

# Reader Response to last week's review of Stephen Patterson's book BEYOND THE PASSION. RETHINKING THE DEATH AND LIFE OF JESUS.

Colleagues,

Last week's ThTh 400 posting elicited some mail. Here are some of the responses. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## **STEPHEN PATTERSON, the book's author**

*First, thanks for honoring me with a lengthy piece like this. Though you clearly disagree, you are also laudatory at places, which I very much appreciate.*

*I think the piece is fair.*

*In the chapter on "Martyr" I do attempt to explain the concept of reconciliation between God, angered by human rebelliousness, and those who look to the martyr's death as vicarious, "for us." So, I don't altogether overlook this important aspect of (especially) Paul's thinking about Jesus' death. However, I also (in fairness to your characterization of my point of view) express the fact that I do not find such ideas to be*

theologically illuminating. The point I expected comment on, however, was my interpretation of Romans 5:10, where Paul seems to be saying (fully congruous with current ideas about martyrdom) that the sacrificial death of Jesus reconciles us to God, but salvation comes by taking up the life of Jesus—that is, embracing the cause for which the martyr died. This strikes most (not just good Lutherans!) as bald works righteousness. But there it is. I can see no more natural way to read this text and all the surrounding material on Abraham (where one is counted righteous by one's faithfulness to God) and Adam (where death is overcome by obedience to God). For Paul, in Romans 5:10, reconciliation is a past event, but salvation lies still in the future and involves a particular way of life. I wouldn't be offended if you went back and called attention to this reading of things and gave me the proper Lutheran tongue-lashing it will seem to deserve. This, at any rate, may be a key text in which my way of seeing things (salvation is ethics) is tested.

But I do wish to be very clear about this point. At the end of the day, I do not think that for Paul or anyone else salvation comes because of ethics. Salvation is ethics... or ethos, if you prefer. All that God holds in store for us can be had in the embrace of life lived in love for God and neighbor. The Kingdom of God is in the midst of you. It is possible to be "in Christ" now. This does not address the question of the afterlife. But in the gospels and in Paul the afterlife is seldom more than an afterthought.

Thanks again, Steve

PS I think I'll keep that typo ["canon fodder"] in the next edition. I'm starting to like it. (:

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## **FRED DANKER, retired Seminex Professor (New Testament)**

- 1. It is odd that SP views Rome as the contra for Jesus' agenda. A primary reason for rejection of Jesus as Messiah relates to his apparent disinterest in challenging Rome.*
- 2. The Kingdom of God is God's reigning activity as envisaged by OT prophets and psalmists. Ps. 145 is a preeminent exhibition of the idea, and Luke 1 echoes it. Deliverance from the enemies of Israel and renewed relationship with God are here the major facets of the "Reigning" idea. Luke 4:18 outlines the program, and 4:43 restates it. The reign of God includes especially demonstration of God's concern for and interest in people who are marginalized. A total overhaul of attitudes exhibited by the bureaucratic religious structures as well as by ordinary people is required. Matthew 5-7 and Luke 6 are in effect a description of the reign in action.*
- 3. The NT Jesus is not 'Jesus contra Rome'. He is rather the Jesus who challenges the Judean establishment to rethink its acclaimed interest in the authority of Moses. Jesus' performance of miracles on the Sabbath, to cite but one example, is an "uppity" performance. By not endorsing Jesus and instead enticing Rome to view Jesus as suspect the leaders of Israel invite their own judgment. Rome's major interest was the maintenance of public order. Jesus endorsed Rome in that respect. He was not sponsoring a dissident way of life. Any dissidence had to do with Judean misapplication of Mosaic legislation. Rome moves in on Jesus when Judean bureaucracy and its supporters*

*distort the deeds and words of Jesus.*

- 4. The view of Jesus' death as a sacrifice with an anti-Rome edge is an oversimplification. The death of Jesus is first of all an exhibition of the bankruptcy of bureaucratic thinking in Jerusalem. The resurrection demonstrates God's generous forgiveness of the perpetrators of Jesus' death. That is the climactic expression of God's reign, according to Luke.*
- 5. SP's reading of Hebrews obscures the intramural Israelite debate expressed in its pages. At every turn Hebrews shows how Jesus trumps apparent Mosaic dismissal of his Messianic identity.*
- 6. SP lacks a clear understanding of the idea of "resurrection" in the ancient polytheistic world. "Dead men rise up" never was the general consensus. Membership in the elite club of the immortals was on a different level of perception.*
- 7. The NT writers do not reduce the resurrection of Jesus to a metaphor. He was not a good candidate, given the manner of his death. John the Baptist would have been a more likely choice. Moreover, Paul himself does not focus on Jesus as the resurrected one, but on Jesus as the crucified one. The fact, according to the consentient voice of the Christian community, is that the resurrection of Jesus constituted a problem for the followers of Jesus. The raising of a miscreant seemed to be out of character for God. Hence it was necessary to get the rationale for the crucifixion straight in order to understand the resurrection. In this way we are able to answer the question: "Why Jesus?"*
- 8. By taking on an establishment that distorted the authentic Mosaic record, Jesus ensured his own death. And Paul summed the matter: The Law killed Christ. For Law, without submission to God's reigning interest, always*

kills. And from the killing process one needs salvation so that the ethical interests of Jesus can be realized. The Reigning moment of God is in itself a message of forgiveness. According to the NT witness, those who reject it affirm their own autonomy and thus in reality the rejection of Moses . Hence a word like this: We have no king but Caesar. The irony, according to the evangelists, Paul, and the writers of Hebrews and Revelation, is that those who seem to be most Semitic end up being anti-Semitic, for Jesus is the incorporation of Israel. The Church has much unfinished business on this score, notwithstanding recent decrees and posturing in numerous other directions. Dietrich Bonhoeffer required of the Church that it adopt a discrete atheism. Today the call is for the Church to become Mosaically Semitic in depth.

9. Your point about Judaism disappearing in SP from the life of Jesus requires no reinforcement.
10. Ultimately, SP's interpretation follows the kind of analysis one might make of a dramatic production. What does the dramatist have in mind in the twists and turns of the plot and development of the characters and their interrelationships? The application of such critique to the NT is hazardous. Dramatists are creators of events and characters. We can analyze the dramatists' strategies and tactics. But the New Testament writings are of a different order. For them the events they record belong to the real world. The ways in which they present them tell us something about their understandings of such events. But it is an entirely different matter for a modern interpreter to replace the events with perceptions that in effect equal allegorization.

*Just a few thoughts brought on by your diligent probing,*

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## **Retired Theology Prof in Texas**

*Two weeks ago I sat through four lectures in San Antonio by John Dominic Crossan – six hours worth. So when I read your review of Patterson's book, I felt deja vu all over again. Practically the same words, phrases, thesis. The Jesus Seminar folk seem to be pretty monolithic.*

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## **Two Lutheran Pastors in Indiana. Brothers. One ELCA, one LCMS. Guess which is which.**

*I have not read the book either, but what a stunning tour de force! I run into this kind of ethics as salvation in the form of some liberal left of center politics all the time in my mainline protestant friends. Your book review gave me more ammunition. It was a great read. Peace.*

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*Thanks for the review of Stephen Patterson. Once again I am glad that my salvation does not depend upon my courage to be, or my ethical production etc. I might be a lazy Christian, but first, last, and in between I'm God's handiwork. And that's just what I need to hear day after day after day. Thanks again for your weekly insights,*

*Peace.*

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## **An ELCA Seminary Professor**

*Your Karl Barth attribution [about scholars searching for the*

*“historical Jesus” by peering down a deep well to see his face, and then describing the face they saw peering up at them] belongs rightfully to Albert Schweitzer, in his book “The Quest of the Historical Jesus,” though KB, of course, also read and was influenced by AS. P.S. I learned that studying with you at the sem in '81. [Ed. Shows that not only my short-term memory is fading.]*

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## **Another Lutheran Theology Professor (Ethics)**

*I really appreciated again this thoughtful exegesis of SP's exegesis. A few thoughts come immediately to mind:*

- 1. Might the biggest problem for postmodern theology still be the enduring problem for theology before it was postmodern: namely, underappreciating [in the paradigm of the Crossings matrix] the D-3 depth-dimension of the human problem, and the P-4 dimension of “deep” Gospel needed to heal that diagnosis? My sense is that SP would have no idea about what God you are talking about in wrath and criticism, because that God is not at all present in his working theology of Jesus.*
- 2. We can appreciate that SP, along with many others, even many an ethicist (e.g., Reinhold Niebuhr), do well or pretty well with the Diagnosis step 1 (people's bad morals, bad behavior) & sometimes D-2 stuff of misplaced faith—even to crossing it over to the Good News of P-5 and P-6 (right faith and right behaviors). But they miss the depth of THEOLOGICAL ethics by leaving the God who criticizes (even to death) sinners but also gives them a Lord who claims them back from death into life. When you spoke of how we are now in the third or fourth round of searching for the historical Jesus, might all this*

*searching itself be an indicator of how the D-3 God is keeping us in the dark? (deus absconditus)*

- 3. Speaking as a theological ETHICIST, we need not (even as Apol.4 did not) leave out a connection between faith and works. But we do need to appreciate the horse of faith (and all that it means when Jesus says, "Your faith has saved you") before the cart of works.*