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Book Review

Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary

by Marcus J. Borg

Author(s): Justin Staller

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Book Reviews

Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary

Marcus J. Borg

New York: HarperOne, 2015. 343 pages.

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In *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*, Marcus Borg sketches a plausible historical profile of the biblical Jesus using traditional historical resources and modern scholarly methods. Borg's portrait of Jesus is drawn in five strokes: Jesus was a Jewish mystic, an exorcist and healer, a wisdom teacher, a prophet, and a movement initiator (Borg, 163). This Jesus is a mystical disciple of the radically apocalyptic John the Baptist, and teaches "the Way" of universal wisdom to promote moral, ethical, social, and spiritual health. Jesus is portrayed as a *type of person*—a mystic—who happens also to be Jewish, while the remainder of the categories—healer, prophet, teacher, movement launcher—are structured according to an intercultural perspective relevant beyond a first-century Jewish context.

Albert Schweitzer in his *Quest for the Historical Jesus* famously wrote that historians' portraits of Jesus closely mirror their own lives and experience. Similarly in *The Biographer's Gift*, James Veninga notes that within every biography there lies the autobiography of its author. This seems to be an apt description of Borg's *Jesus* as well. Born into a somewhat conservative Christian tradition, Marcus Borg eventually became one of the leading figures of liberal, ecumenical Christianity. In many ways, Borg's *Jesus* undergoes a similar transformation.

The dimension of inward, personal spirituality is key to Borg's portrayal of Jesus as a charismatic wisdom figure. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus experiences "a deepening religious passion" and seeks out John the Baptist (117), who facilitates a mystical "noetic" encounter

(131), “a private experience” of the divine that prompts Jesus to retreat into the solitude of the wilderness (117-121). Borg’s Jesus is also a subversive or counter-cultural wisdom teacher, similar to “what we find in Job and Ecclesiastes as well as ... the Buddha and Lao Tzu” (167). Examples of Jesus’ subversive wisdom might include his emphasis on participatory rather than imminent eschatology (258-259), as well as his invitation “to imitate, participate in, collaborate with the compassion of God” (178). Additionally, as a prophet, Jesus was demonstrating against the elite, priestly establishment as collaborators with Rome who had perverted the true practice of justice and had neglected the poor (148-150). It is acting in this confrontational capacity that ultimately gets Jesus killed, as he symbolically, non-violently challenges the rule of Rome.

While holding to many of the important tenets of scholarship in consonance with the Jesus Seminar, Borg writes with an authorial voice that is both gentle and generous to conservative readers. For example, he rejects a comprehensive “psychosomatic explanation” for the phenomenon of healing in our biblical traditions, leaving his readers space to believe in something more (148-150). However, at times *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* seems unbalanced in its perspective or assessment. For example, when introducing Jesus as “a teacher of wisdom,” Borg asserts that “wisdom is not about knowledge or information” or “commandments and rules” (163). While this may often be true, Borg does not even attempt to demonstrate that wisdom-oriented teachings universally stress *experiential knowledge* of God. Although there are other wisdom pedagogies represented both in biblical and extrabiblical culture—for example in Philo—Borg did not seem to adequately account for or even acknowledge them, and instead presents a sort of mystical wisdom sensibility. This summary lopsidedness in favor of Borg’s non-dogmatic, non-apocalyptic Jesus seemed to be a major methodological weakness throughout the book.

Borg's sketch provides an accessible starting point that is valuable for distinguishing between the Jesus of traditional imagination (the "post-Easter" Jesus) and Jesus as he lived in real space and time (the historical Jesus). Although at times it may not be entirely thorough or balanced, this popular-level depiction of the historical Jesus seems especially valuable as a centrist model for an interreligious or interfaith audience. Its multicultural orientation is able to sustain several variations on its primary themes across a wide swathe of topoi—mysticism, healing, exorcism, teaching, prophecy, politics. This portrait is one that might appeal most to an audience with no strong institutional or personal investment in the traditional Jesus, but that remains interested in mystical phenomenology and holistic spiritual praxis.

Justin Mark Staller
Graduate Theological Union
Berkeley, California, U.S.A.

Justin Mark Staller is a doctoral student in Christian Spirituality at the Graduate Theological Union, focusing his research on Christian spirituality and apocalypticism. His recent book is The Apocalyptic Gospel: Mystery, Revelation, and Common Sense (2016).



***Baby, You Are My Religion:
Women, Gay Bars, and Theology Before Stonewall***

Marie Cartier

New York: Routledge, 2013. 224 pages.

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A bar and a church may seem like improbable allies, but in *Baby, You Are My Religion: Women, Gay Bars, and Theology Before Stonewall*, that is just what they turn out to be. In this history of LGBT oppression in