

BOOK REVIEW

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

DUSTIN SMITH

James Dunn has embarked on a trilogy of books in which he hopes to cover the first 120 years of Christianity. *Jesus Remembered* is his first volume in the series. This massive tome (over 1000 pages) has all of the characteristics of Jimmy Dunn: honest and critical scholarship matched with extensive footnotes and references. It is well written and very well organized, building on foundations that are clearly and succinctly laid out point by point. For those who enjoyed *Christology in the Making* and *The Theology of the Apostle Paul*, this will keep your mouth watering.

Dunn begins his book with a review of critical Jesus scholarship over the past 200 years. His main criticism is that scholars in the past have failed in their methodologies in two vital areas: they ignored the fact that Jesus was a Jew (and therefore needs to be firmly set in his Jewish context), and they come at the text from a non-faith perspective (failing to understand that the gospels were written by believers to believers — authorial intent being the vital missing piece).

In a section entitled “History, Hermeneutics and Faith” Dunn makes the pointed statements that every exegete, both at the lay and scholarly level, needs to hear. He argues that “Hermeneutics is best conceived as a dialogue where both partners must be allowed to speak in their own terms, rather than as an interrogation of the text where the text is only allowed to answer the questions asked. To put the same point another way, for a dialogue to be fruitful there must also be genuine engagement of the interpreter with the text” (p. 124).

One of the biggest contributions that Dunn brings to the historical Jesus debate is his fresh approach at explaining the variations of the Jesus tradition in the Synoptics. Many scholars have been content with the two-source hypothesis, maintaining that Matthew and Luke derived

material from Mark and Q. Dunn cites multiple examples to show that the evidence time and time again does not fit this paradigm. He shows that the oral traditions and stories about Jesus were communicated in a way in which key details were maintained, while non-essential details were shifted at times. One particular test case is the Last Supper speech in which Jesus communicates to the disciples about the Passover and the New Covenant. This was first written *not* in a gospel, but in 1 Corinthians. Mark is clearly not literarily dependent on Paul, and shows that the tradition, in its main content, was faithfully passed on. He writes that “developments in the Jesus tradition were consistent with the earlier traditions of the remembered Jesus” (p. 224).

Chapter 9 is the most informative because Dunn spends 71 pages giving honest and thought-provoking details about the historical context in which Jesus lived. This is the finest work that I have seen on this crucial and often overlooked part of modern biblical studies. The reconstruction of 2nd Temple Judaism is absolutely amazing; well documented and footnoted. Dunn makes the point (rightly) that Jesus was a Jew who absolutely must be situated in the correctly understood Judaism of his day. I would argue that this chapter alone is worth the price of the book.

When he gets to the kingdom of God theme, which was obviously the core of Jesus’ words and deeds, the discussion is fascinating. Even where I don’t agree with him I have to give him credit for working all of the appropriate material over, giving the major options serious and critical thought, and engaging all of the major voices in modern scholarship. His section on the kingdom of God is over 100 pages long!

Dunn also gives his latest thoughts on the Christological question since his *Christology in the Making* written over 20 years ago. This chapter is 90 pages long, filled with rich material and well laid-out argumentation. The Psalm 110:1 material is heavily important in the disciples’ understanding of who Jesus was and is, Dunn states firmly. Dunn goes beyond citing and defending proof texts to a wider view of Jesus’ actions as key Christological clues which can no longer be ignored when speaking about the nature of Jesus Christ. On a rather positive note, he boldly proclaims that “the Nicene Creed represents a crystallization of a *process* stretching over nearly three centuries. Our concern here is with the beginning of that process” (p. 708, italics mine).

Those who have a negative view of scholars can rest easy in that Dunn explicitly professes faith in the resurrection of Jesus (p. 879). He does however have some doubt about the reliability of some material in the gospel of John. At times he states that John modifies material in order

to make a wider theological argument (Jesus being called the “Lamb of God,” etc.). In my opinion, for John to take material and to modify it to suit his evangelistic and apologetic purposes proves that he actually *had original material to modify*.

Although I don’t agree with all of Dunn’s conclusions, his approach is very stimulating, his methods are solid, and his questions are thought-provoking. He has obviously done his homework over a lifetime of modern biblical scholarship. I found that quite a few points that he raises really got me thinking in ways that I never considered. Even though this book (primarily) is Dunn’s attempt at the historical Jesus studies, I found that the background which he brings to the table in order to better set the Jesus of history into his place is very enlightening. At times I couldn’t put the book down, and at other times I had to slow down to check his key bits of exegesis for myself. Fans of James Dunn will not be disappointed with this book. Readers will be enriched in their understanding of Jesus’ historical background.