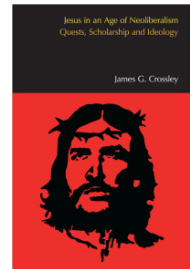


Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism: Quests, Scholarship and Ideology, by James G. Crossley

BibleWorld | Sheffield: Equinox, 2012 | xv + 248 pages | ISBN: 978-1908-04970-4 (hardback) £60.00 | ISBN: 978-18446-57377-6 (softback) £17.99



One might observe that biblical scholarship is an especially industrious field in which scholars have long been in spirited conversation, if not outright debate, about such weighty matters as the boundaries of the discipline, its preferred (or submerged) methods and disciplinary conversation partners, and its utility for a variety of interested audiences in the modern world. Given that biblical texts, for better or for worse, have enjoyed unusually persistent and enduring afterlives in a myriad of venues across time and cultures—inside and outside of institutional theological rhetorics, from popular music and film, to church windows and architecture, to political speeches and actions—it is no surprise that, for biblical scholars, the burden of knowledge production in a complex world, where the “object” of analysis is a moving target, can seem great. Deciding where to focus one’s intellectual capacity and energy can be a daunting task, since choosing to privilege primary ancient texts, social and historical contexts and backgrounds, and/or

histories of deployment and interpretation will yield vastly different questions and hypotheses. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith proposed more than four decades ago in his seminal *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* essay, “The Study of Religion and the Study of the Bible” (39 no. 2 [1971]: 131–140), a great challenge for modern biblical scholarship in a university-based religion department—where the focus is ideally not on the teaching *of* religion, but teaching *about* religion—is to shift from unlocking the indigenous and timeless meanings of ancient scriptures to understanding how scriptures are formed, what human purposes they might serve, and what relationships we might have with scriptures in different historical and social settings: “the first point, then, is to see the Bible not merely as a set of ancient documents or even as a first- and second-century product but as a third-century and twelfth-century and nineteenth-century and contemporary agent” (134). Smith proposes a course of study in a religion department that would rigorously examine the roles the Bible has played, what roles it plays now, and what the future of our relationship with the Bible might look like (we might now call such an approach “reception history”). Of course, Smith finds his own curricular recommendation attractive as a relevant way forward for the study of biblical literature, and yet at the end of the essay he bemoans the unlikelihood of finding a person with doctoral training suited for such a task. Indeed, one might imagine that no one person can possibly be equipped to do justice to how biblical literature “works” in the ancient world and, perhaps more critically, beyond it. Every attempt to do so, no matter how comprehensive its claims, is partial, incomplete, and contestable.

James Crossley may agree with Smith’s proposal for a shift in focus in biblical scholarship as an academic discipline, and he may even have some remedy for the question of how one is to conduct doctoral training for the massive responsibility inherent in critical biblical scholarship as it relates to the practices of teaching about religion through its reception. Where they might disagree is in where the focus of understanding and articulating our relationship with the Bible should be amplified, and where muted. Nevertheless, in *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism: Quests, Scholarship and Ideology*, Crossley suggests that we take a long and hard, even if partial and incomplete, look at how cultural and political-economic contexts shape the ideology of all academic discourses, the rhetorics of biblical scholarship more specifically, and most expressly the various contributions to the so-called “quests” for the historical Jesus along with how such debates are observed in public territory beyond ivory tower locales. This book is intended as somewhat of

a companion, if not sequel, to his *Jesus in an Age of Terror: Scholarly Projects for a New American Century* (London and Oakville: Equinox, 2008); interested readers would do well to access the former book before engaging this one, as Crossley refers to it extensively as that which underlies many of the arguments presented here. Similar to *Jesus in an Age of Terror*, one of Crossley's aims, as stated in his introduction, is to produce a kind of intervention into scholarship that methodologically is both similar to and different from "traditional" historical criticism. In fact, Crossley explicitly states that his practice as a New Testament exegete will be especially useful in his reading of modern Jesus scholarship, so

instead of lengthy exegesis of Gospel texts, here I will exegete scholarly texts and general scholarly positions in their modern contexts. Methodologically, the sort of historical study I am pursuing here is not necessarily dramatically removed from conventional biblical scholarship; if anything, it is simply the chronology and focus of study that is different. (5–6)

To explicate his case for more fully noticing and understanding how biblical scholarship is a product of its time, and to accomplish his interpretive goals, Crossley relies on a considerable selection of scholarly resources such as his own exegetical training, Stephen Prothero's approach to locating constructions of Jesus in their cultural contexts, and critical-theoretical frameworks for understanding the political and economic structures and practices of contemporary life such as David Harvey's work on neoliberalism and Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman's "Propaganda Model" (the latter of which is a reference point throughout the book). *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism* has three subsequent parts wherein Crossley attempts to read contemporary Jesus scholarship, in its various manifestations, as (un)consciously informed by, and even a product of, neoliberal culture. Part I, "From Mount Pelerin to Eternity? Contextualizing an Age of Neoliberalism," begins with Chapter 2, "Neoliberalism and Postmodernity," where Crossley provides a brief overview of postmodernity and neoliberalism, which he states is the "broad contextual basis" (21) for understanding how Jesus has been constructed in modern scholarship of the last half century. In Chapter 3, "Biblioblogging: Connected Scholarship," the author extends arguments he has made elsewhere on biblioblogging: it is an important site for exploring the intersections of ideological inclinations, public performance, and scholarly

examination. In this case, the examples for such exploration are select bibliobloggers' responses to the 2010 Haiti earthquake and the identity and politics (and identity politics) of supposedly now-defunct pseudonymous biblioblogger N.T. Wrong. Whereas Chapter 3 hones in on specific examples to make the case for how scholarship participates in neoliberal discourses, in Chapter 4, "Not Made by Great Men? The Quest for the Individual Christ," Crossley develops a proposal that constructions of Jesus as a "Great Man" are not just inheritances of the history of scholarship, they also rather neatly cohere with neoliberal capitalist conceptions of causality and historicity, and it is this particular confluence that informs the rest of the book. The chronological period under consideration is narrowed in Chapter 5, "Never Trust a Hippy: Finding a Liberal Jesus Where You Might Not Think," wherein Crossley turns his attention to locating the various portraits of Jesus offered by proponents of the "Third Quest" such as the Jesus Seminar, attempting to show that in a neoliberal context the historical Jesus is constructed in various ways as a conveniently domesticated "Other" without the dangerous elements that usually accompany "Otherness." For Crossley, this is most obvious in studies that concentrate on "Jesus the Jew."

"Jesus the Jew" in modern biblical scholarship becomes, in Crossley's view, a signifier for a key tenet and social effect of neoliberalism: the naming and celebration of multicultural liberal identities without structural critique or change. Part II, "Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism," contains two interrelated chapters wherein the author expounds upon this sentiment. In Chapter 6, "A 'Fundamentally Unreliable Adoration': 'Jewishness' and Multicultural Jesus," Crossley discusses the rhetorical forms and functions of constructing Jesus as Jewish in contemporary Protestant evangelical and Catholic discourses, including those recently offered by Pope Benedict XVI. This Jewish Jesus, as it turns out, is remarkably "useful" in contemporary discussions of Christianity that may themselves betray latent anti-Jewish impulses. Chapter 7, "The Jesus Who Wasn't There? Conservative Christianity, Atheism and Other Religious Influences," attends to the neoliberal aspects of discussions about the (non-)existence of Jesus in various venues that deploy the rhetoric of science and reason, from New Atheist writers such as Richard Dawkins to the recent "Jesus Project." In Part III, "Contradictions," Crossley aims to explore broader cultural and ideological issues connected to constructions of Jesus beyond, yet tangled up with, New Testament scholarship. In Chapter 8, "'Forgive Them; for They Do Not Know What They Are Doing!' Other Problems, Extremes, and the Social World of Jesus," his analysis

extends to a particular discursive case, that of the Context Group, to illustrate a prominent feature of Chomsky and Herman's Propaganda Model: that even though individuals may purport to occupy different political space than that of the dominant ideological system, they will still, in their words and deeds, participate in, and thereby perpetuate, that very system. In the case of the Context Group (via the work of Bruce Malina), the construction of the Middle East may reduplicate Orientalist sentiments even as this runs contrary to expressions of personal pro-Palestinian politics. This analysis is extended into Chapter 9, "Red Tory Christ," wherein Crossley takes on the constructions of Jesus proffered by Radical Orthodox theologians and politicians in the UK, resulting in a Jesus that rather neatly coheres with a Radical Orthodox project that claims to speak for Christianity—a depoliticized political Jesus, as it were. Finally, in Chapter 10, "Conclusion: They Know It and They Don't," Crossley reflects upon recent debates, including a public, online discussion concerning the introduction of faith perspectives into the Society of Biblical Literature's annual meeting, as a means to propose that more work be done to identify case studies outlining the connections between neoliberalism and New Testament studies.

Throughout *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism*, Crossley offers an array of issues to consider further, and much with which readers who inhabit many different political and theological proclivities can interact. Of course, given that there are so many topics under consideration in one volume, there is a panoply of issues with which some readers could, and probably will, take umbrage. These potential points of contention are wide-ranging: from the persistent misspelling of a prominent Marxist theorist's surname (Lukács for Lukács), to Crossley's construction of straw men opponents and red herrings in order to make his arguments; from his off-handed use of off-the-record conversations with disciplinary colleagues, to his sometimes less-than-judicious assessment of "traditional" scholarship; from the lack of detailed analysis of the scholars under consideration for uninitiated readers, to his rather cursory and repetitive presentation of theoretical concepts that would otherwise seem critical to flesh out for this study (most importantly, "neoliberalism"); from an insistence on framing scholarly debates in dichotomic terms, to an overuse of binary oppositions to make his points. Some scholars might also find it curious that, even as he mentions gender- and race-critical analysis briefly and in passing, Crossley's admittedly eclectic recent history of scholarship influenced by cultural contexts is one populated almost exclusively by dominant-culture-identified male New Testament scholars, which

might prompt some to wonder just how (neo)liberal and multicultural the discipline actually is, or whether ideological criticism and Marxist analysis have intersected with gender and race in ways that might support the arguments Crossley makes. Methodologically, it is also worth noting that Crossley promises “exegesis” of scholarly texts of the recent, instead of distant, past, as part of his concentration on locating biblical scholarship as a part of the reception history of biblical texts and traditions. Yet, one might wonder what the utility is in offering “exegesis” of modern scholarship, a term that denotes a set of disciplinary practices fraught with connotations that the author himself has claimed not to fully trust, at least not when applied to ancient texts. A perhaps unintentional effect of Crossley’s rhetorical construction of this project as “exegetical” is that he appears to superimpose inherent meanings and intentions onto large and disparate bodies of scholarship—meanings and intentions that only a most astute, sober reading such as his can discover. In so doing, a stability and coherence is made of Jesus studies and biblical scholarship more broadly, not to mention the cultural contexts in which this work takes place. As Crossley well knows, when using any methods to articulate the social worlds in which we might contextualize texts it is always possible, if not likely, that we are not merely describing but rather inventing the social contexts that seem most helpful in serving our aims. Clearly this observation would also apply to Crossley’s own analysis, which no doubt many of his critics have already recognized. Perhaps most directly, Crossley’s analysis of the constructions of Judaism among scholars of early Christianity ultimately skirts the issue that the Judaism that is constructed is relatively tame and one quite acceptable to neoliberalism (this is, in fact, where his analysis would have been most profitable). One might therefore suggest that Crossley himself does not escape this same “charge.”

While some scholars might find these and other issues to be “dealbreakers,” the present reviewers note several important areas where *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism* has some potential to make a positive and responsible contribution to discussions of methodology in the study of the New Testament and Early Christianity, discussions that are, we might add, vital as scholars continue to deliberate best practices for the discipline as a whole. Perhaps first and foremost is the necessity for New Testament critics to engage the history of the field, recognizing that every disciplinary question, debate, and controversy is located in space and time, and is never inoculated from ideological influences, personal and institutional politics, and power relationships. Second, New Testament scholars would do well not only to understand emer-

gent trends in the field, but also to trace how such trends are related to (but not necessarily caused by) those of the past, as well as to assess how material realities such as geographical location and modes of communication shape knowledge production and dissemination. And third, in this work Crossley does help to make the case that New Testament scholars can deploy their considerable reading skills to examine the rhetorics of scholarship itself, in conversation with theoretical frameworks that can enhance understandings of social formation as well as the worlds in which humans are formed in relation to, perhaps even as, texts.

In addition to noting the potential to make a productive contribution to ongoing conversations in New Testament studies, we raise here several observations occasioned by our reading of *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism* that we think could benefit from further reflection, development, and argumentation. First, over the last several decades it has become common to suggest that the ideological context in which interpretation takes place will shape scholarly discourse. Less explored are the ways in which we observe how ideology shapes the methods scholars might embrace. For example, it would be worth investigating how quests for the historical Jesus are predicated not just, or simply, on the predilections of interpreters embedded in their contexts, but on ways those contexts might participate in the organization of knowledge. Perhaps some additional attention to the emergence of the empirical category “history” as a scientific discourse that provides certainty as to “facts” and “story” and “existence” would further illuminate this point. Further, in terms of how modes of organizing knowledge and communicating scholarly discourses operate in a neoliberal context, it is clear that biblioblogging is a well-established media form. However, a more nuanced understanding of biblical scholarship in an age of neoliberalism might view the uses of biblioblogging and social media as a means to participate in the commodification of the biblical scholar as a persona, or “personal brand,” as well as examine how blogs have become a form of advertising for certain ideas and individual personalities as “products” in an online marketplace, which is not devoid of its own economic structure. In a neoliberal context, the “marketplace of ideas” is perhaps heavy on the “marketplace,” less so on the “ideas.” Moreover, it is clear that the individual—person or corporation—is emphasized and valorized in neoliberalism. A more trenchant consideration of quests for the historical Jesus in light of the rise of the individual as a discrete entity in an age of neoliberalism might foreground the role of personal consumption in identity formation under neoliberalism—in this light, we

would do better to analyze the ways and means by which we construct Jesus to render him palatable for mass production and consumption in our current neoliberal landscape, including the role that social media might play in this phenomenon. While Crossley rightly suggests that his work is partial and that many more examples of biblical scholarship's involvement with neoliberalism need to be located and explored, we submit that further work in this area will benefit from clarity about the difference this kind of analysis can make to the field as a whole, as well as what is at stake, and why it matters.

Finally, we add that Crossley's *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism* has inspired us to think a great deal about the current state of scholarship, social media, and the future of the discipline. There is obviously much more to say on all of this. As a last word in this review, we note that without the persistent impact of neoliberalism on the contemporary social and economic global scene, Crossley's own book—and persona(lity), in print and in social media—would not likely resonate as it does with us now. And that obviously provides food for further thought. To be sure, Crossley has shot the first volleys over the proverbial disciplinary “bow” (and there are no real casualties—for which some will breathe a sigh of relief and others of regret). We await the scholarship that follows, and that *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism* in fact demands, which will both evaluate and also flesh out, not to mention more fully cook, the smorgasbord of raw ideas that Crossley has laid on our plates.

Davina C. Lopez Todd Penner
Eckerd College *Austin College*