

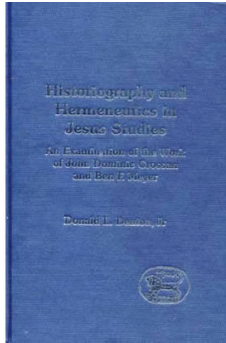
○ REVIEW OF DONALD L. DENTON JR'S *HISTORIOGRAPHY AND HERMENEUTICS IN JESUS STUDIES*

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George Aichele reviews *Historiography and Hermeneutics in Jesus Studies: An Examination of the Work of John Dominic Crossan and Ben F. Meyer*, by Donald L. Denton, Jr. (JSNTS 262; London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2004).



For the last two centuries, much of biblical studies, and especially New Testament studies, has been dominated by the historical-critical method, in which various ‘quests’ for the ‘historical Jesus’ have played major roles. Anyone doubting this need only look at the space devoted to papers discussing the historical Jesus in recent conference programs of the Society of Biblical Literature, as well of course as the activities of the Jesus Seminar. While the modern historical-critical method has from its beginning generated and learned much from its own critique, it is only with the advent of the kind of postmodern thinking that is called ‘critical theory’ in this journal that a thorough examination of the ideology underlying historical criticism has become possible. The beginnings of such an examination have recently appeared in books by Roland Boer (*Novel Histories*) and Richard Walsh (*Mapping Myths of Biblical Interpretation*), among others.

Historiography and Hermeneutics in Jesus Studies does little to further that ideological examination. Donald Denton makes it clear that his own allegiance is to modern historical criticism, and more specifically, to furthering the search for the one true historical Jesus. Denton mentions ‘ideology’ only in passing, and although he cites the work of Roland Barthes, Hayden White, Jacques Derrida, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Friedrich Nietzsche, their views do not figure significantly in his analyses. He clearly opposes the ‘anti-realism’ of postmodern approaches to the Bible. Historical study may never be objective, but according to Denton, it seeks a ‘valid interpretation’ that corresponds to a ‘real object’ (p. 144). Even his discussions of theology, that visible tip of ideology most relevant to biblical studies and especially to hermeneutics, suffer from the embarrassment that is still common in modernist biblical scholarship, which as a proper child of the

Enlightenment seeks to disassociate itself from its roots in faith through claims of scientific disinterestedness (see p. 75, n. 71). Denton does acknowledge the importance of theology, especially in Ben Meyer's work, and he notes, quoting Marc Bloch, the 'instinctive metaphysics' that 'drives historical criticism' (p. 62). However, despite his discussions of Meyer's indebtedness to the thought of Bernard Lonergan, Denton apparently sees little or no relation between theology (or ideology) and the two foci of his book, historiographic method and hermeneutics.

Why then bother to review this book in the pages of a journal devoted to critical theory? Perhaps it would be better to leave its consideration to the numerous journals dedicated to historical-critical biblical studies. However, I strongly feel that some sort of conversation needs to be pursued between historical critics (at least those who are somewhat sympathetic to critical theory, and Denton may be one) and those of us who choose other ways to read biblical texts, and I don't know how that's to be done without talking about each other's writings. This conversation may be going on in other fields, but if it is happening in biblical studies, I'm not aware of it. Denton is no postmodernist, but he is also no slouch when it comes to phenomenology, philosophical hermeneutics, or the philosophy of language, matters that are also of interest to critical theorists, and he brings them all ably to bear upon historical criticism and the search for the historical Jesus in ways that are worth paying attention to.

Indeed, Denton makes a number of very helpful observations about problems within historical-critical biblical studies. His principal concern is with the relation between method and interpretation, as his title suggests, and his careful analyses and comparisons of Crossan's and Meyer's works serve as a detailed case study of two quite distinct (despite other similarities between the two scholars, pp. 9-13) ways to develop this relationship. (Some may wonder at his choice of Meyer as a sparring partner for Crossan. It becomes evident that Denton's clear preference is for Meyer, and Crossan serves as the fall guy – although he is hardly a straw man! Denton's presentation of each scholar is nuanced and insightful.) Specific discussions of Crossan and Meyer take up most of Denton's book (six of its eight chapters), but he skillfully weaves his theoretical concerns into those discussions, so that by the time one gets to the two concluding, and more general, chapters, one is well prepared for those larger observations, and for his own response to them. Despite his timidity when it comes to theology, Denton is well aware of the agenda of historical criticism, and more specifically of the search for the historical Jesus, and his discussion of how this plays out in the work of these two scholars is well organized and enlightening.

Two of Denton's ongoing concerns are of special interest. First, he notes how the relation between method and hermeneutic can be one of antagonism, as in Crossan, whose highly organized and very 'public' method serves to rein in his 'interactive' (which Crossan calls postmodern, p. 75) hermeneutic, or it can be one of subservience of method to hermeneutic, as in Meyer, resulting in the disadvantage of a 'tacit' or non-public quality of the argumentation. Denton wants the best of both approaches: Crossan's public marshalling of 'atomistic' data and analyses and Meyer's (Lonerganian) 'holistic' hermeneutical sophistication, for which facts are not independent of the horizon of interpretation. Second, and closely related, although he does not discuss ideology as such, Denton's distinction between 'public' and 'tacit' hermeneutical presuppositions and historical methodologies does take him into that neighborhood. He notes that historical study is never anything more than sophisticated 'common sense' (p. 143). Although he clearly prefers a historical approach that tries to be as public as possible (this is Crossan's great redeeming feature,

according to Denton), he recognizes that there will always be a tacit (dare we say unconscious? but Denton does not) element, and in several interesting pages (124-129), he discusses the 'metacritical goals of history' and the inevitability of bias.

Denton's own view, which is evidently strongly influenced by the views of N.T. Wright and Bruce Chilton, is presented at some length in the last two chapters. He favors a holistic approach that takes the sources (i.e., the biblical gospels) as the proper context for understanding the various atoms of the Jesus traditions. Presumably each gospel's story is to be read in its final, canonical form, although Denton does not discuss this or related questions (e.g., the synoptic problem and the status of Q, the multiple endings of Mark or questionable passages in John, the relevance of the noncanonical gospels, etc.) at any length. These sources are to be read in light of their own intrinsic 'narrative intelligibility' (following David Carr) and understood through 'critical realism' (as developed by Lonergan, Meyer, Wright, etc.), and the multiple Jesuses that appear within the stories are to be taken as refracted presentations of a single historical reality (p. 166, compare 183-184). They are evidence of, not testimony to, 'characteristic and distinctive' features of their subject (p. 164, see also 65-66). Denton also seems to think that miracles, including the resurrection, are historically plausible (pp. 148-149).

Do I recommend this book? I do, if you want to see what a thoughtful, modernist historical critic has to say that is critical of biblical historical criticism – i.e., 'from within', as it were. Or if you're looking for succinct, insightful discussion of the views of either Crossan or Meyer. The book is generally well written, although there are a few grammatical oddities and a bit too much repetition of major points. A lot (perhaps too much) of the analysis seems to take place in the footnotes. There is a helpful introduction and an extensive bibliography, and indexes of names and of biblical citations, but a subject index is lacking. Two lengthy appendices are also included: a survey of recent criticisms of 'criteria of authenticity' used in the Jesus quests, and a survey of 'Varieties of [modernist] Critical Realism'. I found this second appendix to be quite interesting. That said, I find critical realism and the related concept of narrative intelligibility to be unacceptable, and it seems to me that holism as a basic strategy of reading forestalls critical questions rather than raising them.