



Reviews

JESUS: A PORTRAIT by Gerald O'Collins SJ, *Darton, Longman and Todd*, London, 2008, pp. xvi + 246, £12.95 pbk

Gerald O'Collins is one of those rare breeds: a systematic theologian who has been able, and willing, to keep abreast with developments in biblical scholarship. Perhaps more famous in New Testament circles for his significant books on the Resurrection, in this volume he widens his sights to incorporate also the earthly life and ministry. Yet this is no predictable 'Jesus book'. O'Collins takes as his starting point St Augustine's meditation on divine beauty in his homily on Psalm 45, as the lens through which to explore the story of Jesus: 'he [Christ] is beautiful in heaven; beautiful on earth; beautiful in the womb; beautiful in his parents' arms . . . beautiful on the cross; beautiful in the sepulchre; beautiful in heaven' (p. 2). This provides the setting for the remainder of the book, in which O'Collins explores various 'moments' in Christ's life as manifestations of the divine beauty. He attempts to do what few writers of Jesus books dare to do: facilitate a 'face-to-face encounter' with the Jesus witnessed to by the evangelists.

This in no way means that O'Collins has overlooked or bypassed his recent scholarly predecessors. On the contrary, he is far from naïve about the difficulties of his task. He acknowledges the elusive mystery of the human person, noting at one point that the nature of our sources makes it hard (though not impossible) to penetrate the inner life of Jesus of Nazareth. In tackling the sources themselves, he accepts and utilises the 'three stage' theory of gospel formation typical of mainstream historical criticism (Jesus – oral tradition – evangelists). However, he exhibits rather more historical optimism than the form critics regarding the 'second stage'. The influence of Richard Bauckham's recent and provocative *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, and James Dunn's stimulating exploration of orality in *Jesus Remembered*, is pervasive and gratefully acknowledged. Simply put, they remind us that there never was an 'uninterpreted Jesus' (Dunn), and that a good case can be made for the gospels having preserved reliable eyewitness testimony (Bauckham). This reviewer was also reminded of Luke Timothy Johnson, who has asked some very searching questions of traditional 'quests' of the historical Jesus, not least the colourless non-apocalyptic version emanating from the American Jesus Seminar. In both one detects the conviction that there must be a more satisfying alternative to that sharply posed dichotomy between 'the historical Jesus' and the 'kerygmatic Christ'. Surprisingly, Johnson is not one of O'Collins's conversation partners.

In the unfolding portrait which O'Collins paints, Jesus's original proclamation of the Kingdom is envisaged as containing both present and future dimensions, and revealing a person profoundly steeped in Israel's Scriptures yet finely attuned to the world around him. O'Collins make the powerful observation that, despite the New Testament emphasis upon Jesus's proclamation of the kingdom of God, 'King' (so prevalent in the Old Testament) is frequently displaced by 'Father' as Christ's preferred divine title. While generally avoiding the infancy narratives as precarious territory for historical reconstruction, he is nonetheless willing to

speculate on the equally-shadowy pre-ministry years, as the formative period during which Jesus must have built up that rich stock of images which permeate his parables: 'During the years in Nazareth Jesus had been intensely alive to his world and what was happening between human beings and their constantly loving God' (p. 20). He rightly notes the central place of the miracles in Jesus's ministry, a body of tradition so pervasive that even the most sceptical of contemporary historians would find it difficult to deny its antiquity. But instead of getting side-tracked into the 'Did they happen?' question, he is much more interested in their meaning for us: he teases out from the healings tradition four major themes of deliverance, forgiveness of sins, light, and life.

In O'Collins's view, the 'trinitarian' face of the Kingdom inaugurated by Jesus is perhaps best exemplified in the parables he taught. What kind of mind or imagination, he speculates, lies behind such stories? At this point, the criteria for distinguishing between the 'three levels', so carefully set out in the opening chapters, are far from evident. Given his particular concentration on the distinctly Lucan parables of the Good Samaritan, the Rich Man and Lazarus, and the Lost Son (to which O'Collins devotes a whole chapter), one might equally ask 'Whose imagination?' That of Jesus or of Luke? His profound reflections on the Prodigal Son are full of theological insight and homiletic potential, and his instinct may well be right that we gain here a particular glimpse into the heart and mind of the Master. But it still requires careful methodological underpinning, of the sort O'Collins employs so adroitly elsewhere (e.g. in his treatment of the Beatitudes, or the Lord's Prayer).

Most of the time, O'Collins is rather more restrained. He believes that Jesus anticipated his own death, but finds no clear evidence that he interpreted it in the light of Isaiah 53. His account of the 'moment' of the Passion presumes that we cannot do better than the evangelists themselves in exploring the mystery of Christ's suffering and death. Following Bauckham, he majors here on two complementary accounts: of Mark (preserving second-hand the Petrine testimony) and of the Beloved Disciple (a close associate of Jesus but not one of the Twelve). Paradoxically, it is the one gospel springing from an eyewitness – the Gospel of John – which exhibits the greatest impressionistic creativity. For O'Collins, however, this is not a problem: 'A lifelong process of understanding and interpretation, along with the abiding presence of the risen Jesus himself, allowed the beloved disciple to gain ever deeper insights into the meaning of the events in which he had participated' (p. 201). Indeed, unlike many of his fellow Jesus-questers, he does not conclude the story there, but includes narratives of Easter appearances to provide fuller insight into the Christ who continues to come to his followers.

This is a readable and penetrating book, which draws upon artists, poets and novelists as well as patristic authors and contemporary exegetes to illuminate its subject. At times, some might find O'Collins over-optimistic, and guilty of not applying his criteria as systematically as his opening chapters suggest he might. Yet again and again, one feels that his instincts are sure, and that he brings us closer to the 'real Jesus' than do many rival questers. In the end, we are left not with a Jesus lying dead on a mortuary slab, to be dissected by the disinterested historian. Rather, we encounter the living Lord, in all his elusiveness and complexity. Moreover, as O'Collins reminds us early in his book, knowing another is itself an exercise in self-knowledge. This book is ultimately an invitation to a transforming encounter with the One who knows us more deeply than we know ourselves.

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