

For the “Jesus Seminar,” Just How Much Jesus is Needed?

Colleagues,

This week a book review.

Stephen J. Patterson. BEYOND THE PASSION. RETHINKING THE DEATH AND LIFE OF JESUS. [Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 2004] x, 161 pp. Paper. US\$18.

Marie and I attend an early morning [every other Tuesday at (ugh!) 7 a.m.] Bible class that has been running for 16 years already. With our pastor at the helm we mix-and-match studying the Bible and books about the Bible. We meet at the home of folks who are just around the corner from our Bethel Lutheran Church,. They crank up the coffee pot and we take turns bringing the edibles. Right now, in preparation for Lent, we’ve started Stephen Patterson’s [hereafter SP] book. We’ve had two sessions—and many of the folks around the big table are taken, some maybe even smitten, with SP. He’s a winsome writer, articulate in arguing his case. SP is actually a local guy, professor of New Testament at Eden Theological Seminary, just two suburbs away from where we meet.

SP’s fundamental thesis is that Christian piety almost everywhere focuses on the death and resurrection of Jesus, but gives no similar attention to the words and works, the LIFE of Jesus, even though those texts-from-life take up most of the four gospels. For Patterson, the BIG stuff about Jesus is in those texts-from-life. How the death of Jesus was interpreted by his followers after the fact, and what they really meant when they said “He is risen,” are not unimportant. But they are all

consequences from those slice-of-life items. So, first things first, please.

I should tip my hand at the outset. As SP pieces together what the Good News is by “rethinking the death and life of Jesus,” the Gospel he comes up with is too small. Way too small. I’ll first try to articulate that SP gospel, and then spell out my caveats.

1. For SP (and the vast majority of NT scholars today) the key term in the words & works of Jesus is “the empire of God.” SP’s preference for “empire of God” over other translations for the Greek term “*basileia tou theou*”—kingdom, reign, realm, regime of God—is linked to his conviction that Jesus’ major agenda addresses his major antagonist, the “empire of Rome.” That empire, of course, was the harsh occupation force in Jesus’ homeland—and the power that killed him on the cross. Throughout his book SP always has Rome as the “contra” for Jesus’ agenda.
2. And what Jesus’ alternative godly “empire” is can almost be predicted by what Rome’s was not. Justice for injustice, love for cruelty, egalitarianism for hierarchicalism, mercy for military, peace for war, persuasion for coercion—and especially Jesus’ affirming the nobodies vs. Rome’s adulation for somebodies. [ThTh readers have heard me moan before—in missiology postings, e.g.—that today’s penchant to define God’s Kingdom in Christ as “the universal rule of love and justice in the world” (a definition repeated many times by SP) is a flatout misreading of that cardinal term in the NT. More below.]
3. Jesus himself is a “nobody,” a peasant nobody, in SP’s reading of the gospels. He speaks for and to the nobodies of his day, the rejects of the world he lives in. Which

would be OK, so far as the occupying Rome legions are concerned, if he didn't keep making such a fuss about it, rubbing it in by calling his project an alternate "empire," and even without a single sword or spear in his motley menagerie of followers, being so "in your face" to all that Rome stood for. So he wound up a Victim of the Pax Romana—which was for the "pacified" anything but Shalom.

4. "Victim" is one of SP's 3 major chapter headings for "rethinking" Jesus. That chapter, using recent scholarly findings about the Roman Empire—sometimes brilliantly so—chronicles why and how Rome throttled him for his "alternate empire" uppityness. Yes, Jewish leaders were in the mix, but not as independent players, just as Rome's sycophants, themselves conned into the "power of patronage," the brick-and-mortar that held Rome's empire together. The NT Jesus is "Jesus contra Rome."
5. Next chapter is "Martyr," how the Jesus-followers made their first sense for themselves of this "crucifixion of a nobody." Here too SP knows the territory, the martyrological literature in the Jewish [Eleazar vs. Antiochus] and Hellenistic [Socrates as seen by Epictetus] world, and he crosses it with the crucified Jesus exquisitely. In sum, "the martyrological tradition gave early Christians a way of using the death of Jesus, terrifying though it was, as a source of power for those who would take up his dissident way of life, and his cause of a new empire of God." (p.67)
6. The final term is "Sacrifice." SP's stunning cultural reportage shows how sacrifice was just as constituent to Greco-Roman common life as it was to Judaism. And absolutely necessary to keep local communities—yes, the vast Roman empire as well—from falling apart. The anti-Rome edge in viewing Jesus' death as sacrifice is that his

followers saw in his death the end of all sacrifice—especially and explicitly any sacrifice mandated by the Roman empire. They did so for the simple reason that they were living “in another empire, an empire of God, and looked forward to the day when the empire they had come to despise would cease to be.” With a unique reading of the NT Letter to the Hebrews SP proposes that “Jesus died as a sacrifice that really was no sacrifice. His sacrificial death was in reality a brutal state execution—for his followers the sacrifice to end all sacrifice.” Thus, after Rome “sacrificed” Jesus to keep its empire from disintegration, his followers moved “out of that ordered world of their past, a world that had cast Jesus out, and into some unknown future. Jesus’ fate took him out of the ordered world, the city, ‘outside the camp,’ into that great beyond of chaos and no-place” [U-topia]. Leaving it all behind, “the empire and its gods, the Temple and its altar,” they set out on “the mysterious journey into faith: a life of trusting God to bring them to some new and better place, a ‘city that is to come.’ . . . [T]he unclean and unsettling death of Jesus became the sacrifice to end all sacrifice, and an invitation to take leave of one’s home fires to seek life in the liberating and terrifying experience of no-place.” [p.100f.]

7. Comes now an Epilogue: “The Resurrection of a Nobody.” In the NT era resurrections happened all the time. Jesus did so for Lazarus and for Jairus’ daughter. Paul did the same out on the mission field. Ditto for other apostles. Ditto for other holy men in the Hebrew scriptures and in the non-Biblical world. So “resurrection proves nothing.” But why did the followers of Jesus, also the NT writers, make such a big deal of Jesus’ resurrection? The resurrection metaphor was the culturally available wineskin for speaking of the impact Jesus had on them well before he

died—during the days of his living, acting and speaking in their midst. Jesus' post-easter "appearances" reported in the NT are not face-to-face interactions between master and disciples. Rather they "refer to spiritual ecstasy, experienced by many in the act of gathering for worship. These moments of spiritual ecstasy, experienced individually and in communal worship, now became experiences of the risen Christ." "Perhaps in the inner dimensions of the spiritual lives of ... James and Peter, who had been particularly close to Jesus, these experiences took on the more personal character of an encounter with their former teacher and friend, his tortured body now transformed and freed from his former suffering. These 'appearances' of Jesus became for them the reauthorization for continuing what he had begun, their apostolic mandate."

SP concludes: "The resurrection proclamation is finally about the spiritual life Jesus unleashed among his followers. It is about the decision to believe in Jesus and to give oneself over to the Spirit to be discovered in his life." Notice. Resurrection is nothing at all about Jesus himself. It's "finally" about something going on in the disciples. The vision Jesus followed is resurrected in his followers after his death. Jesus was not.

8. After the epilogue comes a conclusion with a feisty couple of preachy paragraphs at the end. In some prior chapters SP had also ended with a homiletic addendum. E.g., the Victim chapter: "Jesus died the victim of an empire that is not so different from our own." Then comes a side-by-side of Pax Romana and Pax Americana. The peace offered in both is "not God's peace—at least not as it appeared in the life of Jesus, the victim of the world's last great pax." Also the Martyr chapter concludes by asking the

reader: "Could the martyrological tradition prove meaningful even today?" The answer is yes, and here is the axiom: "the courage to die for one's convictions is preceded by the courage to live out one's convictions." [I can't resist this one. In distinguishing between valid/invalid dying for a cause SP 's editors let this one slip, where SP "draws the line between the martyr and canon (sic!) fodder." (p.67)]

9. In the feisty couple paragraphs at the very end SP badgers "Christian believers and theologians[!] today," who "generally . . . approach the question of Jesus' death" unconcerned about "the things Jesus said that led to his death. What he lived or died for is of no concern." Thus they (we?) have "killed Jesus by having killed the vision." To wit, Jesus' own vision of God's empire that SP has shown us. These folks, we folks, have done "what the cross could not do" to Jesus: killed him. Instead of attending to the "cause" for which Jesus died, "Jesus' death has become for us a mythic event connected to the universal problem of death and the mysterious and frightening end of human life. ... The resurrection assures us of our own immortality." Such misreading of Jesus vexes SP.

And then comes the zinger of his critique. For such misreaders "Ethics are never as important as salvation." SP's final words are a plea [vox clamantis in deserto?] to reverse the order of those two nouns. The empire of God IS ethics, "the universal rule of love and justice in the world." (p.129) Though we today generally "do not look to Jesus for a way of life, but for salvation, . . . this was not so for the friends and followers of Jesus. For them the empire of God WAS salvation."

Comments:

SALVATION

- A. SP critiques “bad” CHRISTIAN piety today because “ethics are never as important as salvation.” To which I say: There is no salvation agenda at all in SP’s 131 pages of rethinking the Death and Life of Jesus. Even though he asserts at the end that “the empire of God WAS the salvation,” for him the salvation—and the empire of God—that Jesus brought IS ethics. It’s getting folks to shape-up according to the “universal rule of love and justice in the world.” In Reformation Latin it’s all “coram hominibus,” but not “coram deo.” It’s a transaction face-to-face with humans, but not the human interface with God. But that’s not what the NT means with the term “salvation.” Never. SP’s Jesus never says (or does!) anything about the divine-human interface, getting sinners reconciled to God, getting them forgiven, getting the unrighteous made righteous again, getting the fracture between God and Adam’s offspring restored to Shalom. If that is not THE central salvation agenda of Jesus in the 4 gospels, then what is? And if the death of Jesus is not at the center of his “It is finished” with THAT agenda, then what is? Apropos of what’s “important,” THIS salvation agenda—never mentioned—is patently of no importance at all for SP’s Jesus. It’s “ethics ueber alles.” **THE EMPIRE OF GOD**
- B. Ethics is, as SP openly says page after page, what the Empire of God is all about. And that is where I think SP is fudging on (radically misreading) the NT canon he interprets for us. The Kingdom of God in the NT is not what SP tells us it is. Not ethics is salvation, but getting sinners forgiven is salvation. Talk about “canon” fodder! Granted, there’s a huge debate about that these

days among the pros, like SP, and among the pastors and people in the congregations. But still we must thank SP for formulating it so precisely. Is God's kingdom in Christ ethics or salvation?

- C. The either/or is this: is God's new regime in Christ crucified and risen God's own "regime change" with sinners OR is it God in Jesus visioning and enacting "the universal rule of love and justice in the world?" My contention is that ALL the references to "kingdom of God" in the NT speak of salvation as God and sinners reconciled. KoG occurs at the divine-human interface, the primal relationship of humankind. We all stand coram deo—every moment of our lives. [Run the concordance study on KoG suggested below to see for yourself.] All KoG references are staged there. None addresses the universal rule of love and justice in the world. That, so it seems to me, is a fabrication. Textual canon fodder. What makes it God's "new" regime, new deal (covenant), is that apart from Christ crucified and risen God continues to deal with sinners according to his "old" regime, by "counting trespasses," not forgiving the trespassers. It's patently a salvation-agenda, a God-and-sinners transaction, whereby sinners get un-sinned so that they get a new ethos (quality to their lives) and thereupon a new ethics. But the regime change happens before the ethics happen, or the ethics don't happen at all.

JUDAISM DISAPPEARS FROM THE LIFE OF JESUS

- D. Another signal of SP's ho-humming the REAL salvation agenda of Jesus by making ethics = salvation, is this book's total disregard for the "Jewish agenda" of Jesus. As SP reads the gospels, all of the opposition/antagonism to Jesus comes from Roman empire agents. We never hear anything from SP about Jesus' ongoing debate with Jewish

folks, about conflictive conversations about God (all those Sabbath fractures Jesus makes), about rightful reading of the Hebrew scriptures, about “Go and learn what this means.” The only place where Jewish leaders come into SP’s text is where they are in cahoots with Rome and thus oppose Jesus for the same reason that the Roman politicians do. Apart from those sell-out Jewish antagonists, you’d think that Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders were best of friends. Bypassing those umpteen conflict-pericopes between Jesus and his fellow Jews, SP is being rather cavalier with the de facto agenda, both of these Jewish leaders and of Jesus in debate with them. But it figures. The Jewish agenda is from of old—Genesis to Malachi—a “salvation” agenda. It’s about healing Israel’s fracture with God, a.k.a. broken covenants. Therefore if you deem that agenda to be uninteresting, or passee, or already a done-deal, then ignoring the Jesus-and-Jewish-leaders debate makes sense. But to bypass this overarching and constant agenda in the gospel narratives is (seems to me) making more fodder out of the canon.

THE JESUS SEMINAR

- E. SP is a major voice in today’s “Jesus Seminar.” I’ve not followed this movement very closely, but from what I think I know, this book’s vision of Jesus and God’s empire is standard fare. Jesus-seminarists are the third (or is it the fourth?) wave in a two-century-long “quest for the historical Jesus.” Its goal: to determine what Jesus REALLY did and said before his followers started interpreting (and possibly mucking up) the data as they passed on his story from generation to generation. So you work your way through the jungle that has grown up around him in 2000 years—beginning already with the early growth

that distorts the data which we encounter in the writings of the NT itself. It's like that Yale professor's discovery nearly a century ago (Hiram Bingham, 1911) of Machu Picchu in Peru. It's still there, the Andean locals told him, almost 100% engulfed by centuries of vegetation, only little bits of the original city still sticking out. So he hacked his way through the overgrowth and underbrush and found the "historical Machu Picchu," the fabled city as it really was.[I think it was Karl Barth who tweaked the first generation of historical-Jesus-questers as scholars peering down into a deep well in their search for Jesus. In their books they then tell us about the face they saw looking up at them from the watery surface below. The Jesus in SP's study looks an awful lot like today's good-guy left-wing liberal-anti-militarist, anti-global capitalist, pro-human rights, anti-empire, opting for the nobodies in an America-dominated world.]

F. But which Jesus are SP and company looking for? Apparently NOT one who is interested in the Bible's own salvation agenda. That appears uninteresting. So if you are not looking for it, chances are good that you won't find it. And if there simply ARE buckets of salvation-agenda material in the canonical gospels, then you will have to "not see" them in order to miss them. Perhaps SP is so dismayed (see his concluding paragraphs) by the fundamentalist and biblicist smothering overgrowth about salvation, that he deems it impossible to cut through that jungle and ever get to the real Jesus. For whatever reason, he settles for ethics. That's what makes his gospel too small. He settles for pennies when he could have had pearls. He presents the pennies as though they ARE the pearls. Perhaps he thinks the salvation agenda is not pearly. Perhaps for him it is pennies. I wonder. In any case he opts for ethics over salvation. His ethical

“empire of God IS salvation.” But it’s not what Jesus was talking about in the often-repeated words in the gospels: “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.” For the folks who heard such words from the historical Jesus, those were pearls—pearls of “great price.” They weren’t ethics. **A**

GOSPEL TOO SMALL

- G. When THE gospel shrivels, it becomes an “other” gospel. When you cast away salvation pearls, you are talking about another gospel. There is an apostolic caveat (worse actually, an anathema) about hustling other gospels. So the real question SP leaves us with is not simply: Do you accept my proposed gospel of “the empire of God as a universal rule of love and justice in the world,” or don’t you? His real question is: will you cast away the Kingdom pearl of sinners being reconciled to God, in exchange for the Kingdom-as-ethics pearl I propose?
- H. To which I’d say: Why take a frightfully diminished substitute—even though it is claimed that this ethical pearl IS salvation—when you could have the whole ball of wax? To wit: a really crucified and really risen Christ (not just “spiritually” risen within the disciples after Good Friday) as our connector with God and that same BIG Christ for ethics, our connector to the world and our fellow worldlings. Isn’t that what the NT gospels clearly and plainly offer, what they call THE Good News? Isn’t this THE kingdom of God—God’s mercy-management proposal for sinners? Only in Christ, of course. In all of God’s other regimes, trespasses get counted. That’s the bottom line that sinners need to be saved “from.” [Just for fun sometime, take a Bible-concordance and check all the “kingdom of God” passages in the NT. Wherever that term occurs, read “God’s NEW regime: no more trespass-counting, instead mercy-management of sinners,” and see what you get. Make sure you don’t miss St. Paul’s “regime-change”

claim in Colossians 1:13f.] **THE “RISEN” CHRIST—NECESSARY OR NOT?**

- I. If salvation = ethics, then there is no need for a resurrected Jesus. His vision—God’s empire of love and justice—survives his death. It is this VISION that is resurrected, resurrected in the hearts and minds of the disciples. That is salvation enough; that is resurrection enough. The vision doesn’t stay dead, even if Jesus does. But suppose the nemesis of un-salvation is much greater than the un-love/in-justice vision resident in human hearts (at least SOME human hearts), a vision that then gets routinized in human societies and re-enforced by “Roman” empires. Suppose God himself, the cosmic critic of unlove and injustice, were the nemesis both of such empires and of such human hearts. What would salvation have to be then? Suppose that God’s verdict on such un-loving and un-just folks were a death sentence—grim as that may seem, though eminently just in divine jurisprudence—“the wages of sin,” etc. Would anyone in such a fix call it salvation, merely being offered an alternate ethical vision? From Genesis 2&3 through Psalm 90, Isaiah 53, 1 Cor. 15 and all the way to Revelation 21 death is the nemesis underlying all false visions. Someone has to conquer death if salvation is to happen for folks with such bad vision(s).
- J. Paul says it simply (1 Cor. 15): If Jesus didn’t lick death, then death still reigns. Paul’s claim is triadic: death is the last enemy; death’s deadly stinger (the lethal cocktail in it) is sin; and sin gets its clout from the law (“karma” rules—you get what you’ve got coming). Unless all three of these are trumped, nothing has changed. Un-salvation at the coram deo interface is the empire still in charge. New visions—even coming from a victimized, martyred, sacrificed Jesus (for whom death too

has the last word)—change nothing on the salvation agenda. We're still stuck in un-salvation. If un-salvation persists, Jesus died in vain.

- K. SP doesn't need a resurrected Jesus because his salvation agenda is so small. Therefore his gospel—Jesus as victim, martyr, sacrifice, but not risen—is so small. Way too small. So he can put Socrates and Jesus side-by-side, finally mirroring each other in dying for a new moral vision. But it's all small potatoes alongside the real salvation agenda which is cosmic: sin, death, the law. These are not “flesh and blood” nemeses. New ethical visions won't faze them at all. Instead they must be engaged and defeated. If not, they win. Death stilll has the last word.

The BIG Gospel, the big cannon in the NT canon, says we do indeed have such a Christus Victor. The emblems of his victory—for us and for our salvation—are two beams of wood AND a deserted tomb, a death defeated. At the core Christians do not believe in a Christic vision. Instead, they trust a Christus victor. That's what God's empire in Christ is all about. That's the salvation offer of the Christian Gospel. Apart from that salvation there IS no Christian ethic.

But there is Christus-victor salvation. There is Christus-victor ethics. Consequently there is . . . Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder