3-2012

Book Review: Jesus, Paul, and the Gospels

Christopher R. Bruno

Cedarville University, cbruno@cedarville.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/biblical_and_ministry_studies_publications

Part of the Biblical Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/biblical_and_ministry_studies_publications/309
straightforward reading of Hebrews 3 and 4 makes it clear that the “rest” lost by the wilderness generation and pursued by the readers of Hebrews is nothing less than God’s eternal rest that he entered at the culmination of creation. The larger context identifies this “rest” with the heavenly eternal City of chapter 11. In commenting on 9:24 Allen himself identifies this “rest” with entrance into the heavenly sanctuary. Furthermore, within the book of Numbers the fact that God “pardoned” the rebellious wilderness generation “according to” Moses’ “word” (Num 14:20) simply means that he did not destroy them.

Finally, both Allen’s determination to limit the punishment for faithlessness to the temporal and his inclination to find a millennial period in Hebrews prevent him from grasping the overall rhetorical shape and purpose of this carefully constructed biblical book. The rhetorical shape of Hebrews comes into focus only when one sees that the rest lost by the wilderness generation is equivalent to the heavenly city pursued by the faithful of chapter 11. After laying a foundation in 1:1–2:18, the author of Hebrews turns his hearers from the disobedience and loss of the wilderness generation (3:1–4:13), by means of the sufficiency of Christ (4:14–10:18), to the faithful endurance of those who enter the heavenly City (10:19–12:29). Allen’s work assists us in seeing the relationships between Hebrews and Luke–Acts. His commentary contains insightful statements and thorough, useful syntactical observations. In my evaluation, however, it offers little help in grasping the overall message and purpose of Hebrews.

Gareth Lee Cockerill
Wesley Biblical Seminary, Jackson, MS


During three weeks in the spring of 2009, James Dunn presented three different lecture series on the historical Jesus, the apostle Paul, and the Gospels. In these three series, Dunn summarized much of his research and major contributions to NT studies in the last forty years. Consequently, it is fitting that these lectures were reformatted and published in book form under the title *Jesus, Paul, and the Gospels.*

On one level, while this is a rather short book (at least when compared to most of Dunn’s other books), it is difficult to review sufficiently, since in so doing, one must reckon with not only the content of the book itself, but also the many books, articles, and essays that stand behind it. However, since aspects of Dunn’s research have been dealt with at great length elsewhere, I feel no need to interact with all or even most of his arguments in this short review. Rather, after summarizing the content of the book, I briefly will comment on some of its key positive
and negative features, along with making some observations about its usefulness.

The book is formatted rather simply. Dunn begins by discussing the Gospels by summarizing the main contours of his research on the Gospels and their transmission. He repackages his argument against the traditional literary model of Gospel transmission and emphasizes the significant role the oral traditions played in the transmission of the Jesus tradition (see James D. G. Dunn, Christianity in the Making, vol. 1: Jesus Remembered [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003]). Beyond this, Dunn also discusses the Synoptic problem, strongly advocating Markan priority, both in terms of chronology and literary structure. He concludes that Mark’s Gospel was the first of a new genre and that Matthew, Luke, and to a lesser degree, John (which still fits well in the Gospel genre in spite of its differences with the Synoptics), are dependent on Mark.

The second part of the book, “From Jesus to Paul,” discusses the relationship between the Jesus of the Gospels and the Pauline epistles. Dunn sees three general parallels between Jesus’ dominical teaching and Paul’s letters. First, both proclaimed the “openness of God’s grace.” While Jesus himself was not as explicit in his acceptance of Gentiles, it seems that his association with sinners set a trajectory that leads to Paul’s Gentile mission. Second, both share an “eschatological tension.” That is to say, both see the kingdom of God (and the ministry of the Spirit) as both already and yet to come. Third, both see love as the fulfillment of the Law. Dunn goes so far as to say, “Nowhere is the line of continuity and influence from Jesus to Paul clearer than in the love command” (p. 114). Thus, Dunn makes a strong case for Paul as a disciple who is faithful to the teachings of his master Jesus.

In the last part of the book, Dunn summarizes his well-known research on the apostle Paul. He strongly emphasizes the ongoing Jewish self-identify of the apostle. Along with this, he repackages some of his earlier research on Paul’s “conversion,” arguing that, in his new allegiance to Christ, Paul’s zeal for Israel’s boundaries was transformed into a zeal for Israel’s commission to be a light to the nations. Unsurprisingly, Dunn devotes significant attention to Pauline justification, arguing that the Gospel had (and has) both a vertical and social dimension. He then concludes the book by summarizing his work on the body of Christ and its role as a “charismatic community.” In this vein, Dunn argues that by “shutting up the Spirit” in the sacraments, the Bible, and the hierarchies of the church, we have foreclosed on any opportunity for the Spirit to work in the way that he did in the earliest days of the Christian church.

Dunn’s ability to summarize, repackage, and condense much of his life’s research into this concise form is certainly admirable. His wit and clear thinking come through at many points. Beyond this, each of the three sections contains points that are worthy of significant praise. His work on the transmission of the Jesus tradition is a clear and helpful
summary of his larger argument, and is an accessible introduction to the problems with traditional source-critical models of Gospel transmission. His discussion of the relationship between Jesus and Paul makes a clear and compelling case for several lines of continuity between Jesus and Paul. Similarly, his argument for Paul’s self-understanding of his ministry as a fulfillment of the hopes for Israel demonstrates the important link between Paul and the OT. In addition to these features, the book is accessible to a wide range of audiences and so could be useful in graduate or even upper level undergraduate courses as an introduction to an influential NT scholar.

In spite of these positive features, the book does raise more than a few questions. While we cannot deal with all of these questions, as noted above, many others have raised similar questions about Dunn’s research, particularly his understanding of justification and the development of the Jesus tradition. However, in this review, I would like to point out two difficulties that illustrate some of the methodological problems with the book.

First, in his discussion of Paul’s conversion, Dunn makes a strong comparison between Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus in Acts 9 and the account of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10–11. Dunn concludes, “As Paul had been changed from one who regarded openness to the Gentiles as a threat to Israel’s holiness, so Peter had been changed from one who regarded Gentiles as such as unclean and a threat to Israel’s purity” (p. 157). This statement significantly underestimates the nature of Paul’s conversion. Regardless of whether Peter was present at the stoning of Stephen, it is quite clear in Acts that he was not complicit in Stephen’s murder, nor was he involved in persecuting Hellenistic Christians. The same could not be said of Paul. Therefore, to equate the two “conversions” seems to be a classic case of putting in the foreground what should be in the background while putting in the background what should be in the foreground. Paul’s conversion was first and foremost a turn from rejecting Jesus as Messiah to embracing him as Messiah and risen Lord. While a new attitude toward Gentiles was certainly part and parcel of his new identity, the implications for the Gentile mission are secondary to his new allegiance to Christ as Lord.

On a somewhat different note, Dunn’s discussion of the role of the Spirit raises another point where Dunn’s method and overall approach to Scripture seems to be less than satisfactory. Dunn is to be commended for his strong emphasis on the Holy Spirit’s ongoing role in the life of the church. However, he also expresses a concern that the modern church will hinder “the Spirit who broke through the boundaries round Israel to open the grace of God to Gentile as well as Jew” (p. 179). Dunn suggests that the church not be bound by the “letter of the Law” in the organization and community of the church. However, this seems to be methodologically inconsistent with his view of Paul’s Spirit-led mission.
Throughout most of the third section of the book, Dunn goes to great lengths to demonstrate that Paul’s self-understanding of his mission was faithful to and a fulfillment of Israel’s Scriptures. Rather than Dunn’s somewhat open-ended warning to exercise care lest we bind the Spirit, we can do even better by following the example of Paul, who faithfully sought to fulfill the Scriptures by the power of the Spirit.

This book is a useful introduction to Dunn’s research, along with many important fields of NT studies. Since Dunn has been one of the key players in NT studies over the last several decades, any student of the Bible would benefit from reading this book, if only to be caught up on the major conversations. Moreover, for students who are methodologically and theologically savvy, it could be a great help. While many of Dunn’s emphases and method can be frustrating at times, one cannot deny the impact he has made on the field, and this short book is an excellent summary of his research to date.

Christopher R. Bruno
Antioch School Hawaii, Honolulu, HI


When children grow up and become members of an evangelical church, there is a time in their life when they begin to question the faith that they adopted. If the child becomes a scholar in a discipline requiring interaction with their faith, this questioning can become even more acute. A main area in which this challenge becomes especially acute involves the nature of Scripture. The texts discussed in this review involve two different Christian scholars examining different aspects of the nature of Scripture. It seems that each of them is writing the book to explain their departures from conservative evangelicalism. The result of these seemingly introspective examinations is a substantial revision of their faith. Both scholars were at the University of North Carolina in different capacities when their belief systems were challenged and to some extent overturned. This review will look at both of these important texts in terms of the major content, what each has in common and a critique of their positions.

Christian Smith is a distinguished sociologist teaching at the University of Notre Dame.