

Jesus according to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels. By Darrell L. Bock. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002, 704 pp. \$39.99.

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John Ciardi wrote in the preface to his translation of Dante's *Inferno*, "I should acknowledge a debt of borrowed courage to all other translators of Dante; without their failures I should never have attempted my own." With these words Ciardi recognizes that his translation, which has been hailed as a spectacular achievement, in fact fails to capture the sublimity of Dante's poetry. If all translations of Dante's poem are failures, how much more so all books on Jesus. Since so many cherish Jesus (and their own understandings of what the Gospels indicate), anything short of his very presence is bound to disappoint. We can thank Bock for his courage in undertaking this task.

We begin with three questions: for whom is this book written? What is this book's thesis? And what kind of book is this? In answer to the first question, Bock writes for students and pastors (15), answering the second, and hinting at the third, Bock states, "This book is not a technical historical Jesus study. It seeks rather to argue that a coherent portrait of Jesus emerges from the canonical Gospels . . ." (17). Bock helpfully restates and reinforces his thesis, that the picture of Jesus in the Gospels is coherent, throughout the book. For instance, he writes, "My basic contention is that the coherence of this portrait emerges and commends itself as one that gives unique insight into who Jesus is and was" (48).

Answering the question of what kind of book this is transitions us into description of the book's plan and contents. Bock assures the reader that "this approach is not strictly like a harmony, which seeks to reconstruct a chronological flow to Jesus' ministry. Nor is it like a typical 'life of Christ,' which often builds off of a harmony" (46). What, then, is this book? It seems to be primarily a commentary on the Synopsis.

The book has four parts. The first briefly overviews each Gospel, providing an outline of each Gospel, highlighting the major themes, and touching on the introductory questions of authorship, date etc (44 pp.). The second part amounts to a commentary on every incident in the Synoptic Gospels (360 pp.). The third part is a look at "Jesus according to John" (150 pp.) and part four presents "A Theological Portrait of Jesus" (90 pp.).

The basic thesis of the book, then, seems to be that the Gospels present a coherent portrait of Jesus. The length of the book results from Bock's desire to cover all of the Gospel material. This feature is both the book's strength and its weakness. The strong point is that here in one volume is a defense of the coherence of the portrait of Jesus found in the four Gospels, and every incident the Gospels record is covered. The weak point is that covering every incident limits the detail into which Bock can go, making the book more useful for those being introduced to academic study of the Gospels. Further, since the book covers *all* of the Gospels, some points are redundant. Bock is strongest when dealing with Luke, since he obviously knows that material best. The book is well indexed, and so will readily serve as a reference work on the Gospels.

Bock constantly alludes to, summarizes, or directly quotes the Gospel accounts he is dealing with. This is a good practice when writing a book entitled, *Jesus according to Scripture*, but, more often than not, the Dallas professor neglects to give the verse references for the statements cited.

Bock states, “None of the Gospels names its author” (24). This is technically true, in that none of the Gospels explicitly states its author in the body of its narrative (though John comes close). Bock later wrongly cites Martin Hengel on the point that the roots of the Gospel superscriptions (According to Matthew, According to Mark, etc.) “go back to the early-to-mid-second century” (29). In fact, in the article Bock cites, Hengel argues against a second century date for the superscriptions, placing them firmly in the first century. Hengel writes, “The titles of the Gospels are by no means late products from the second century but must be very old. With a considerable degree of probability they can be traced back to the time of the origin of the four Gospels between 69 and 100 and are connected with their circulation in the communities” (“The Titles of the Gospels and the Gospel of Mark,” in *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, trans. J. Bowden [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985], p. 84).

If the reader is looking for a more evangelical version of N. T. Wright’s *Jesus and the Victory of God*, this is not the book to read. Nor is this the book to read if the reader is looking for something focused on Jesus, like R. H. Stein’s *Jesus the Messiah*; and if the reader is looking for technical, exegetical discussion of the Gospels, better conservative commentaries on each Gospel are available. If, however, the reader is looking for a book that walks through the Synopsis arguing that a coherent picture of Jesus emerges from the four Gospels, *Jesus according to Scripture* is that book.

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