

BOOK REVIEW

Braaten, Carl E., *Who Is Jesus? Disputed Questions and Answers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011). vii + 147 pp. Pbk. \$20 USD.

According to the author, this book derives from his 1959 doctoral dissertation, where he argued that ‘the modern search for the historical Jesus has been a failure’ (p. 2). After five decades, Carl E. Braaten, now Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and former executive director of the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology, is still convinced that the ongoing search for the historical Jesus by current scholars is a failure. His view is that ‘the only real Jesus is the One presented in the canonical Gospels and that any other Jesus is irrelevant to Christian faith’ (p. 3). Braaten’s goal is to provide an answer to the perennial inquiry about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth (Mt. 16.15). The book is aimed at ‘ordinary Christian lay folks who have not had the luxury of formal theological education’ (p. 142). The titles of all eight chapters of the book pose questions that have been variously answered by some of the greatest theologians since the first century as they reflected upon and gave a defense of their faith in Jesus. Braaten attempts to answer each of these questions via a systematic theology approach from the perspective of a Lutheran scholar. The book concludes with some further questions for future inquiry.

Chapter 1 addresses the question ‘What can we know about Jesus of Nazareth?’. The author reviews some scholarly works of the first, second and third ‘quests’, categorizing them as either positive (e.g. by conservative scholars) or negative (e.g. by the Jesus Seminar scholars). Whereas the negative critics seek to reconstruct a ‘correct’ image of Jesus, as they believe that the Gospels inaccurately depict Jesus, the positive critics in turn respond to defend Christianity’s fundamental beliefs and creeds, since they maintain that the Gospels are quite reliable. The author tends to side with the positive critics, though he is at once sceptical about the theological relevance of the historical reconstruction of

both camps of scholars, especially in terms of ‘probability of knowledge’ (p. 23) about the historical Jesus. It is clear that Braaten endorses the position of the so-called ‘no quest’ scholars, whose aim is to put an end to the historical Jesus enterprise. For Braaten, the search for the historical Jesus is a never-ending enterprise in which there can be no scholarly consensus reached at the end of the day. He agrees with Martin Kähler in claiming that ‘the real Jesus is the Christ of the apostolic preaching’ (p. 12). Any opposing views that depend upon ‘the erudition of learned professors’ (p. 26), the author asserts, are ‘powerless to mediate the living biblical Christ of faith’ (p. 25), as they are not grounded upon eyewitness testimonies recorded in the Gospels. From here, the subsequent chapters deal with topics in systematic theology. Biblical scholars may immediately find a disjunction between the subject matter (historical Jesus research) Braaten wishes to address and the arguments (via systematic theology) he marshals. In fact, virtually all of the topics discussed are ones seminarians study in their introduction to systematic theology class.

Chapter 2 tackles ‘How do Christians come to believe in Jesus?’. The author points out that none of the three quests for the historical Jesus ‘gives faith the means of access to the saving revelation of God in Jesus Christ’ (p. 30). Braaten is sympathetic to the use of reason in faith inquiry, and says that it forms a ‘hermeneutical chain’ (p. 37) with the witness of the Holy Spirit and Scripture in an ecclesial context. Because he believes that authentic faith rests upon the apostolic memory and preaching, Braaten argues that any historical fact from an extra-canonical source ‘contributes nothing to the gospel of salvation preached by the church’ (p. 41) and is ‘irrelevant to Christian faith’ (p. 46). Two important comments need to be made. First, I am uncertain as to how the author’s call to rely upon the apostolic preaching contributes anything to the reliability of the Gospel materials, considering the fact that in some circles biblical scholars using social memory theories are questioning the accuracy and reliability of the memory of eyewitnesses of an event. At the least, Braaten should have addressed this issue or provided evidence to support his case. But as this and the following chapters make clear, the author appears not to be dealing with the question ‘who is Jesus?’ as in the title of his book, but is rather apologetically answering the question ‘how do Christians acquire their salvation?’. Unfortunately, this subject matter is not the concern of historical Jesus research. Secondly, I do not understand why the author

agrees with the use of reason for faith and historical inquiry, but simultaneously debunks the historical Jesus enterprise, the main concern of which is to establish the link between the historical Jesus and the biblical Christ. The historical Jesus enterprise owes its beginning in the seventeenth century to those who first questioned the relationship between history and faith by the use of reason.

Chapter 3 addresses the question ‘Did Jesus really rise from the dead?’. Braaten points out that while the Christian message hinges upon the resurrection event, the application of modern historical-critical methods ‘released a flood of doubts regarding the stories of Jesus’ resurrection in the Gospels’ (p. 49). He then suggests that Jesus’ resurrection must be seen as both a historical and an eschatological event that offers hope for believers in the promised life to come. Chapter 4 answers ‘Why do Christians believe that Jesus is truly God?’. The author notes that the early Christians ‘started their christological thinking... with soteriology’ (p. 62). And even if their basis was personal experience instead of dogmatic theology, they still emphasized a high Christology that continued until the rise of orthodox Christianity. The remainder of the chapter discusses the various versions of both high and low Christology, argues why Jesus is truly God by comparing him with figures in other religions, explains the Lutheran view of the Lord’s Supper, and ends with a critique of John Hick’s edited book *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977). Chapter 5 asks ‘Is Jesus unique?’ and contends that Jesus is the only way to salvation. The author discusses the impact of religious pluralism on Christianity. He notes that the problem of pluralism lies in the controversy over the nature of the gospel, which, for Christians, is conveyed by God’s special revelation through the exclusive work of Christ on the cross and the witness of the Spirit through the Church. Thus, Braaten underscores the fact that there is no salvation outside Christianity. It is not altogether clear in these three chapters how these topics are actually pertinent to showing how the historical Jesus is related to the biblical Christ, although Braaten is quick to say that Christ can only be reached by faith through the work of Christ, the Spirit and the ministry of the Church. But if this is what the author wishes to explain, why is there a need to draw upon historical Jesus research in discussing this matter? At the least, the author should have either demonstrated how faith and the Church are related to historical Jesus research (e.g. Dunn’s *Jesus Remembered*) or stated explicitly that faith and history should be kept separate (e.g. Kähler and

Bultmann). But the author says, ‘A faith perspective is fully compatible with a robust use of reason in historical Jesus research’ (p. 31).

Chapter 6 deals with the question ‘Why did Jesus have to die on the cross?’. Braaten contrasts Luther’s theology of the cross, which emphasizes the suffering and death of Christ, with the theology of glory, which ‘seeks to deal with God apart from Christ’ (p. 94). He presents four theories of the atonement, and adopts the ‘concept of representation’ (p. 106) as his own take on the doctrine of atonement. Chapter 7 highlights Easter as the turning point between Christ’s preaching of the kingdom of God and his later disciples’ (and the Church’s) preaching about him to answer the question ‘Was Jesus the founder of the Christian Church?’. Braaten discusses three biblical images of the Church, the four pillars of the early Church, and the seven marks of the (true) Church to counter Robert Funk’s proposals to reconstruct Christianity. The eighth and final chapter takes on issues surrounding the question ‘What does Jesus have to do with politics?’. The author points out that even though Jesus promoted neither rebellion nor violence, it would be ‘wrong to claim that Jesus had nothing to do with the political situation of his day’ (p. 127). Banking on the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms of God, Braaten asserts that ‘Christians are to live “in but not of the world”’ (p. 131) and ‘in tension between the “already” and the “not yet”’ (p. 134). The logical disjunction I have noted above is again apparent in these last three chapters. Moreover, I would even say that these questions are seldom raised in Christian apologetics. Whereas the previous three chapters are typically relevant to audiences who are skeptical about Christianity in general, these last three chapters seem to concern believers in their growing spiritual life with Christ. This being the case, I am confused as to who the actual target audience of the author is, even though Braaten mentions that it is ordinary lay people (see above). In addition, I also do not think that the author is fair in his presentation of these materials that purport to explicate the relationship between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith to his audience. Many of the topics he discusses should have been confined to the discipline of systematic theology, focusing on the explication of the Christian faith in the Lutheran tradition.

In conclusion, I would like to raise one key point scholars must consider and address. This is that Jesus scholars should discontinue producing works that merely recycle old theses and arguments in summary form. This book, among many others, is an unfortunate example. What

new insight(s) can students gain from this book, aside from a brief survey of the three quests for the historical Jesus and an introduction to topics in systematic theology, both of which can be found in so many previous books by other scholars? While new publications might be beneficial to old scholars in stacking up their scholarly works, it might not be so for new historical Jesus students, unless one can offer new proposals, theories or methods of inquiry or even a new direction to this field of study. This comment aside, not only do I take the use of reason in historical Jesus research to be compatible with faith, but my faith conviction is also in agreement with the author. The only difference is that I still think that the historical Jesus enterprise is necessary and legitimate for biblical, theological, ministerial and apologetic purposes.

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