
The Message of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and Ben Witherington III in Dialogue

Robert B Stewart, Ed

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This enjoyable work is the product of the 2010 Greer-Heard Point-Counterpoint Forum in Faith and Culture. This annual forum aims “to have a respected Evangelical scholar dialogue with a respected non-Evangelical or non-Christian scholar on an important subject in religion or culture” (xv). The 2010 forum hosted a dialogue between John Dominic Crossan and Ben Witherington III on “The Message of Jesus.” Other scholars contributed papers related to the subject. These, along with additional related essays, follow a transcript of Crossan’s and Witherington’s dialogue (including a Question and Answer section) and are collected to produce this fine introduction to and exploration of the topic.

The book begins with an excellent overview essay of historical Jesus research by the book editor, Robert Stewart. This essay surveys the major contributors to current methodologies and the various ‘quests’ for the historical Jesus. After commenting briefly on the Renaissance, Stewart really begins his survey with the seventeenth century and the rise of modernity. He actually begins with Spinoza because, he argues, his work would “eventually bear fruit in modern forms of biblical criticism, which would affect the quest for the historical Jesus” (3). Stewart then moves on to discuss briefly the main contributions of other significant, perhaps more familiar, ‘life-of-Jesus’ scholars such as Lessing, Reimarus, Schleiermacher and Strauss. He also discusses key contributors to synoptic scholarship such as Lachmann, Holtzmann, Ritschl, Von Harnack, and Wrede. Continuing to address the history of the historical Jesus quests, he writes about the work of Schweitzer, Kahler, Troeltsch and Bousset (the latter two from the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*). The essay also discusses the work of Bultmann in Form Criticism. The ‘relatively short-lived’ New Quest included the works of Kasemann, Robinson, Bornkamm, and Conzelmann. Then there is the Third Quest, with contributions from Meyer, Sanders, Dunn, Wright and Witherington.

After surveying this movement, Stewart recommends proceeding by thinking in terms of ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ approaches to the study of Jesus. He regards Crossan as an example of the postmodern approach. The gospels are not straight-forward history. Rather, they portray Jesus making powerful social and political statements, by word and action. Stewart summarizes Crossan’s view of Jesus as being about ‘magic and meal,’ or ‘free healing’ and ‘common eating’ all with a view toward “proclaiming a message that undermined the political, social, and religious hierarchies of his day” (25-26). Witherington represents the modern approach. Like others in this category, he is optimistic about the

historical reliability of the gospels. For him, “Jesus’ message was that of a prophet, Israel’s messiah, God’s son, the Son of Man, and Wisdom incarnated. Most significantly, by implication, Jesus taught that he was in some sense divine” (30). Witherington also views Jesus’ message as eschatological (the climax of history) and focused on the “inbreaking of God’s kingdom” (30). This essay expands the reach of the book by making it more accessible to readers who might not be familiar with historical Jesus research.

The next section of the book contains the transcript of Crossan and Witherington’s dialogue. Crossan’s opening statement summarizes his position on the message of Jesus. He regards the message as basically about the eschatological kingdom of God, foreseen in Daniel 7, coming to replace the violent kingdoms of the world. Through Jesus’ nonviolent ministry of healing and eating, “God’s Great Cleanup of the World” (41) begins. This project would establish God’s distributive justice. But it is not the work of Jesus alone. Crossan argues that the divine plan “does not begin, cannot continue, and will not conclude without our divinely empowered participation and transcendently driven collaboration. That is the message and challenge of Jesus” (41).

Witherington’s opening remarks focus on “the narrative thought world which generated all of (Jesus’) teachings” (43). He sees real “continuity between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, and between Jesus and the risen Lord” (43). He argues that Jesus was aiming to rescue people both from sin and the coming judgment of Roman destruction. Witherington also leans on Daniel 7 for understanding the kingdom movement that Jesus was bringing. However, for Witherington, this movement is more focused on the person and work of Jesus, including his death, physical resurrection, and promised return, than on notions of empire. For Witherington, “the key elements in Jesus’ message (are) Kingdom of God and Son of Man, and it was, and is, and ever shall be only the latter that brings the former on earth as it is in heaven” (52). Witherington also roots Jesus’ self-understanding in the “prophetic and wisdom literature of early Judaism” (51).

In these remarks and in the dialogue section that follows we learn that Crossan and Witherington actually agree on a number of things. They both agree that Jesus was a ‘nonviolent revolutionary,’ that history is important for understanding Jesus, that Daniel 7 plays a key role in interpretation, and that Jesus was leading a kingdom movement. They do, however, have rather different emphases. Witherington emphasizes Jesus’ rootedness in the Jewish story, and does not think Jesus is mainly acting contra Rome. Crossan has a more cosmic, perhaps more abstracted, emphasis. For him, “the core issue is, to whom does the earth belong?” (56). The gospel declares that the world belongs to God. Empires will not accept this. So there is conflict. And the one gospel Jesus embodied has “at once, religious and political, theological, social, and economic” (57) dimensions.

The ‘Q&A’ section adds a little more to our understanding of their views. For instance, we learn that Crossan does not take the resurrection literally (though he appreciates the Eastern Orthodox’s corporate understanding of it) but Witherington does. Witherington affirms that “forgiveness is at the heart of the gospel” (62), whereas Crossan does not emphasize that. They also have differing views of Jesus’ ‘divinity.’ Crossan thinks this is simply the sort of thing that people in the ancient world said about persons who performed some extraordinary action for humanity. Witherington seems to think there is more to it than that but does not address it in detail here. They also have differing views on the cross. Crossan views it as the result of Jesus’ (essentially political) message. He was regarded as a revolutionary. Because Jesus accepted his death without violence, it serves to ‘show that a life of nonviolence ... is possible’ (67). Witherington thinks that there is more purpose and

Book Review

intention in Jesus' death. It was not simply his message that led to his crucifixion. It was part of a greater plan, one rooted in Isaiah 53, and one that would deal with humanity's sin problem.

Witherington's and Crossan's contributions to the conference (and thus the book) are insightful, and the exchange is enjoyable. Readers who are familiar with their respective works will likely not find much that surprises them. But the presentations could be very interesting to students who are relatively new to discussions on the historical Jesus. The book as a whole is a good introduction to serious New Testament scholarship presented in an easily digestible form.

The main presentations of Witherington and Crossan are complemented by several scholarly essays by other experts in the field. They range from Evangelical to Critical in orientation. Readers will gain insights on Jesus' use of Jewish scripture, Jesus' parables, prophecy in Matthew, at least one example of an Evangelical contribution to historical Jesus studies, and an argument for historical material in John's gospel. The chapter on economics and the parables by Levine and Shinall is very well written, insightful and relevant. And David Wenham's chapter on Jesus tradition in Paul, connected to Jesus tradition in John's gospel, is quite compelling, original, and seems to make a real contribution.

Not every reader will be satisfied by the arguments put forward by each contributor. That is because they represent a range of perspectives in historical Jesus research. However, the book is a great introduction to the field, and readers at every level will gain fresh insights. Thus, I recommend the work to anyone interested in historical Jesus studies, whether a beginning undergraduate student, or a long-time New Testament scholar. There is something in here for everyone.