthy appendix chapter, 'Altering the Default Setting', an earlier version of which appeared in *New Testament Studies* 49 (2003): 139-75. Here Dunn likens scholarly predispositions to a literary paradigm of development to that of a computer's

preset preferences. Unless the presets, the default settings, are deliberately and permanently changed they will remain the starting point from which all else is built. Likewise, scholars ‘naturally, habitually, and instinctively work within a literary paradigm’. So deeply entrenched is this paradigm (default setting) that change will not come about without great effort.

There is much in the appendix that is reiteration of points made in earlier chapters. In addition Dunn makes it very clear that he is not arguing for a rejection of the basic two source theory. He is still convinced that there are strong reasons for accepting arguments for Markan priority in the Synoptic tradition and the presence of some sort of common literary source common to Matthew and Luke apart from Mark (i.e. ‘Q’). He is simply arguing that hypotheses of literary interdependence are insufficient by themselves. Dunn provides several examples of parallel traditions from the Synoptics where hypotheses based on oral tradition may provide as reasonable (if not better) an explanation as that based on a literary paradigm.

For those seeking a voice within New Testament scholarship willing to challenge the long held literary paradigm that has dominated theories of sources underlying the Gospels, Dunn answers. *A New Perspective on Jesus* provides a launching point for further research into the field of oral development and preservation of traditional material as well as providing validation for those who hold to such a position. Dunn’s arguments are well informed and provide many points for discussion and further investigation. If the book suffers from any weakness it is brevity. More detailed engagement with research in the field of oral traditions would have made the arguments stronger. However, though it is neither an exhaustive treatment, nor the final word on the subject, it serves well as an introduction to this approach and should be a stimulant for investigation and debate.

Ronald D. Peters
McMaster Divinity College