
Review of James G. Crossley, *Reading the New Testament: Contemporary Approaches*. London: Routledge, 2010.

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Crossley begins his Introduction by urging his readers not to read the book as “a series of definitive ways in which to read this collection of texts,” but rather as “a guide to different ways in which readers can approach the texts” (p. 1). He explains that one of the primary goals of the book is to introduce readers (viz. those who, by station or lot, are just now wading into the academic study of the New Testament) to a broader range of frameworks for studying the New Testament than one typically encounters in standard introductory textbooks and, going further, to equip them to search for even more ways of reading this body of literature. Whether for those in the target audience who are preparing for advanced study of the New Testament, or for those who will never again read this material academically upon completion of the course for which this serves as a required textbook, I think these are admirable goals, insofar as an emphasis on ways of reading rather than mastery of content or method is sure to do both groups a greater service.

The book consists of twelve chapters. Following the Introduction, which succinctly outlines the plan of the book and Crossley’s description of this body of literature known as the New Testament, the remaining eleven chapters are divided into four parts. Part One (“History”) provides the overarching perspective of the volume—namely, that history is inescapable, whether it be the history behind the text or the histories of the text’s various receptions and appropriations. The first chapter in this section, “Reading Historical Documents Historically,” introduces the topic of history itself, and then describes each of the traditional disciplinary methods (viz. source, form, redaction, literary, and social scientific criticisms). In chapter 3, Crossley turns his attention to “Contemporary Historical Approaches,” such as ideological and postcolonial criticisms, which are characterized by a fundamental concern with matters of identity and difference, viz. “the ways in which people view themselves, relate to others, and negotiate perceived similarities and differences with others in the world” (p. 33). Chapter 4 illustrates how the approaches of the two previous chapters can be brought to bear on a selection of biblical text. Crossley chooses Mark 6:17-29 as his example, and leads readers through a layered analysis and appraisal of the passage in a manner that highlights what each of these methods does and does not do, and how they relate to one another (an exercise Crossley performs repeatedly throughout the volume, to great effect). To conclude Part One, Crossley devotes chapter 5 to the quest for the historical Jesus. Now firmly located within a much broader (and theoretically astute) context than is customary with standard introductions to the New Testament, Crossley focuses on the foundational criteria of historical Jesus research, again with an eye toward the discourse of scholars utilizing these analytical rubrics, and then takes up the very difficult (and arguably irresolvable) question of the resurrection. Recognizing that while we seem incapable of determining with any degree of certainty that the resurrection did or did not happen, nearly all agree that *something* happened historically to generate the various accounts of that event. Therefore, Crossley argues in favor of leaving it at that and moving on to “develop a broader explanation of Christian origins without worrying about whether or not this constitutes proof for atheists or conservative Christians ... thereby channelling more intellectual energy into historical explanations of Christian origins” (p. 69).

Part Two (“Revolutionary Origins of Christian Beliefs?”) consists of three chapters that deal with the formation and development of Christian perspectives on key ideas—namely, Christology, the Jewish Law, faith, and salvation—in relation to the emergence of Christianity as a distinct religious identity. As he did in Part One, Crossley moves deftly between the primary material and scholarship on it, placing both in context, and then raising questions that readers of *The Bible and Critical Theory*

are sure to deem more interesting, more productive, and, ultimately, more important: that is, questions concerning the conditions that give rise to discourses in and around the Bible, whether the focus is on the formation of early christologies or the recent interest in Paul on the part of continental philosophers.

After dealing with matters of definition (chapter 9) and method (chapter 10), Part Three (“Reception”) takes up the issue of “How to Read New Testament Scholarship” (chapter 11). This entire section is premised on the notion that, in Crossley’s view, reception history might well be the future of New Testament studies, because “how much interpretation of the same small collection of texts can be done without coming close to exhausting the options or be doomed to repeating old arguments over and over, with only the highly specialist analysis of the smallest detail being left”? (p. 117)

Part Four (“Extracts from New Testament Scholarship”) follows very naturally from the preceding section, and consists of four short readings from Justin Meggitt (“Living Standards in the Ancient World”), Stephen Moore (“Postcolonialism and the Book of Revelation”), Markus Bockmuehl (“Reception/Effective History”), and Shawn Kelley (“Rudolf Bultmann and Reading Scholarship in Context”), each of which parallel and illustrate, in various ways, the themes running through the four sections of Crossley’s book. This is a wonderful resource, especially for a book as concise as this one. This section is what really allows the book to function as more than an introduction to the primary literature of the New Testament, but also as a critical foreword to the primary literature of New Testament scholarship.

It should be clear by now that *Reading the New Testament* is a remarkable blend of essential introductory material, history of interpretation, and critical reflection on the larger discourses (social, cultural, political, ideological) that are manifest in and around both. This, in my judgment, is the book’s greatest strength. Crossley has provided readers with both a clear sense of where and how things are in New Testament studies (versus where and how they must be because scholarly tradition so dictates) and a critical guide to reading that state of affairs in relation to questions of paramount importance, not the least of which concerns the place of the Bible and the study thereof in the academy. It is a very smart and useful book in that regard, and one that could provide a handy tool to allow for any New Testament course to perform double duty.

The comprehensiveness that would ordinarily be afforded students in a traditional introductory course is potentially sacrificed by Crossley’s approach, but one could equally argue that *Reading the New Testament* is actually more comprehensive insofar as it so wonderfully contextualizes the New Testament and biblical criticism in relation to larger discourses. I therefore find myself conflicted as to whether this volume would serve best as a primary or a supplemental textbook.

In an effort to see how well Crossley’s book plays with what I perceived to be the intended audience, I vetted two of his chapters with an upper-level undergraduate course on the letters of Paul: chapter 7, “Paul, the Law, Faith, and Salvation: Old Perspectives, New Perspectives, Different Perspectives,” and chapter 8, “Paul’s Revolution for Our Times? Paul and Continental Philosophy.” In conjunction with chapter 7, I had the students read now classic essays by Krister Stendahl and Ernst Käsemann. Students were also required to read Richard Horsley’s Introduction to *Paul and Politics*. The chapters played relatively well. A major reason why, I think, has to do with the fact that students (my students at least—undergraduate students at a small, private liberal arts college) often have tremendous difficulty understanding and appreciating what is at stake in so many of the scholarly debates that constitute the warp and woof of our respective academic disciplines, obsessed as they are with such seeming *minutiae* and with arguing over things that appear so obvious. Crossley does an outstanding job of helping students to see the point (which is frequently a very different point than what might be argued by most New Testament scholars), and to understand the implications and consequences not only of taking a particular position but, more

importantly, of failing or refusing to consider the issue as if doing so were avoidable and the outcome did not matter.

Elsewhere, Crossley has cited with approval Noam Chomsky's argument that "overly complex intellectual language has more to do with creating an intellectual niche to preserve intellectual power" (Crossley 2008, 6). In other words, the unnecessarily complicated jargon that so often characterizes critical theory at best presents an obstacle to one's engagement with that theory, preventing those who most stand to benefit from the critiques that theory articulates from being able even to understand it. At worst, it makes one think (potentially at least) that she is actively effecting change when in fact the academy continues to control the means of intellectual production. Thinking again about my specific professional context (a service department with very few majors at a four-year, private liberal arts college), a constant challenge I face is getting students to read at all, much less engage the material. Crossley's introduction to the New Testament and to the academic study of it does a remarkable job of disarming the protective defenses of the guild. This immensely accessible book will equip students to shape the conversation creatively, rather than simply to be indoctrinated into it.

REFERENCES

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