



Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2013.08.12

James G. Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism: Quests, Scholarship and Ideology*. BibleWorld. London: Equinox, 2012. \$99.95. ISBN: 9781908049704.

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James Crossley notes that it is best to understand *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism* as a companion piece to the author's 2008 volume *Jesus in an Age of Terror*. Like its predecessor, *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism* comprises a series of mostly-independent case-studies in how the North Atlantic political climate manifests subtextually in the study of the historical Jesus. More specifically, each of the book's nine chapters selects a theme and examines how the field of biblical studies is complicit in prevailing economic trends and geopolitics. Crossley follows Russell McCutcheon's self-characterization as a "participant-observer-analyst of the scholarly profession of constructing and studying religion in North America."¹ The present volume is therefore is not a study on biblical *texts* so much as a study on the field of biblical *studies* and the role of scholars in upholding North Atlantic political hegemony. To demonstrate this point, Crossley draws heavily upon the theoretical work and social analyses of Slavoj Žižek, Terry Eagleton, Wendy Brown, David Harvey, and similar thinkers. Readers would also be advised to have moderate familiarity with world events since September 11, 2001.

The introductory chapter, "Jesus Quests and Contexts," takes on the dominant three-quest narrative of historical Jesus studies. Crossley builds upon recent arguments (from Dale Allison, Stanley Porter, etc.) that each of the three so-called "quests" were more heterogeneous than previously appreciated and that the divisions between the three quests obscure more than they clarify historical Jesus scholarship. Crossley instead proposes that scholars shift away from the language of "quests" and individualist explanations of scholarship to instead analyze the political context of contemporary scholars. Chapter two, "Neoliberalism and Postmodernity," provides Crossley's theoretical apparatus for analysis of biblical interpretation in such terms. Crossley finds most helpful the work of Harvey, Eagleton, and Fredric Jameson on the connections between economic and cultural practices. The remaining chapters seek to demonstrate that the field of biblical studies participates fully in neoliberal norms—norms marked by the commodification of cultural forms, ranging from the historical Jesus to the academy itself.

Chapter three, “Biblioblogging: Connected Scholarship,” examines the often-informal discussions that occur on biblical scholars’ blogs and the peculiar assumptions they make when addressing world events. Crossley finds these blogs to almost universally reflect uncritical acceptance of neoliberal political narratives. One instance to which he devotes his attention is the aftermath of the 2010 Haitian earthquakes. While on the one hand biblical scholars were highly critical of attempts to blame the victim (against, e.g., political commentator David Brooks, Pat Robertson claiming voodoo was partially responsible), bibliobloggers nevertheless tended to both engage in a paternalistic neo-colonial discourse and exonerate the U.S. economic policies from responsibility. Thus, while critical of blame-the-victim narratives, most bloggers’ revisions to the narrative were toothless in their critique, given their failure to interrogate their own complicity in such events.

Chapter four, “Not Made by Great Men,” proffers thorough criticism of prevalent obsessions with individualism in discussions on the historical Jesus. Drawing upon the work of Georg Lukács, Crossley sees historical Jesus scholarship as participating in bourgeois celebrity history, celebrating the lives of “great men.” These are most problematic in their normalization of capitalist conceptions of causality, where the monadic subject is capable of effecting mass change through the sheer force of their individual personality. There are a few scholars resisting this individualist tendency, instead imagining the study of the historical Jesus as a component of the economic history of Jewish Palestine (e.g., John Dominic Crossan, Richard Horsley, and Crossley himself). Unfortunately, the shift in orientation is rarely taken seriously, as reviews of such books often revert to complaints about Jesus’ uniqueness as a cause for Christian origins.

Chapter five, “Never Trust a Hippy,” argues that emphases on multiculturalism in historical Jesus studies act as a superficial means of inclusion. Crossley proffers extensive discussion, for instance, of the disingenuous invocations of “the Other,” who is then stripped of “Otherness.” Crossley identifies this as prevalent in biblical studies: an eschatological Jesus without apocalypticism, an historical Jesus reliably attested in the Gospel of John, etc. Nothing in the study of Christian origins is allowed to be Other in any meaningful sense; scholars manage to pull anything seemingly strange back into the orbit of standard tales of Christian origins. The following chapter, “A ‘Fundamentally Unreliable Adoration’,” deals with similar questions, though focused more specifically on Jesus and Judaism. Crossley finds numerous examples of commentators paying lip-service to ancient Judaism (e.g., Benedict XVI, N. T. Wright, Michael Bird), only to have Jesus and his insights eclipse Judaism.

Chapter seven, “The Jesus Who Wasn’t There?,” examines a few instances where atheism has played a notable role in New Testament scholarship. In particular, the Jesus Project had as a major agenda item to determine whether or not the historical Jesus ever existed in the first place. Crossley details the complex relationship between the mass media reporting on the Jesus Project and the chairpeople’s attempts to define the Project in a manner that assured scholarly credibility. Ultimately, the Jesus Project was disbanded two years after its inception in 2007.

Chapter eight, “Forgive Them; For They Know Not What They Are Doing!,” is undoubtedly the most attention-worthy chapter of the book, wherein Crossley addresses the topic of anti-Semitism in New Testament scholarship. On the one hand, Crossley contends that charges of anti-Semitism are often issued frivolously against scholars; for instance, there is nothing anti-

Semitic about reconstructions of the historical Jesus that bear similarities to Cynic philosophers, despite numerous assertions to the contrary. On the other hand, Crossley presents a strong argument that anti-Semitism *does* play a role in the scholarship of Bruce J. Malina and his anthropological work on the social world of the New Testament. Crossley marshals considerable evidence that Malina seeks to consistently deny continuity between ancient and contemporary forms of Judaism. Malina does so by appealing to a variant of the “Khazar hypothesis,” contending that Ashkenazi Jews did not descend from Israelites, but from the Turks during the eighth century C.E. This hypothesis has been overwhelmingly rejected by experts (including historians, geneticists, Middle Eastern experts, etc.). Crossley noted that a significant section of this chapter was voluntarily omitted to pre-empt legal action in the book’s acknowledgements. This may explain why Crossley is so nebulous about Malina’s vague hostility toward Judaism. The explosive contents missing from the chapter—or at least what one surmises their central claim to be—were subsequently posted online (p. xvi).²

Chapter nine, “Red Tory Christ,” examines the manner in which the historical Jesus is construed in British politics. Crossley sees British radical orthodoxy’s reception of Benedict XVI’s book on Jesus as a particularly revealing moment in the link between religious and political discourses. More specifically, Crossley expresses frustration with the regressive rhetoric that John Milbank and others employed in support of the former Pope’s book and how this backing translates into support for neoliberal economic policies. Take, for instance, Benedict’s interpretation of the temptation narrative: Jesus observes the importance of hunger, but views it as subordinate to spiritual nourishment. The Pope understands this in relation to aid for Africa, where he insinuates that continued impoverishment in much of the world results from secular nature of charity. Whatever impulses are imagined to be “radical” in radical orthodoxy, Crossley contends their ideology is “business as usual.” The book concludes with a brief chapter wherein Crossley laments the increased role of neoliberal policies in the university system, with its marketization of the classroom and the imposition of austerity measures therein. It would be an understatement to claim that Crossley sees biblical studies as largely compliant with the demands of North Atlantic economic hegemony. It is thus surprising that he holds considerable hope for the future of the discipline being more resistant to such policies.

Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism covers an exceptionally wide range of subjects, thanks largely to its case-study approach to both field and theory. Crossley has a tendency to discuss a topic just long enough to reveal the depth of the problem before shifting to another example of scholarly collusions with late capitalism, generally leaving the reader to contemplate the matter further. Consequently, any of these chapters could easily have been a book unto itself. The material is extremely rich and there is no doubt that the material will provoke considerable thought for every reader. It was very easy to become excited several times over the course of a few pages with the novel ideological analysis and the possibilities for further study. The downside of this case-study approach is that the book can verge on repetitive at times; I counted three instances where Crossley quoted a single joke by Eagleton (pp. 58, 89, 213).³ This recurrence is probably because a few chapters’ sections had been previously published in other venues, where repetition was not a concern. This problem is of little significance, though, as it allows the reader is able to read any chapter independently of the others for fruitful gain.

If I can proffer one suggestion for this book and others like it—I hope not too late—it would be to include a companion website at a stable web address. As noted above, there is an entire chapter to biblioblogging and there are a great number of URLs cited for news reports and commentary. It may be helpful to collect the various web pages mentioned in the footnotes onto a single web site for easy perusal. It is often tedious to hand-type a complicated web address for a citation that one desires to investigate further, so this may be a useful way of encouraging the reader’s further interaction with the ideas the book presents.

Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism is a very worthwhile book. This book is strongly recommended for research libraries, and since a paperback version will be available immanently through Acumen Publishing at a much lower price, it would be a worthy purchase for scholars and students interested in the politics of interpretation, ideology, the historical Jesus, and Marxian approaches to Christian origins. Different arguments will be more or less persuasive to different readers, but this seems consistent with Crossley’s implicit goal of starting a conversation about the deep political-ideological problems in biblical studies both as an academic discipline and as a product of neoliberal cultural. One hopes that this aspiration is taken seriously.

¹ Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 7. Quoted on p. 6.

² James G. Crossley, “Kevin Brook on Khazars, Jews and Malina et al,” *Sheffield Biblical Studies* (Dec 17, 2012) available at <http://sheffieldbiblicalstudies.wordpress.com/2012/12/17/kevin-brook-on-khazars-jews-and-malina-et-al/>.

³ Eagleton discussed postmodern radical chic in the academy, citing a fictional paper named “Putting the Anus Back in *Coriolanus*.”