

More Discussion on Patterson, the Jesus Seminar and Jesus Himself

Colleagues,

Here are some items in the continuing discussion. Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

I. Author Steve Patterson responds to the folks who had something to say about his book last week: A few comments on the postings from last week...

One person, who has not read my book, thought I sounded much like Crossan. He's right. I've learned just about everything from Crossan, though I try to shine that light in some different directions. The overarching framework is the same, but the territory covered in the three main chapters is different. As for the rest of the Jesus Seminar, you'll find more diversity there than you think.

To Ed [Schroeder], and to Fred [Danker], whose criticisms I take much to heart: one very important thing I think I have learned from Crossan, especially in his book on Christian origins, *The Birth of Christianity*, is this: the Jesus movement was not a Christian answer to the inadequacies of Judaism, but a very Jewish answer to the problems with empire. This is an insight that I believe we need to take to heart, both for the sake of overcoming our historic anti-Jewish tendencies and gaining critical distance on our own nation's aspirations to empire (with

wide-spread Christian endorsement). By the way, I do not think this makes my take on Jesus less Jewish. Jesus the victim joins thousands of other Jewish victims of empire in the period of Christian origins. The martyrdom tradition, through which I read Paul and the gospels, is thoroughly Jewish. The Jesus (and the Jesus movement) I have tried to reconstruct is Jewish... just not anti-Jewish. Through him the Jewish God of justice for the poor and the outcast speaks a word of truth to empire: the first will be last, and the last first. Fred: I think Luke gets that just about right, but he doesn't want to scare away respectable Gentiles, so after he gets through the downright treasonous Magnificat, he softens the blow to empire, especially in Acts. As for Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, I take the antitheses and the rest of the material in ch. 5, and the anti-pharisaic tirade in ch. 23, as the product of Matthew's tussle with Pharisaic Judaism after Javneh. I would not appeal to this as evidence of Jesus' own views.

Finally, if my concerns with anti-Judaism and empire seem too contemporary for the purposes of pure history, I'll risk the criticism. Schweitzer was right: historians always look into the well of history and see their own reflections. That is what historians are supposed to do, so long as the past itself is not obscured in the process. We look to history to see ourselves in it, to see our issues in a new light, to ponder our questions with the aid of the past. And sometimes our present helps us to see things in the past we would otherwise have missed. I believe we've been fairly un-self-conscious historically about the way our texts and our theology have been co-opted for empire, and used in the service of anti-Semitism. I have seen-Crossan has helped me see-strong

elements in the tradition that would block such directions as these and tried to underscore them. I think this is important to do in our time. This is how I believe the Jesus of history addresses us in our present. But this moment, too, will pass, and our insights, such as they are, will become dated. In the Jesus Seminar we never tried to fool ourselves into thinking we had settled things for all time. We were just trying to think new thoughts about the relevance of the tradition in our time.

To those of you who gave this little book a chance, thanks for the indulgence.

Steve Patterson

II. From The Very Reverend J. C. Michael Allen, retired Dean, Christ Church Cathedral, St. Louis. Dear Ed, This past week, I have been pondering your take on Stephen Patterson. I wish I could address my concerns more clearly, but here goes.

I think you are both preaching too small a gospel. That is, none of us preaches a large enough gospel. We either come down hard on the divinity of Christ and light on the humanity of Jesus, or the other way around. We are either too earthy, or too other worldly.

I owe this understanding to my reading long ago of Anders Nygren's "Agape and Eros." We mortals do at best an inadequate job of dealing with the essential mystery of God and the Son of God. In fact, that, as I understand it, was what the Reformation was all about, the depravity of our reason as well as our will. We never get it quite right. So we have to try again and again.

As for me, given my personal history, and my role as a

pastor, I side with Patterson.

My father and his friends were all “premature Anti Fascists.” They were not Communists, though god knows they were so accused. That is they warned us all of the danger of Fascism long before the West was prepared to see the danger, while the western elites were supporting Hitler. And my father and his friends all paid a high price for their integrity.

They all suffered many defeats. Harsh defeats. In my father’s case, after serving in the invasion of Morocco as an “assimilated” Colonel in charge of Army Psychological Warfare, he came home and sank into a deep depression from which he never recovered.

So, the question in my mind as I grew up, the question that led me to the gospel, was and is – is there no vindication for those who have taken a stand for truth, who have fought for justice and been gunned down? Do the Fascists in fact inherit the earth?

These are not academic questions. Nor are they abstract. They are of the essence of living. The answer I found was that the resurrection of Jesus the Christ is God’s answer: yes those who “hunger and thirst for right to prevail” (NEB) do receive vindication. The resurrection of Jesus is the vindication of his life and ministry preaching the Empire of God in place of the Empire of Rome.

My father did not die in vain. And so I can do battle for justice as well in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection from the dead.

The gospel is after all the hope of all those who then and now struggle for peace and justice.

Love and peace,
Michael

PS from EHS

Beginning Sunday February 26 and for most of the month of March, D.v., Marie and I will be away from St. Louis. If possible, incommunicado, although our kids will know where we are. Four guest writers will be anchoring ThTh posts during the month. Should you just HAVE TO get a message our way, son Nathan (Crossings listserve master) is also our private message-master.