

Gregory A. Boyd. *Cynic Sage or Son of God?* Wheaton: Victor, 1995. 416 pp.*

Cynic Sage or Son of God? by Gregory Boyd, Professor of Theology at Bethel College, is an evangelical response to the Jesus Seminar led by Dominic Crossan and Burton Mack and its first major work, *The Five Gospels*. Writing not as a NT scholar but as a systematician and an apologist, Boyd states his own purpose thus: "To expose the arbitrary presuppositions, the faulty lines of reasoning, the circular methodologies, and the speculative assumptions that characterize the Cynic thesis as put forth by Crossan and Mack" and to offer "counter arguments that favor the evangelical perspective that the New Testament portraits of Jesus as the Son of God and of the early church as professing this faith from the beginning are in fact rooted in reliable history" (p. 13). The book is thus truly "conservative" in nature. It does not seek to add substantially new knowledge to the field but ventures to defend the more conventional understanding of Jesus. Boyd's work is one of several attempts to counter the Jesus Seminar's astonishing media appeal and the resulting confusion among readers unaware of its presuppositions and methodology. It represents one of the most successful and effective efforts, alongside other excellent recent works such as *Jesus Under Fire* (edited by Michael Wilkins and J. P. Moreland) or (with certain reservations) Luke Timothy Johnson's *The Real Jesus*.

In his first chapter, Boyd lays the foundation by surveying the previous quests of the historical Jesus, or as he terms them, "the quest" (1778–1906), "no quest" (1906–53), and "the new quest" (1953–70s). While this is familiar territory for many, Boyd writes in a refreshing, interesting way rather than merely rehashing old material, and even the knowledgeable reader will glean additional information from the author's stimulating discussion. Colin Brown's assessment, quoted by Boyd at the outset, appears as true regarding the Jesus Seminar as it is characteristic of previous efforts at discovering the "historical Jesus":

From the Deists and Reimarus to Strauss and Renan, the world view that was brought to the study of the Gospels was decisive in the interpretation of Jesus. . . . The history of the study of Jesus in European thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is as much a history of changing philosophies, theologies, and world views, as it is of growing refinements in historical techniques. (p. 35)

The ensuing radical skepticism regarding the modern interpreter's ability to delineate the contours of the historical figure of Jesus eventually gave room to a "new quest" initiated by R. Bultmann's pupil E. Käsemann. The latter, while largely supportive of his teacher's overall method, feared that Bultmann's skepticism would result in a docetic Christology, in which the earthly Jesus and the Christ of faith were divorced and the Christian faith reduced to an existential dream. But since this "new quest" pursued different conclusions than the "no quest" while using the same methodology, it too, like the "no questers," was doomed to fail.

Chapter 2 is devoted to a treatment of two phenomena arising from the various "quests" delineated in chap. 1: the "third quest," an effort to arrive at an accurate understanding of the historical Jesus by refining the methodology used by the "new quest," and the "post-Bultmannian quest." Evangelical scholars pursuing this "new quest" include N. T. Wright, Craig Evans, and Ben Witherington; the Jesus Seminar is placed by Boyd in the latter category. The author shows that the Jesus Seminar's reliance on Bultmannian categories extends to its belief in the primacy of extra-canonical gospels, such as the gospel of Thomas or the hypothetical sayings source "Q." The Seminar also subscribes to a history-of-religions approach, viewing early Christianity as a diverse, syncretistic movement that can best be understood in relation to other religious movements of its day. Moreover, the "post-Bultmannian quest" is characterized by an emphasis on social-scientific

data. In the case of the Jesus Seminar, the primary paradigm for Jesus is found in the ancient Cynic philosophers. These independent-minded, unconventional individuals valued personal freedom from social custom and engaged in efforts to open the eyes of others to their plight. They went barefoot, kept their hair and beards long, wore rough and ragged cloaks, and were generally viewed as beggars. In the light of some of the surface similarities between the lifestyle of Jesus as portrayed in the canonical gospels and these itinerant Greek (anti-)philosophers, it hardly comes as a surprise that some, most notable in recent years the Jesus Seminar, would postulate a direct relationship between Jesus and the Cynic way of life.

This is the thesis recently popularized in Crossan's *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (chap. 3). In a revealing and incisive chapter, Boyd illumines the path that led Crossan to develop his thesis. Berger's and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality*, arguing that views of reality are largely shaped through language, and structuralism, which maintains that language is reality, led Crossan to focus his "quest of the historical Jesus" to the *language* of Jesus, in particular Jesus' parables. Crossan found in these parables with their irreducibly metaphorical nature a paradoxical and subversive quality. This quality Crossan then extended to Jesus' entire ministry, which, according to Crossan, was devoted to a paradoxical subversion of Jesus' entire world, including the idea that God was moving history to a definite end or even that he was moving it at all. Jesus' view of the end is a "comic eschatology," since it "laughs at the idea of a final ending." Jesus, in other words, is the master-deconstructionist. In recent years, Crossan turned to an exploration of the "apocryphal Jesus," discovering him to be a peasant Jewish cynic. This is where the paths taken by Crossan and Burton Mack converge.

Mack's work is critiqued by Boyd in the following chapter (chap. 4). This scholar's interest is devoted to Hellenistic wisdom mythology and Graeco-Roman rhetoric as well as the understanding of religious myth in terms of ritual as "mythic rationalizations" of social group formation (viz. *The Myth of Innocence*) and post-structuralism. Mack identifies five different types of "Jesus movements" in early Christianity, of which "itinerants in Galilee" as represented by the "Q" document are the most important. Notably, while approaching Jesus from very different directions, both Crossan and Mack arrive at the conclusion that Jesus was a Cynic sage who never cured diseases, made no divine claims, and whose first followers saw no special significance in Jesus' death and had no concept of a resurrection. Both agree that the gospel portraits of Jesus are largely mythological and hence fundamentally unreliable.

After these largely descriptive sections, Boyd launches into a critique of post-Bultmannian assumptions, working from the general to the particular (chap. 5). The author demonstrates that Crossan and Mack, like earlier proponents of the "quest," embrace anti-supernaturalistic, anti-dogmatic, and generally reductionistic presuppositions. He shows that, if the possibility of the intervention of a personal God into history is ruled out *a priori*, it is predictable that the NT world view and many of its historical claims will be dismissed as "mythical" This set of values, with its projected air of scholarly neutrality and objectivity, is highly critical of the underlying assumptions of people's beliefs — except those of the critics themselves. Hence it is misleading to claim to proceed on the basis of historical or sociological evidence while in effect being largely guided by religiophilosophical, naturalistic presuppositions. Moreover, in chaps. 6 and 7 Boyd shows that even historical research does not bear out the claims of Crossan and Mack, since there is virtually no evidence that Cynics inhabited Galilee at the time of Jesus. This is supported by the fact that Cynic philosophy had significantly waned in the second and first centuries BC and did not experience a revival until *after* Jesus in the mid-first century AD in Rome.

In Part Two, Boyd goes on the offensive, turning the evidence from Paul's writings, the gospel of Mark, and the book of Acts against the Jesus Seminar's thesis of Jesus as a Cynic sage. Space fails me to recount in detail the author's capable refutation of the Seminar's tenets, which he concludes with a fiery defense of the historicity of Jesus' resurrection; brief summaries of Boyd's general

argument must suffice.

Regarding Paul, Boyd shows that Mack, in order to uphold his thesis of a Cynic Jesus, needs to demonstrate that Paul, whose writings are among the earliest NT documents, is not representative of what early followers of Jesus generally believed. But this portrait of Paul as a proponent of Hellenistic Christianity, miles apart from the original "Jesus movement" embodied by the people of "Q," is all too indebted to the scholarship of Bauer, Boussett, and Bultmann, which in this regard has long been recognized as out of step with Paul's Jewish background and way of thinking. Boyd ably demonstrates that Paul rather stands in essential continuity with the early church in confessing Jesus as Lord (1 Cor 12:3; Rom 10:9; Phil 2:11; d. also 1 Cor 8:6; 11:23–26; 15:3–8). What Paul and the early church have in common, according to Boyd, is their "shared Christocentric variation on Israel's monotheistic-covenantal story" (p. 187). On the other hand, the author shows that the development of people's conception of Jesus from Cynic sage to Son of God is highly implausible.

Regarding Mark, Boyd judges unsuccessful Mack's effort to cast this gospel as a largely creative, historically unreliable "mythic fabrication," or, as Crossan puts it, "magnificent theological fiction." According to these scholars, Mark gave the founder of Christianity a superhuman authority under which the beleaguered community of his day could unite. This, of course, constituted a radical departure from the egalitarian Cynic sage Jesus really had been. But, as Boyd shows, Mack and Crossan heap speculation upon speculation:

Of course, *if* one grants that there was a Q community that believed only what the Q material in the Synoptic Gospels explicitly contains; and *if* one grants that this document can be accurately reconstructed and accurately stratified; and *if* one grants that GosThom is to be dated earlier than the Synoptics; and *if* one grants that Mark knew and used Q; and *if* one further grants that Paul and the Hellenistic communities radically departed from the historical Jesus and the original Jesus communities; and *if* one is willing to grant that Mark knew and used material from this Christ-cult; and, finally, *if* one grants that Mark's narrative should be read as theological fiction for the purpose of social self-definition so that the narrative conflicts of Jesus can be assumed to be "really" about the conflicts of the Jesus people community; *then* it can perhaps be agreed that there is some evidence for Mack and Crossan's reconstruction. (p. 209)

But since each assumption by itself is highly questionable, "the tenuous portrait that results from stringing them all together, and the reconstructed history offered to explain this portrait, can't be considered all that compelling" (p. 209). Moreover, if Mark really wrote theological fiction, Boyd asks, would his contemporaries have believed him? Would Mark have been capable of concocting such a "myth of origins"? And is there any historical evidence to support such claims? The answer, according to Boyd, is a resounding "No!" in all these instances. He proceeds to discuss the titles of the gospels, internal considerations of Petrine authorship, and eyewitness features of Mark's narrative, and poses the concluding question: "[W]hat must the historical Jesus have been like to have created a movement that so quickly (if not immediately) came to see him in the incredibly exalted fashion it did?" (p. 242). Boyd suggests the answer is much more simple than Crossan's and Mack's reconstructions: "It is, quite simply, that Jesus was, in fact, the kind of person Mark said he was" (p. 242).

Regarding Luke's portrait of the early church in Acts, the author shows that the "Jesus as a Cynic Sage" theory has to discredit Luke's account to maintain its own version of how the church came to

be, a perspective Boyd summarizes as follows:

The church began as a small, loosely defined, Galilean social experiment in radical egalitarianism. Struggling against social pressures and in search of a social self-identity, it gradually broke into several disparate branches, each developing its own distinct mythologies about Jesus to justify their own evolving self-understanding. (p. 247)

Canvassing information regarding the author and date of Acts, and discussing Luke and other ancient historians, Boyd builds a case for the historical reliability of Luke's account in Acts. If Boyd is correct, however, Crossan and Mack stand corrected in maintaining that Jesus started out his career as a Galilean Cynic sage, since Acts shows how his followers proclaimed Jesus from the very start as the risen Lord and Savior of all.

Finally, Boyd tackles the Jesus Seminar's denial of the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. According to Crossan, Jesus' body became "a corpse for wild beasts." Mack, likewise, in good post-Bultmannian fashion, considers Jesus' resurrection to be a religious myth. Marshaling data from the distinctness of the four resurrection traditions in the gospels, the details of the resurrection narratives, and the role of eyewitnesses, as well as dealing with 1 Corinthians 15, Boyd concludes that the most likely explanation for the early church's belief in Jesus' resurrection is that he did in fact rise from the dead. This makes faith in the resurrection of Jesus a reasonable act of faith.

Overall, this is a book written with both sharp intellect and a consuming passion to set the record regarding Jesus straight. Its major contribution will doubtless be to equip those more fully who are already persuaded by Boyd's contentions, providing them with plenty of ammunition to "fight the good fight" for the *true* historical Jesus more knowledgeably and convincingly. The rather strong language used *by* the author to describe the methods of his opponents, despite Boyd's general even-handedness in critiquing the substance of their positions themselves, renders it unlikely that any protagonists on the other side of the issue will give the book a serious hearing, much less be persuaded *by* it. But then again, it is admittedly difficult to be restrained in one's criticism of another position, if the abuses and mishandling of the evidence are as blatant and pervasive as those perpetrated *by* the Fellows of the "*Jesus Seminar*." For any lover of debates surrounding the figure of the "historical Jesus," and for all defenders of the historic Christian faith, I recommend this book as a great intellectual workout that will also reinvigorate the passion for truth of even the most burnt-out, don't-give-me-another-book-about-the-historical-Jesus skeptic.

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