

James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, Christianity in the Making, Vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003. xvii+ 1019 pp. \$55.00, hardcover.

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James D. G. Dunn, Lightfoot Professor of Divinity at the University of Durham, England, has embarked upon a three volume project titled “Christianity in the Making.” This first volume is on Jesus.

The book is divided into five parts. Dunn opens with a discussion of “Faith and the Historical Jesus. Here he re-tells the story of the rise of unbelieving critical research into Jesus and early Christianity. Part 2, “From the Gospels to Jesus,” seeks once again to reconstruct what we can really know about Jesus from the Gospels. Having sifted the material, Dunn then addresses the questions of Jesus’ Mission (part 3), Jesus’ self-understanding (part 4), and Jesus’ death, resurrection, and remembrance among his followers (part 5).

It is impossible to interact with a 1,000 page book point by point in a short review, so here I will focus on two statements Dunn makes that raise significant questions about his approach. These two statements are related, but I will consider them separately before exploring their combined implications.

First, Dunn writes that it is “the ‘lust for certainty’ which leads to fundamentalism’s absolutising of its own faith claims and dismissal of all others” (105). There are not a few problems with this statement. Dunn is advocating “Probability Not Certainty” (102), but to caricature those who pursue certainty as “lustful” and “fundamentalistic” is more offensive than it is persuasive. Is anything other than “relativism” now “fundamentalism”? Dunn argues that faith always has an element of doubt, and suggests that “The language of faith uses words like ‘confidence’ and ‘assurance’ rather than ‘certainty’” (104). He cites the fact that the NRSV only uses the word “certainty” once, but the wildly popular NIV translates Hebrews 11:1 as follows: “Now faith is *being sure* of what we hope for and *certain* of what we do not see.” Dunn suggests that “the ‘definition of faith’ in Heb. 11.1 is much disputed as to its meaning and does not bring added clarity to the issue” (104 n. 15). But BDAG states of the word the NIV translates “certain” that “conviction” regarding unseen things is in view and that “faith means *to be sure* about unseen things” (BDAG, 315, emphasis added throughout). Probability will keep scholars wrangling for their views, but only certainty will send missionaries to the ends of the earth where they place themselves and their families in danger of martyrdom (cf. Heb 11:37).

The same problems apply to Dunn’s apparent dismissal of “fundamentalism’s absolutising of its own faith claims and dismissal of all others” (105). Jesus said, “He who is not for me is against me” (Matt 12:30), a rather absolute claim. Only certainty that Christianity is the only way of salvation will send young people to the Muslim world seeking the lost. Dunn seems to suggest that the view that the Christian religion presents absolute faith claims is not Christianity but “fundamentalism.” At one time the word “fundamentalism” had connotations of anti-intellectualism. If this holds today, Dunn has lumped all who recognize Christianity’s exclusive truth claims in with those who are not willing to grapple with cerebral complexities. This is unfair to thoughtful Christians who are convinced that the Bible presents an exclusive religion.

It would seem that, rather than this being a “fundamentalistic” interpretation of Christianity, Dunn has departed from orthodox Christianity on this point, which contends earnestly that the faith in Jesus once for all entrusted to the saints is the only way for humans to experience right standing before God. This is not an anti-intellectual position; rather, it is a biblically consistent position. Christians do not claim exhaustive knowledge, but we do claim that we can have true knowledge. We are not omniscient, but we can be certain.

Second, Dunn writes that “Few if any today assume that the written sources take the reader back directly to the Jesus who worked and taught in Galilee three or more decades earlier” (173). This may be true for scholars in some circles, but it is not true for those in the Evangelical Theological Society, the Institute for Biblical Research, or the Tyndale Fellowship (and see esp. the IBR Jesus Group). Many prominent evangelicals, acknowledging that the Gospels were written from a faith perspective intending to persuade and win converts, nevertheless maintain that the evangelists faithfully and accurately present Jesus as he was (see the works, among others, of E. Earle Ellis, D. A. Carson, Andreas Köstenberger, Craig Blomberg, Darrell Bock, and David Wenham). Aside from this sound historical work defending the reliability of the Gospels, historic Christianity has always held that God inspired the authors of Scripture and guarded their accounts from error. Historically and theologically, then, there are good reasons for believing that when we read the four canonical Gospels, we read true accounts of what Jesus said and did. Dunn not only concludes that the Gospels are not error free, he comes to the position that even Jesus got it wrong (see p. 479).

I suspect that the two points discussed above are related to the way that Dunn summarizes the history of research on the historical Jesus. Dunn omits any discussion of the responses to atheistic attempts at NT scholarship, so that the reader is left with the impression that once scholars finally figured out how to be rigorous about doing history, everyone who employed seriously critical methodology came to realize the unreliability of the gospels as sources for a life of Jesus. Dunn neglects any mention of those who wrote on the life of Jesus from a conservative stance—building their conclusions on the gospels rather than first rejecting the gospels then creating Jesus in their own image. Thus there is no mention of Bernhard Weiss’s 1882 *Life of Jesus*. Weiss is neither discussed nor indexed, nor does he appear in Dunn’s bibliography. Even more glaring is the total absence of any reference to Adolf Schlatter. When scholars were agreed that the “Jesus of history” could not be equated with the “Christ of faith,” Schlatter took critical orthodoxy head on with his *The History of the Christ*. Using the most exacting and critical historical methods, but treating the gospels as reliable historical documents, Schlatter convincingly responded to atheistic NT scholars who sought to establish the fiction that Jesus as he really was in history was not the Christ in whom the early church believed. Like Weiss, Schlatter is not discussed, not indexed, and not given the honor of appearing on Dunn’s bibliography. The reader of *Jesus Remembered* is thus given a severely imbalanced treatment of the history of Jesus research.

This overlooking of the history of conservative scholarship continues when Dunn seeks to ascertain what we can know about Jesus from the gospels. Here there is no mention of two important books by Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, and *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel*. Dunn, therefore, uses “John’s Gospel as a source, but mostly as a secondary source to supplement or corroborate the testimony of the Synoptic

tradition” (167). This is standard critical practice, but to continue this practice without engaging the work of those like Blomberg and A. C. Headlam, whose *The Fourth Gospel as History* (1948) is also ignored, is revealing. To treat a *primary* source such as the Fourth Gospel as a *secondary* source results, at best, in a truncated picture of Jesus.

I do agree with Dunn’s conclusion that “the ‘default setting’ of the literary paradigm”—the view that the authors of the Synoptic gospels were literarily dependant upon each other (usually taking the form of Matthew and Luke depending on the literary exemplars Mark and Q)—“is far too limited to explain the complexities of the Jesus tradition” (336). Anyone who has underlined through the Synopsis can see that the kinds of differences between the Synoptic Gospels and the sheer number of these differences scarcely permits the conclusion that, for instance, Luke was copying Mark and only making changes to suit his emphases.

Dunn’s project, “Christianity in the Making,” seems to run roughly parallel to N. T. Wright’s “Christian Origins and the Question of God.” Wright’s general approach is more robustly critical of the critics, and thereby Wright’s work is healthier than Dunn’s. By Dunn’s own admission his project is very similar to Peter Barnett’s *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity* (2 n. 11). Barnett focuses on the primary sources, discussing the actual text of the NT; while Dunn provides vast discussions of the last 200 years of left-leaning NT scholarship. A more balanced treatment of the history of research can be found in Gerald Bray’s *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*. Those seeking a more succinct and conservative account of the historical Jesus and early Christianity would profit from Barnett. Historical studies of Jesus are also available in something of an abundance: Adolf Schlatter’s *The History of the Christ* has recently been translated and re-issued; Larry Hurtado’s *Lord Jesus Christ* looks at early Christian worship of Jesus; and the concise but still strong *Jesus the Messiah* by Robert Stein remains helpful. James D. G. Dunn is a major figure in current scholarship, so scholars and Ph.D. students are in a sense obligated to be aware of his work, but unless one is pursuing serious scholarly research on Jesus, any of these other volumes would better repay the time and money invested.

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