

Review of James G. Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism*. BibleWorld; Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2012.

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Whereas biblical scholars typically devote most of their effort to analyzing the ancient historical context of the biblical texts, this book targets what Crossley refers to as an Anglo-American neoliberal context of contemporary biblical scholarship itself. Crossley thus continues to break new ground by focusing on the social history of biblical scholarship.¹ As indicated by Che Jesus on the front cover, the work is theoretically informed by Marxist-inspired thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci, David Harvey, Wendy Brown, Noam Chomsky, Edward Herman, and Slavoj Žižek. One of Crossley's main points, to which I will return below, is to show how scholarly writings on Jesus contribute to the masking of power and social realities.

Even if the book, as Crossley initially acknowledges (p. ix), is limited in scope, it has a rich sense to it. Considering that the writings on Jesus during the last forty years (Crossley's choice of time span) are immense, the need to make choices and delimitations is obvious. In terms of actual scholarly works on the historical Jesus, then, Crossley only analyzes a handful (with Wright, Crossan, and Ratzinger sticking out). The purpose, evidently, is not to be comprehensive but rather to open a field of enquiry for future meta-critical studies on biblical scholarship in relation to its contemporary neoliberal context. Such rather harsh demarcations have the positive effect of giving room for intriguing analyses of various discourses where biblical scholarship and the neoliberal context intersect more visibly, viz., biblioblogging, multiculturalism, the new atheism, The Jesus Project, and the Red Tory Christ.

The book has three parts, with the first introducing neoliberalism as a context for biblical scholarship. Crossley here introduces the perspective of Fredric Jameson and his understanding of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism. Although I am not quite persuaded that postmodernism equals a politics of low taxes that benefit the rich, I find the way in which Crossley discusses Marxism and postmodernism helpful. These are two strands of thought that have much in common, not least in terms of power critique, but are nevertheless often seen as incompatible and as being in competition. Although Crossley comes out on the Marxist side (if it is possible to speak of sides here), he is careful not to idealize Marxism, nor to demonize postmodernism. Marxism sometimes involves totalizing claims, he asserts, but on the other hand, he appreciates postmodern thought for, among other things, fuelling anti-war movements. Generally, however, he regards postmodernism as a masking of power (I will return below to the issue of masking that seems to be rather central for the book).

The third chapter opens a new and important area of enquiry: biblioblogging. Apart from being highly relevant in order to understand biblical scholarship in relation to popular culture, the chapter makes for a remarkably entertaining read. Crossley's pointing out how the pseudonymous biblioblogger N.T. Wrong makes visible the intellectual and religious conservatism of the mainstream bibliobloggers is exceptionally thought-provoking. Even if anonymity surely has its problems, Crossley is able to show how bibliobloggers, despite writing without official constraints, nevertheless replicate the trends in the mainstream mass media.

A significant context for Jesus research is introduced in chapter four, which analyzes what Crossley refers to as a neoliberal cult of the individual. The individualist understanding of history celebrates the importance of a freely acting autonomous individual with little attention to material conditions and is keenly illustrated by the (in)famous quote from Margaret Thatcher: "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families." Such an understanding of history,

Crossley argues, is typically reproduced in research on the historical Jesus and is seen most clearly in depictions of Jesus as a “Great Man”, but also, Crossley points out, in the exaggerated interest in factual details instead of approaches that highlight socio-economic conditions in order to understand Jesus and Christian origins.

When I read the book, chapter five was where I put most of my question marks. Crossley here analyzes how the so called Third Quest (he is critical of this designation) interplays with the neoliberal context. More specifically, he discusses the Jesus seminar and its founding figure Robert Funk. This is the perfect image of (neo)liberal scholarship, Crossley thinks; it is democratic, it is pro freedom, and its initiator was a true entrepreneur. With this I would agree. But Crossley also regards this as an expression of postmodernism. Here it becomes more difficult to follow Crossley. How could the Jesus seminar, with their self-secure propositions on what Jesus actually said and did, be labeled postmodern? When I think of postmodern theory and its skepticism towards having access to a meaningful reality apart from textual representations, I would hardly bring the Jesus seminar, and their focus on the man *behind* the text, as an illustrative example. The Jesus seminar, it seems, belongs rather to the older modern (and liberal) trajectory of historical criticism. A more appropriate illustration of a postmodern approach to the historical Jesus, I would argue, is the article by Susan Lochrie Graham and Stephen Moore which brings New Historicism into the Jesus research (Graham and Moore 1997). A reason for this disagreement could be that Crossley slips between discussing postmodernity as a general cultural attitude and postmodernism as an academic, mainly theoretically driven, trajectory.

This is also the chapter where Crossley seems to make the kind of totalizing Marxist claim from which he previously distanced himself. Or does he? Discussing matters of gender and ethnicity, he signals that such issues are not really political since they are (with a quote from Eagleton) “not necessarily anti-capitalist” (p. 92). It does not, however, become clear why engaging in one aspect of power (economic injustice) ought to be seen as political whereas other aspects of power (based on gender and race) are not. In fact, since the book as a whole does not defend such a position, it could also be taken as a tongue-in-cheek proposition that teases the postmodernists not to forget about issues of class.

In Part Two, Crossley offers a few case studies. As he begins with the issue of how Jesus scholars construe the Jewishness of Jesus, he somewhat ironically enters the trajectory of the Other that has been established mainly by postmodern thought. Referring to Žižek’s critique against liberal multiculturalism that accepts the Other without the difficult Otherness, Crossley discusses a tendency of defending a “very Jewish” over against a “not very Jewish” Jesus. Crossley highlights the way in which Jewishness becomes construed in contemporary scholarship by the common critique of Crossan’s Hellenized Jesus that typically is seen as not Jewish enough. But then again, as indicated by Crossley’s reading of N.T. Wright, Jesus can also become *too* Jewish. Considering that the critical scholarship on Jesus, already from its beginning during the late eighteenth century, has been haunted by the question of Jesus’ Jewishness, Crossley’s interpretation of the present state of the question is rather striking: Scholars today tend to regard Jesus as “Jewish but not *that* Jewish” (p. 105). In affiliation with Žižek’s critique of multiculturalism, then, Crossley criticizes Jesus scholars for neglecting the disturbing Otherness of the historical Jesus. At the same time, however, he also stresses, rightly in my view, the importance of opening up the category of Jewishness from what is often too narrow a designation.

In the seventh chapter, two apparently diametrically-opposed scholarly debates on the historical Jesus are analyzed as to their relation to neoliberalism: the atheist-inspired Jesus Project and what Crossley calls the conservative revival under the lead of Richard Bauckham’s *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Bauckham 2006). The Jesus Project became known for its skepticism in relation to the existence of Jesus as a historical person, and characteristically upheld Jesus as essentially a product of early Christian myth-making. The conservative direction, on the other hand, ascribed far reaching

historical credibility to the Gospels by regarding them as eyewitness testimony. These two contradictory strands of scholarship, Crossley argues, can be explained with the help of David Harvey as paradoxical symptoms of neoliberalism with its weakened union power and more atomized and fragmented society. This suggestion certainly has a potential of challenging scholars to catch sight of how their writings interplay with a larger social pattern. At the same time, however, the somewhat sweeping argument also risks neglecting the radical potential in evangelical-inspired scholarship, seen not least in a volume such as *Evangelicals and Empire* (Benson and Heltzer 2008).

Part Three is devoted to the so called Propaganda Model of Herman and Chomsky, according to which individual intellectuals or scholars, despite having beliefs that oppose the dominant ideology, often end up supporting that very ideology. The first illustrative example comes in chapter eight, tellingly entitled “‘Forgive them; for They Do Not Know What They Are Doing’”, and is chiefly oriented around the scholarship of Bruce Malina and the Context Group. The suitability of this example becomes evident since Malina, together with his wife, Diane Jacobs-Malina, has expressed a comparably radical stance of solidarity with Palestinians as well as a critique against anti-Muslim propaganda. As Crossley points out, however, this personal position tends to become absorbed and transformed into a support for the dominant position. This is seen, for instance, in how Malina’s use of “the Mediterranean” becomes associated with “the Arab world” and ascribed with traits of the Oriental stereotype, such as stagnant, politically extreme, and sensitive to humiliation. In a similarly paradoxical way, Crossley argues, Malina construes the connection between the people (Judeans) and the land by using Zionist language. Although I find this analysis persuasive and illuminative, it is also important to recognize that, besides the Propaganda Model, it is based on the work by Edward Said, who made good use of a theorist from the postmodern camp: Michel Foucault.

Another example that is analyzed via the Propaganda Model is given in chapter nine, which addresses Joseph Ratzinger’s work on Jesus and how it was received by Red Toryism and Radical Orthodoxy in the UK. In this case, Crossley focuses not so much Ratzinger’s work itself as on the context in which it was received, which makes for an analysis that gives insight into the changing party political landscape of the UK. The Centre for Theology and Philosophy, with John Milbank and the Radical Orthodoxy movement, hosted a large conference on Pope Benedict XVI’s book, celebrating it as an important contribution to contemporary thinking on Jesus. In this way, Pope Benedict XVI’s book on Jesus became part of the Red Tory strategy to side with the Conservative Party. As Crossley points out, John Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy — as well as Pope Benedict — are famous for their hostility to liberalism and neoliberalism. Despite their hostility, however, they have helped form the so called “Big Society” and the coalition government that has adopted quite an aggressive neoliberal agenda. In this way, Crossley argues, the Red Tory project masks the neoliberal politics of Cameron’s Conservatives. As I read Crossley, however, in this instance, the neoliberal masking is not an unintentional effect, as the Propaganda Model would have it, but rather a calculated side effect that comes with a (naïve?) strategy that attempts to appropriate the Conservatives’ agenda in order to offer a challenge to global capitalism.

In the last chapter, Crossley concludes by asserting that issues surrounding neoliberalism have had a profound impact on historical Jesus studies over the past forty years. As a general overall conclusion, I find it compelling, inviting as it does a context for future studies on the contemporary social embeddedness of biblical scholarship. But I also would like to discuss his more specific claim, reiterated here, that the scholarly writings on Jesus contribute to the *masking* of social realities (p. 211). Firstly, it can be questioned whether the examples that Crossley offers actually shows this. He has surely pointed out several ways in which Jesus research has become caught up in the dominant social perspective. But is this the same as masking? Secondly, and related to the first point, the claim also entails a theoretical problem, unaddressed by Crossley. This brings us into a debate that has been ongoing since the 1970’s between Marxism and other power-critical perspectives.

The concept of masking, it seems, presupposes that the social and economic reality is accessible as meaningful in itself, apart from linguistic representations. Let me just make clear here that I do recognize Crossley's attempt at challenging the idealist tendency in biblical scholarship that neglects the socio-political aspect. Such questioning, however, has been part of biblical studies for quite some time, seen not least in a mainstream introduction to sociological criticism in New Testament studies, where Bengt Holmberg discusses "the fallacy of idealism" and points out "the serious methodological mistake of confusing phenomena with the descriptions of them" (Holmberg 1990: 2). Without diminishing the need for the critique of idealism, it is also important to acknowledge the problem of having access to phenomena or social realities apart from their discursive representations. In other words, postmodern theory (especially Foucault) with its linguistic turn offers an important challenge to the Marxist division between base and superstructure and its concomitant understanding of ideology as a masking or distorting of social reality. Crossley's discussions on masking and distortion seem to presuppose the existence of an extra-discursive viewpoint from which the ultimate truth can be accessed. In my view, Crossley's work would have gained from engaging with Foucaultian discourse theory and post-Marxism as represented by Laclau and Mouffe (2001). Such an engagement would give further credibility to Crossley's attempts at modifying the totalizing claims of Marxism.

This is not to diminish the book's significance for a discipline that Daniel Patte has characterized as anti-contextual (Patte 2011: 198-200). Crossley offers tools that help scholars to become more socially and politically self-reflective and calls for a use of these tools in order to move beyond the tiresome "we all have presuppositions". Such a challenge to biblical scholarship is highly stimulating and warmly welcome.

Endnotes

¹ See also his earlier work (Crossley 2008).

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