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Who was Jesus?

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Admirable, from this reviewer's perspective are the rich and comprehensive studies compassing a volume of modest length. This Bible Handbook is a helpful review for scholars and pastors already acquainted with Old Testament Studies and also a worthwhile project for those engaged in these efforts for the first time.

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Who Was Jesus?

N.T. Wright
Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1992
107 pages

This slender volume is primarily an extended and occasionally ascerbic review of three recent and controversial books about Jesus. It is rounded out by an introductory chapter which sketches the history of Historical Jesus research, and a conclusion which sets the frame for Wright's own major work on Jesus.

The first chapter introduces the reader to the problem of the Historical Jesus and to the scholars who have proposed solutions, from Reimarus over two hundred years ago to recent serious monographs. This is a serviceable introduction to the issues. However, like any attempt to summarize major works in a few paragraphs, it loses important nuances. Especially regarding the more recent works by Crossan and Mack, the reader is advised to consult the original volumes and other reviews rather than relying entirely on Wright's summaries. One can easily see that Wright's well known attempt to divide Historical Jesus research into three "quests", and to place Crossan, Mack, and the Jesus Seminar into the second of the three, is inaccurate.

Chapter two discusses Barbara Thiering's hypothesis, which has been popularized in her book *Jesus the Man: A New Interpretation from the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Thiering claims that the Dead Sea Scrolls give us direct information about the first generation of Christianity, despite recent unambiguous carbon dating which places them well before the Christian era. She also claims that both the scrolls and the Gospels were written in a kind of secret code that she alone has been able to decipher. Among her "findings" are that Jesus was not only married and had children, but divorced and remarried. His death and resurrection were faked. Thiering's hypothesis is so far into the fringes of the academy that one cannot in good conscience recommend reading her work, except perhaps as a curiosity. Wright's review of Thiering, though, is worth reading, in case you encounter someone who might have stumbled across her work and asks you questions about it. Her work does have appeal to those who enjoy conspiracy theories.

Chapter three is about A.N. Wilson's book *Jesus*. Wilson is not an academic but a popular writer, which is both a strength and a weakness. He attempts to render established scholarship about Jesus comprehensible and relevant, but he does so in a way that is sensationalistic and frequently inaccurate. His agenda is to debunk traditional Christianity. Wright correctly identifies those portions of Wilson's book that are sound, and colourfully takes Wilson to task when he has misused the evidence. As is the case with many debunking popularizers, Wilson wants to demonstrate that Jesus could not have been God's son. This allows Wright to make the point that the Christian claim says more about God than it does about Jesus: "This is the really scary thing that writers like A. N. Wilson never come to grips with... that the one true God might actually look like Jesus... a shrewd Palestinian Jewish villager who drank wine with his friends, agonized over the plight of his people, taught in strange stories and pungent aphorisms, and was executed by the occupying forces" (p. 52).

In chapter four Wright discusses Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong's popular and controversial book *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Re-thinks the Birth of Jesus*. Spong continues his recent work of "rescuing the Bible from fundamentalism" by showing the mythological nature of the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke. Spong wants to show believers how to take the Bible seriously without taking it literally. Wright agrees with Spong's attempt to debunk a naive supernaturalism, but he departs from Spong at several methodological points. As with Wilson, Wright criticizes Spong for assuming Platonic or 18th century philosophical ideas about God, rather than starting with the more concrete, Biblical understanding of God.

The final chapter paves the way for Wright's reconstruction of the Historical Jesus. Wright believes that Jesus saw himself in the style of the ancient Hebrew prophets, calling the nation to repentance before God used the power of Rome to smash the rebellious Israel. In a departure from most current scholarship, Wright trusts Mark's account that Jesus foresaw his own death and resurrection, and imagined himself as the catalyst for the coming judgement. In an echo of Pauline theology, Wright even suggests that Jesus thought his death could in some way avert the punishment due to the nation. At this point most scholars on this side of the Atlantic will demur that Wright has gone far beyond what the historical evidence will support.

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