

Dunn, James D.G. 2019. *Jesus according to the New Testament*. Tübingen, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 211 pp., \$20.00

James Dunn has given a gift to all those who might like to read his larger works but are subject to the constraints of time or money or attention. Serious New Testament scholars and theologians will want to read his *Christianity in the Making* (2003, 2009, 2015) volumes and his important work *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (1998). This new work is an ideal introduction to those larger volumes and to the study of Jesus and the New Testament in general.

Much of this material was originally given as public lectures in ecclesial settings, drawing heavily from the larger works. Collected in book form, they now serve as brief, but thorough summary of how Jesus is understood and presented in each New Testament writing.

It is both delightful and helpful to see the portrait of Jesus in the New Testament books laid out like this. There is both diversity and coherence to the Jesus we see in these texts. As Rowan Williams reflects in the *Foreword*, “this mixture of difference and convergence is exactly what should make us pause before accepting the fashionable idea that what we have in the New Testament is some sort of unrepresentative selection of writings which just happened to be acceptable to dictatorial prelates in the early centuries (x). According the Dunn, though we get particular emphases and unique details in the various books, the New Testament still testifies to the same Jesus throughout. There is little reason to be skeptical about this, he argues.

Each chapter is like a small commentary, with a Christological focus. Dunn views each book as a collection of remembrances of Jesus, organized to suit each author’s particular purpose. In that sense, they all bear witness to Jesus, collectively providing the church with a “sequence of testimonies” (187). This sequence begins with a look at how Jesus was remembered in the Gospels. But before looking at each Gospel’s unique contribution, Dunn aims to get at “Jesus according to Jesus.” That is, he looks at what we might, with some confidence, regard as Jesus’s own message and view of himself. What might we say was true of Jesus’s message apart from the various aims of the evangelists? Dunn believes this can be done by looking at unique “lessons learned from Jesus, distinctive features of Jesus’s ministry, and

Jesus's own self-understanding"(1). Dunn then proceeds to highlight such things as Jesus's love command, his focus on the poor, his welcome of sinners, his openness to gentiles, his acceptance of women among his followers, his relaxing of food regulations, and other moments that bear the marks of authentic remembrances, according to Dunn.

As for distinctive features of Jesus's ministry, Dunn points to memories of Jesus teaching about the kingdom of God, *that* Jesus was remembered as a teacher (especially a teacher of parables), him exorcising evil spirits, ministering in Galilee, and other features. These, like the lessons above, were "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" (17-18). In fact, Dunn regards it as "unduly skeptical and prejudiced" (10) to deny that we can have some confidence concerning Jesus's teachings and actions.

The next section examines Jesus's self-awareness. Dunn argues that Jesus knew he was commissioned at his baptism by John, that he (Jesus) was sent by God, that he was the Messiah, God's son (thus referring to God as "Abba"), and the Son of Man. The last phrase appears all the more genuine because early Christian theologians did not make much use of it. Jesus also seems to have expected both his death and his resurrection. Dunn argues that these features are all "firmly at the root of Jesus according to the evangelists" (25).

From here, Dunn moves into an examination of the synoptic Gospels and the unique witness of each. This is followed by chapters on John's Gospel, Acts, Paul (two chapters), Hebrews, the other Catholic Epistles, and Revelation.

There are many illuminating discoveries along the way. For instance, Dunn argues that while Paul focused more on the theological meaning of the Christ event, and says little about Jesus's own life and teachings otherwise, Paul nonetheless must have taught new believers about the life and teachings of Jesus. He shows that it is reasonable to conclude that Paul knew about Jesus's words and actions, and that Paul even incorporated Jesus's teaching into his own teaching. This was not done in a formal or formulaic manner. But, like the other New Testament writers, Paul makes

extensive use of Jesus's teachings, often assumed or rearticulated to meet the needs of his ministry.

Other discoveries might include Act's emphasis on the resurrection and lack of reflection upon the meaning of the cross, or Paul's emphasis upon participation in Christ as a central theme, or the wisdom Christology of Hebrews. Occasionally Dunn will note how some emphases in the New Testament seem to refute or critique some early development in the church. For instance, he argues that the letter to the Hebrews should have prevented the emergence of a priestly office in the church. He writes, "despite Hebrews, the centrality of the priests as intermediaries and essential to effective worship was reaffirmed in second-century Christianity – and quickly became established, again despite Hebrews" (154). Then there is the realization that James' letter barely mentions Jesus, but his teaching echoes Jesus's throughout. And Jude mentions Jesus more, by comparison, but draws more from Israel's history for his examples and exhortations.

The chapter on Revelation is especially enjoyable. Dunn notes that the literary genre is "crisis literature" (apocalyptic) and reflects "the Jewishness of Christianity (as clearly as) anywhere else in the earliest decades of Christianity's existence" (175). This is all the more remarkable given the late 1st century date for Revelation. One distinctive feature of this book is the very exalted picture of Jesus. Dunn comments, "Jesus is more clearly worshiped in Revelation than anywhere else in the New Testament" (177). Perhaps the most distinctive portrayal of Jesus is the twenty-eight references to him as a "lamb." The lamb is slain but reigning on God's throne. His blood cleanses from sin and enables his people to conquer. The lamb is worthy to open seals and is worshiped by all in heaven. Highlights such as these are found throughout Dunn's work, and will prove illuminating for all readers.

This work would make for an excellent introduction to the New Testament, to Jesus, or even to New Testament Theology. It can be read by students, teachers, lay persons, and pastors alike. It is accessible, interesting, and scholarly. The reader finds a trusted guide in Dunn. Whether a reader is looking for scholarly foundations, or something to nurture one's faith, this work will supply both.

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