

BOOK REVIEW

Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Recovering Jesus: The Witness of the New Testament* (London: SPCK; Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007). 336 pp. Pbk. US\$22.99.

Judging a book by its cover is not such a terrible thing when the cover's imagery so faithfully represents what waits inside. The cross on the front of Yoder Neufeld's *Recovering Jesus* is barely visible, obscured by several layers of painted surfaces; the Jesus of the New Testament is similarly buried beneath deposits of history, church tradition, and myriad theological agendas, so 'recovering' him is a shrewdly worded and vitally necessary task. Yoder Neufeld rises to his own challenge, crafting a work that fits nicely between research monograph and course textbook: his presentation is clear and original in its phrasing, accessible to undergraduates or occasional students, and refreshing for journeyman instructors. Readers of all levels will find supportive resources in his lists of key terms and concepts, appearing about once every chapter, and in the supplementary partially annotated booklists for further reading (where texts from Borg and Wright sit next to more popularly approachable authors, such as Philip Yancey). Recommended exercises are rare but helpful, and while the lack of footnotes will frustrate those seeking after sources for a specific point, the resulting style is less daunting for those new to Jesus studies. This book is about the Jesus of history, but also the Jesus of theology. The shaping of the New Testament involved both processes, and present-day interests continue to inform our readings of the Gospels and related texts. This is certainly the case for the author himself, who reads from an Anabaptist perspective, an influence subtly felt at many points in the book. The effects of this particular reading will warrant attention after I have surveyed the volume's thoughtful contents.

Yoder Neufeld explains the history of Jesus research, acknowledging the difficulty of finding just one authentic portrait among the plurality in his first chapter, 'One Jesus or Many Jesuses?' A biblical *ad fontes*

call causes as many problems as it solves. How should we reconcile differences between sources, even among the Synoptics (cleverly re-labeled ‘look-alikes’)? Should Paul’s work count in the search? From the many portrayals previously offered, Yoder Neufeld sets out to sketch not a definitive portrait, but an accurate representation of Jesus as the New Testament authors conceptualize him. Admitting subjective biases, he still believes an unapologetic encounter with that same Jesus to be possible.

To facilitate that encounter, Yoder Neufeld delves into the history of Jesus traditions, adopting the metaphor of an archaeological dig—nuancing the titular image of ‘recovering’—for his second chapter. Major events (the Reformation, Chalcedon, Nicea) become artifacts as theology and history contend with one another; once unearthed, the ‘treasure trunk’ of canon excludes some puzzling leftovers (apocryphal texts) and discloses equally strange artifacts inside (Revelation’s apocalyptic victory, won through martyrdom). The author charts likely oral-tradition influences, though perhaps not messily enough, and reviews criteria for determining historicity and critical tools for sifting evidence. Rather than viewing the canonical Gospels as *direct* or *questionable* links to Jesus, he argues for a compromise of basic *reliability*. Chapter Three examines the ‘fourfold gospel’ according to each evangelist, prefaced with a definition (previously implicit) of *Gospel* as a ‘fusion of sermon and biography’ (p. 53). Mark’s is the script of prophetic drama, displaying urgency, authority, and vulnerability in messianic identity; Matthew is the work of a ‘kingdom scribe’, aimed toward disciples or *students* of Jesus; Luke is the presenter of good news to the poor and oppressed, making Messiah intelligible and Gentile-friendly; John gives the sermon-story of Jesus the Revealer, the Word enfleshed.

Chapters Four and Five place Jesus and his birth in geographical, political, and symbolic context. In a world marked by Roman domination, insurrectionist resistance, and brutal response, fidelity to Torah expressed a hope for deliverance and recalled Israel’s identity as a ‘liberated community of slaves’ (p. 82). Palestinian geography and social sectors bore the impact of Hellenism (or ‘Greekishness’!) and revealed a people deeply fractured: guerillas, separatists, bureaucrats, and marginalized groups subject to a victimizing imperial system were among those waiting for redemption. Though half of the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament are silent regarding Jesus’ earthly arrival, the

accounts in Matthew and Luke remain significant in their parallels and variances. Matthew's allusive account shows a careful appropriation of biblical history and narrative; Luke's psalmic poems are also evocative, and hopeful and earthshaking in their implications. A historical core hides behind each author's distinctive *shaping*, a term Yoder Neufeld uses repeatedly to describe the creativity discerned in the evangelists' writing. In Luke's songs and elsewhere, he is realistic about the ambivalence of blessing, echoing the ominous note that sounds in Simeon's *Nunc Dimittis* and in Luke's rendering of the Beatitudes.

Chapter Six is the first of five chapters centered on God's kingdom, a word Yoder Neufeld keeps despite its linguistic and cultural shortcomings. The kingdom is 'a symbol that tells a story' (p. 127), employing both historical and apocalyptic elements: Israel's track record with kingship, her continuing hope for messianic justice, and the potential for dramatic intervention and cosmic renewal shape Jesus' presentation of God's reign as both a present and future reality. The author returns to the already/not yet distinction when he discusses kingdom ethics; for now, he emphasizes the symbol's relational and comprehensive scope, and advances to Jesus' announcement of the kingdom, moving from John's baptism to the testing and the selection of twelve disciples closest to Jesus. Yoder Neufeld's seventh chapter profiles the Baptist as a mysterious 'bridge figure', a prophet whose language of indictment is symbolically loaded. Jesus' baptism may carry christological elements inserted later, but the confirmation of divine agency is undoubtedly authentic. Agency is pivotal again in the desert testing, as Jesus refuses the 'perks' but maintains the core of messianic identity. The Twelve, the interior within larger circles of Jesus-followers of widely varying profiles, further illustrate the kind of kingdom Jesus proclaimed. Variations between the Gospels are again handled with great respect: for the differences between Matthew and Luke regarding the birth narrative and the order of Satan's tests, Yoder Neufeld treats Matthew first so as not to confuse readers who may be new to the Bible's structure.

Chapters Eight to Ten complete the kingdom-oriented cycle, with Jesus *teaching*, *enacting*, and *living* the kingdom. Yoder Neufeld explores parables according to their metaphorical or allegorical teaching *function*, startling and forcing a response from the audience; their assorted *types*, from 'parables of recovery' in Luke 15 to those that communicate God's generous grace, the urgency of judgment, or the impact of economic decisions; their intended *effects*, both spiritual and

social, ‘sifting’ the audience in pronouncing grace and judgment or alerting them to injustice; and their *relation*, sometimes surprising and even darkly comedic, to the kingdom. Yoder Neufeld uses the interpretive analogy of the joke, challenging the listener to develop his or her sense of humour, to help the reader draw comparisons to familiar communicative modes. Healing, exorcism, and food comprise kingdom-enactment: while these urgent actions may meet immediate needs, they are also symbolically laden, and modeled for Jesus’ followers, calling them to similar enacting roles. In a point reminiscent of Paul Anderson’s work, Yoder Neufeld argues that even in John, where many of the Synoptic miracles are absent, the content of kingdom language remains; and like the Synoptics, John focuses on the generosity, eschatological expectation, and scandalous company that characterized Jesus at meal-time. The Sermon on the Mount (or Plain, with corresponding redaction-critical remarks) offers a kingdom-life manual, going beyond ethics to encoded obedience, a series of intensifications of Torah. Jesus’ followers, like Yoder Neufeld’s readers, are offered while ‘in school’ an ethic in force for the present and the future. Strict commands show the seriousness of covenant-violation; and even mutual hatred of enemies, the apparent heart of loyalty to that covenant, is recast to portray God as the ultimate lover of enemies. The Lord’s Prayer, born in instruction but liturgically shaped, indicates the Sermon’s overall fusion of holiness and hospitality. Ironically, Yoder Neufeld comments, this kingdom is one that comes for the marginalized—yet allegiance can press the kingdom’s own adherents into the margins.

Though the sources conflict enough that they may be referred to as Passion narratives in the plural, the Gospel writers all agree that Jesus’ death represented a miscarriage of justice. Working from a variety of oral sources or perhaps an earlier written account, the authors present Jesus’ anointing and the Last Supper as allusive events, and Peter and Judas as disturbing mirror images. Irony is amplified in Jesus’ final week, and listeners are expected to be biblically informed. Yoder Neufeld renames the Temple cleansing a ‘demonstration’, including it among the eleventh chapter’s vocabulary terms, accentuating its function as a prophetic act of outraged protest, while decrying its use in condoning violence. But who killed Jesus? The question of culpability allows the author to consider the meaning of Jesus’ death for the writers, showing their attempts, within reflective applications of Scripture, to transform the meaning of the cross from failure to success, drawing

on the perversions of justice from Isaiah 53. Avoiding forensic and formulaic fallacies in interpreting the cross, the author names several embryonic atonement motifs as striking metaphors or parables of God's love.

Love gives way to vindication, as Jesus' resurrection becomes the core of hopes for the resurrection of believers and a renewed cosmos. Mark's version is minimal, open-ended; Matthew caps his collected stories of the resurrection with the Great Commission; Luke moves from the tomb (though Luke's recurring 'two men' device is one of many details that Yoder Neufeld is constrained to leave out) to Easter appearances, Pentecost and the Ascension; John, with the additional chapter added later, singles out individual disciples who adopt the messianic mission. Also considered are Acts 1, 1 Corinthians 15, evidence for the resurrection, and the event's meaning as part of the basis for faith. The final chapter, 'Jesus—Christ and Lord', follows the development of Christology through early confessional materials. Here Yoder Neufeld leaves the Gospels to evaluate several key confessional titles for their staying power and their reflection of Jesus' humanity and divinity. It is surprising not to see more references here to 2 Corinthians (cited only three times in the volume). If not as early as other confessional materials, it certainly predates the Gospels, and would cement Yoder Neufeld's case for the combined force of central christological titles, such as the preaching of Jesus as simultaneously 'Christ and Lord' in 2 Cor. 4.5 (so Michael Knowles, *We Preach Not Ourselves: Paul on Proclamation* [Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008], pp. 156, 257).

No attempt to 'recover' Jesus can be completely objective; Yoder Neufeld openly admits as much soon after he begins. A brief self-introduction models honesty in approaching Scripture as both scholar and believer; the author's Canadian Mennonite background offers points of access to Jesus very different from those of some readers. Some educators may want to use this honesty to their advantage in the classroom, asking students to identify ways in which Yoder Neufeld's Anabaptist bias becomes evident in the course of his study, perhaps discovering their own unconscious biases as they read. The effects themselves are fascinating; I furnish three examples here. First, Yoder Neufeld sees discipleship neglected in the early creeds: if these had included emphases from Jesus' life and teaching (love of enemies; taking up one's cross), might history have been peaceably different? Second: the

section on ethical kingdom-living contains extensive comments on the complex balance of motivation between resistance and nonresistance to violence, consistent with Yoder Neufeld's experience in peace and conflict studies. Third, and perhaps most surprising, he characterizes kingdom proclamation as 'nothing less than combat', marked by confrontation and hostility; he later writes, 'Implicitly, resurrection is about revolution, about the bringing to an end of injustice, oppression, poverty—death', framing this opposition against Rome's Empire (pp. 191, 287). Such severity startles at first—but it demonstrates deep commitment to the church as God's alternative community, a perspective argued with conviction, which readers must either come to share, or articulate the reasons why they do not.

Matthew Forrest Lowe
McMaster Divinity College