

BOOK REVIEW

Donald L. Denton, Jr, *Historiography and Hermeneutics in Jesus Studies: An Examination of the Work of John Dominic Crossan and Ben F. Meyer* (JSNTSup, 262; JSHJSup; London and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2004); 239 pp. Hdbk. US\$125.00.

Into the diverse and prolific milieu of contemporary Jesus Studies, Donald Denton issues a plea for methodological clarity.

The study begins with a brief survey of Jesus research. The history of research is organized according to the typical pattern that sees Jesus scholarship progressing in four phases: Old Quest, No Quest, New Quest and Third Quest. Denton criticizes those like Dale Allison, who have called into question the New Quest–Third Quest distinction, while acknowledging that the Old and No Quest phases might not be as clearly established. Allison’s claim that the contemporary quest is characterized by nothing other than diversity is described as ‘not necessarily warranted’ (p. 5) in light of the uniquely existential nature of the post-Bultmannian scholarship (characterized by form and tradition criticism) that was taking place from the 1950s through the early 80s and the distinctively Jewish emphasis of contemporary Jesus research (characterized by a focus on specific criteria for authenticity) (pp. 6, 7). It appears that Stanley Porter’s research is neglected at this point, which lists 47 works from the so-called ‘New Quest’ period representing diverse critical perspectives (*The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research: Previous Discussions and New Proposals* [JSNTSup, 191; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000], pp. 50-51), though his work is mentioned in a footnote toward the end of the chapter. Denton’s suggestion that tradition and form criticism predominated the analysis of the New Quest is also subject to criticism, since it fails to take into consideration the rise of redaction criticism in the 1950s (e.g. Hanz Conzelmann, *Die Mitte der Zeit: Studien zur Theologie des Lukas*

[BHT, 17; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2nd edn, 1953; 4th edn, 1957]; Willi Marxsen, *Der Evangelist Markus: Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Evangeliums* [FRLANT, 67; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956, 2nd edn, 1959], among others). I have a similar concern with Denton's claim that the Third Quest is largely characterized (at least methodologically) by a focus on specific criteria for authenticity. Several studies have made extensive reference to an occupation with authenticity criteria that spans the time margins of the Quest-periods (e.g. John P. Meyer, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus. I. Roots of the Problem and the Person* [ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1991], pp. 167-68; Porter, *Criteria of Authenticity*, pp. 64-102; M. Eugene Boring, 'The Historical-Critical Method's "Criteria of Authenticity": The Beatitudes in Q and Thomas as a Test Case', *Semeia* 44 [1988], pp. 9-44) so that it becomes hard to see this focus as a defining methodological characteristic of the Third Quest, which, like other periods, has the historical-critical method as its basis.

After attempting to set his study within its historical context, Denton introduces the two major figures upon which his work focuses: John Dominic Crossan and Ben F. Meyer. His short biographical summaries offer helpful introductions to the two scholars and add a warm personal element that is absent in much modern scholarship. The remainder of the book gives detailed analysis and application to their work.

The first two chapters provide an exposition of Crossan's tradition criticism. Denton describes the method of the 'Early Crossan' as 'Post-Historiographic Structuralism'. Works from this period include *In the Parables* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); *The Dark Interval* (Niles, IL: Argus Communications, 1975); *Raid on the Articulate*; and *Cliffs of Fall* (New York: Seabury, 1980). Denton suggests that, in addition to the structuralist overtones that clearly pervade the work, *In the Parables* reflects a New Quest orientation due to its 'exclusive orientation to Jesus' words' and its post-Bultmannian existential perspective (p. 24) (the criticisms already expressed about the Quest-divisions are applicable here as well). The evolution from structuralist to poststructuralist/deconstructionist hermeneutics is then traced through *The Dark Interval* and *Raid of the Articulate*, which paves the theoretical path for the radical paradoxical interpretations of the parables we see in *Cliffs of Fall*. This would not have been possible within his previous philosophical and structuralist framework. Denton's evaluation of these works emphasizes the tension between Crossan's poststructuralist hermeneutic

and his tradition-critical historiography. In the early Crossan, Denton observes, we have a method that ‘embraces a hermeneutic that denies the historical referent, and an ontology that denies extra-linguistic reality, along with a historiography that assumes both such a referent and a reality’ (pp. 40-41).

Denton switches to a more synchronic approach in examining Crossan’s later work, characterized mainly by an interdisciplinary orientation. The most rigorous expression of this approach is found in *The Historical Jesus: Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991). Abandoning his initial structuralist and poststructuralist inclinations, Crossan exploits a three-tiered methodological framework for historical investigation: the macrocosmic level (utilizing social anthropology), the mesocosmic level (focusing on first-century Greco-Roman history) and the microcosmic level (consisting of the literature on Jesus—literary criticism). Most of Crossan’s methodological discussion is devoted to the microcosmic level, which essentially involves compiling an inventory of sources (e.g. Mark, Q, *The Gospel of Thomas*) and examining their interrelation. The interdisciplinary shift in his work can be seen in his incorporation of social anthropology, literary criticism and historical analysis. A change in results may also be observed between the early and later Crossan—‘from asocial experience of the transcendent to revolutionary social vision’ in the teachings of Jesus (p. 55).

The third chapter, ‘The Method Considered’, for the most part limits the scope of its analysis to the interdisciplinary phase of Crossan’s work. Like James Dunn and Werner Kelber, Denton is critical of Crossan’s neglect of oral criticism in his extensive investigations of parallel materials. Another concern arising from Crossan’s emphasis on tradition criticism and comparative studies is his treatment of historical data as testimony rather than evidence. Denton insists that Crossan conflates the two categories in his analysis of sources relations when, in fact, the testimonial aspect of sources should only be one consideration within a broader, more cumulative body of evidence. A similar criticism is leveled against Crossan’s admission that he must step outside of his method to account for certain historical data. This is not problematic in itself, Denton claims. But it is indicative of the fact that decisions on historicity are made apart from a consideration of how they may be useful within the context of the historical investigation. He illustrates this point by drawing attention to forensic investigation. A detective, he

explains, does not know which pieces of the evidence at the crime scene will be important and which will not. It is not until he has placed each piece of evidence within the context of the investigation as a whole that he is able to determine which finger print or eye witness will be of value to the case. And such is the case with the historian, Denton insists.

The next three chapters (4 to 6) engage with the epistemology, hermeneutics and historiography of Ben F. Meyer. The section begins by noting Meyer's dependence on Bernard Lonergan's epistemology in general and his transcendental method in particular. Denton emphasizes Lonergan and Meyer's adoption of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, especially his focus on the hermeneutics of consent. Meyer perpetuates Lonergan's epistemology in his understanding of historical knowledge as well. Three aspects, in particular, are observed by Denton: (1) resistance to the knowing-is-like-seeing fallacy; (2) the world understood as emergent probability rather than a closed continuum of necessity; and (3) a common-sense knowledge approach to history that considers objects in relation to the observer rather than in relation to one another. A large portion of the section on historiography interacts with Meyer's intentionality-based approach in *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979), seeking to answer some of the criticisms leveled against intentionalist theories of meaning in general, and Meyer's model in particular. The most obvious incorporation of Lonergan's transcendental model is seen in Meyer's hypothesis-verification method, which emphasizes questioning the data and probing it for answers and verifications of proposed hypotheses. The exposition of Meyer's historiography is concluded by commenting upon two 'metacritical goals' with which he thinks historians should approach the data: (1) historical results can and must be of use for theology and (2) the openness of the historian to be challenged and questioned in her dialogue with the data. Denton rightly observes that limitation to these two metacritical goals makes it difficult, indeed impossible, to radically relativize his method.

In Chapter 6, Denton explores the application of Meyer's method. In summary, Meyer portrays Jesus as an eschatological (but not apocalyptic) prophet focused upon the proclamation of the imminent kingdom of God expressed in God's much-anticipated final restoration of Israel. Jesus, according to Meyer, understood his death as the

inauguration of the eschatological kingdom, which would be consummated in the final resurrection.

In comparison with Crossan, Denton concludes, Meyer is not as rigorous in structuring his material according to his method, though he does often refer back to his seven indices, which amount to what we might call 'criteria for authenticity' in current discussion. The incorporation of the data by Meyer is also more holistic than that by Crossan, who takes an atomistic approach involving a comparison of parallel material and an authenticating process for the data before it is examined. Meyer's interactive hypothesis-verification method also allows for a greater sense of hermeneutical self-awareness than Crossan's model, which perpetuates 'method' as an instrument for keeping the historian's hermeneutical involvement in abeyance. The approach advocated by Meyer also has a greater appreciation of the contextual nature of knowledge, according to Denton. But although Meyer is keenly attuned to the contextual frames provided by the historian's hypothesis and horizons, one significant layer of context that he fails to appreciate is the narrative context of the sources he examines.

The remainder of the book (Chapters 7 and 8) provides a defense of holistic approaches to historical Jesus research and attempts to strengthen Meyer's original proposal by adding a narrative dimension to its contextual considerations. Denton follows a large number of New Testament scholars (including Tom Wright, Dale Allison, William Herzog and James Dunn) in promoting an approach to historical evidence that casts large-scale narratives against the backdrop of the relevant data to see if they fit. This is contrasted to the approach of Crossan and others who start with individual pieces of the evidence and try to construct a picture of Jesus that makes sense of the evidence. One problem with holistic proposals of the data, which emphasize starting with a larger context against which the individual pieces of data can be checked, is how one arrives at the initial context. Various proposals have been given and criticized. The one suggested by Denton attempts to avoid the criticisms that have been made of other holistic proposals and understands context in terms of public and non-public dimensions. The public dimension is the context of the sources in which the data are found and the non-public dimension is the horizon of the reader, since no evidence can be considered apart from it.

The final chapter embarks upon an exploration of Denton's principle of narrative intelligibility. Essentially, Denton is attempting to expand

his proposal, which, in my opinion, amounts to no more than a subtly-nuanced rendition of the epistemology, hermeneutics and historiography we see in Wright's *The New Testament and the People of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1992). Clearly Denton anticipates this criticism when he attempts to distinguish his model from Wright's. He mentions two ways in which his model differs. First, he stresses that Wright's understanding of worldview as a context for interpreting narratives is not as 'concrete' and 'recoverable' as 'the narrativity of lived experience' (pp. 178-80). But when one examines Wright's analysis of worldviews, the components (stories, symbols, answers to life's fundamental questions and praxis—the way in which people act on their answers) are very concrete and seemingly as recoverable within the culture and literature of a society as anything historical could be. Certainly this is the impression one gets from Wright when he applies his theory in Parts Three ('First Century Judaism within the Greco-Roman World') and Four ('The First Christian Century') of his book by detailed exposition of the cultural context for the New Testament. So I think it is unclear how exactly 'narrative experience' provides a more concrete contextual basis for historical investigation than the concept of worldview. Therefore, I am skeptical of whether this provision to Wright's theory is even necessary. A second point of distinction made by Denton is that he thinks Wright uses sources 'somewhat uncritically'. While Denton recognizes that Wright is on the same page methodologically because of his emphasis on compositional criticism in the analysis of sources, he criticizes Wright for harmonizing and attempting to synthesize the Gospels into one story. But this is not a methodological distinction as much as it is a disagreement with application. Both Wright and Denton insist upon the importance of considering sources in their context. The difference lies in how the method is carried out, not in the method per se. And this difference is incidental, in any case, since we have yet to see an application of Denton's model. So I wonder whether this can count as a legitimate methodological distinction.

Two helpful appendices are included in this work. One is on the criteria of authenticity and the other focuses on the varieties of critical realism. The material on critical realism could easily have been incorporated into the contents of the book, but it serves as a good appendix as well. The treatment of the criteria of authenticity is valuable for its penetrating and insightful overview of the past and present situation.

I have very few additional criticisms of the book. Two things do deserve mention, however. First, the book has no conclusion, leaving the reader on his or her own to tie up the many loose ends that Denton leaves hanging. Secondly, although there is much talk about philosophy and epistemology, there is very little interaction with serious contemporary philosophical resources. C. Stephen Evans, for example, is a philosopher who has dealt specifically with questions of epistemology, narrative, historiography and philosophy of history within the context of current Jesus scholarship (*The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996]), yet his work does not even make it into the bibliography. No attempt is made to frame the philosophical theory that Meyer borrowed from Lonergan over thirty years ago within the contemporary context of the discipline. This is a weakness of Wright's work, as well.

Overall, however, the book is to be valued for what it is: a well-written, clear analysis of two contrasting approaches to Jesus research. Denton argues convincingly for a holistic account of historical knowledge and investigation, even if his proposals are not entirely new. He provides clear, cogent summaries and evaluations of Crossan and Meyer that will be an important resource to scholars working within hermeneutics, historiography and, especially, Jesus studies.

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