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***Historiography and Hermeneutics in Jesus Studies: An Examination of the Work of  
John Dominic Crossan and Ben F. Meyer***

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The variety of current portraits of the historical Jesus is a cause for academic embarrassment. How is it that professional historians using the same texts arrive at radically different portraits of Jesus? In this book, Denton attempts to answer this question by comparing the hermeneutics and historiography behind two leading historians of Jesus very concerned with both epistemology and method: John Dominic Crossan and the late Ben F. Meyer. Denton views Crossan as presenting the zenith of a long-standing of tradition criticism in historical Jesus studies, whereas Meyer is a pioneer.

The body of Denton's book consists of three sections. The first focuses on the epistemology (hermeneutics) and method (historiography) of Crossan. The second focuses on the same areas related to Meyer. In the third section, Denton further defines and contrasts their two methods, provides reasons why Meyer's method is superior to Crossan's, then makes suggestions for how the Jesus historian can improve his or her method in order to reduce the subjective element.

**Part 1: Crossan and Tradition Criticism**

Denton compares the early Crossan with the later one, then considers his method. He notes a contradiction between the early Crossan's hermeneutics and historiography. As a structuralist, Crossan "denies the historical referent and [maintains] an ontology that denies extra-linguistic reality while at the same time embracing a historiography that assumes both the historical referent and an extra-linguistic reality" (40–41). The later Crossan seems to have become aware of this contradiction and fades his hermeneutic

from the discussion. His historiography employs tradition criticism to reconstruct the various stages of transmission and recover the earliest strata. Then he applies the criteria of authenticity to the earliest strata to determine its authenticity.

Denton applauds Crossan for contributing to a significant trend among Jesus historians to employ social sciences in his historiography, a trend in New Testament studies that is merely trying to catch up with the larger world of historiography. "Crossan's attention to this area is an example to emulate" (77). He likewise praises Crossan's refinement of tradition criticism. He is "the apotheosis of a methodological tradition that has developed over the course of two centuries." Denton offers a few criticisms. Results and conclusions differ when we start with different inventories of data. By working only with data that can be verified, Crossan's inventory of data used in building his portrait of the historical Jesus will be much more modest than if he had first considered the context in which the data are found. Whereas Crossan isolates the data and then interprets it, Denton suggests there must be reciprocity between data control and interpretation as practiced by Meyer. Crossan exercises reciprocity, but it is between the past and present where interaction must occur for proper history to be done. Accordingly, Crossan's method produces historical results that are relative across generations, since each generation must redo history. A firm grip on history becomes elusive.

## **Part 2: Meyer and Critical Realism**

Denton begins his assessment of Meyer by describing his hermeneutics. Whereas Crossan's method attempts to rule out the subjective feature of historiography by employing only those data verified by the criteria of authenticity, Meyer holds this is wishful thinking, since all historians have basic postures and ulterior interests that figure significantly in the task of doing history. His alternative slogan is "objectivity is rooted in authentic subjectivity." Authentic subjectivity is rooted in three cognitional levels: knowledge, understanding, and judgment. When these three function properly, the knower is in the proper position for doing history. Denton judges that Meyer's "interest in hermeneutics is the defining moment" in all of his work (92). The historian must be attuned to his or her own horizon as well as the horizon of the text under investigation, allowing it to challenge one to the point of conversion, at least temporarily. Without this exercise, the text cannot be fully understood. For Meyer, "Detachment from bias is of the highest importance."

While this may be, Denton complains that the process by which Meyer deals with bias is not public or open to scrutiny. If the historian's horizon, metaphysics, or the interests motivating the inquiry can influence results more than anything else, no means exist for adjudicating between the differing results, such as we see between Crossan and Meyer.

Denton will later suggest that an additional context is needed, that of narrative intelligibility, which considers the context of the sources in which the data come to us, namely, the Gospels. Whereas Meyer rejects the redactional element of a text, ignoring it, Denton suggests that historians should ask whether the redacted material may assist us in an accurate interpretation of the text. There is a reason why the redaction occurred as it did, and the historian may miss the value behind that reason if the redaction is dismissed without serious consideration.

Meyer's historiography is next considered. Since the Enlightenment, historians have assumed that we live in a closed continuum and, thus, the possibility of miracle is denied. But Meyer sees this as philosophical baggage that actually hinders legitimate historical method. Once this baggage is jettisoned, much more of the Gospel data on Jesus are allowed for historical consideration.

Meyer's historiography is guided by his critical realism, which is characterized by the dynamic process of reciprocity. This is one of the most significant aspects of Meyer's historiography, and it sets him apart from Crossan. Whereas Crossan holds data and their interpretation (or fact establishment) apart, for Meyer these are not isolated exercises but are reciprocal. The historian's understanding of the data is dependent on the larger frame of reference within which the data are discovered: context. For Crossan, the data illuminate the big picture, whereas for Meyer the big picture illuminates the data as interaction occurs between the two. There is a circular pattern as both data and interpretation are on equal footing. Denton notes that Meyer's circular method of deciding on the historicity of data and their interpretation prevents a tidy procedural outline as we find with Crossan.

Another contrast in the methods of Crossan and Meyer concerns the role of the criteria of authenticity. These play a prominent role for Crossan, who employs them to establish inventories of data as the first step of historical investigation. Meyer denies that they can be used in this way. He agrees that they are necessary for verification of historical descriptions, but they are better employed to gauge the historical likelihood of a particular saying or action rather than to establish it. The presence of one or more criterion in a saying of Jesus increases its likely authenticity.

Denton notes that Crossan outperforms Meyer in his use of the social sciences. Although Meyer acknowledged their usefulness, he did not take seriously the notion that there are some social structures larger than the intentions of individuals that many times reveal their sense.

### **Part 3: Historiographic Proposals: From Holism to Narrative Intelligibility**

Denton presents a case for Meyer's holism over Crossan's tradition criticism. In tradition criticism, the historian focuses on a small collection of data that can be verified, groups these together in patterns that seem to fit, then begins the work of interpretation. Holism begins, as is were, with dumping the mass of data into a large pile, then sifting through that pile to discern patterns and themes. Patterns serve as the larger context within which to understand the individual data, especially those that are stubborn to interpretation or lack evidence for authenticity when isolated. The historian operating according to holism will immerse oneself in the data in what many times will be a long and confusing experience, then emerges with a hypothesis, a big picture of how everything fits together.

But Denton asks how portraits of Jesus emerging from holism are to be tested. The historian's personal knowledge or horizon plays a large part in painting his or her portrait and differs between historians. Without a better context from which to start, there is no vantage point from which to adjudicate between portraits. Denton suggests a different starting context within holism: narrative intelligibility.

Whereas "narrative antirealism" as held by L. T. Johnson holds that historical investigation cannot give us the real meaning of events, only the facts, "narrative realism" holds that it is possible to get to both. Historical figures perform their actions in the context of a story that gives them meaning. How the agents themselves made sense of their actions is the context in which the historian should find an initial understanding of the data. For Denton, N. T. Wright comes closer to doing this than anyone.

Once historical inquiry is launched by employing narrative intelligibility, broader sociological models may be consulted. Using this order prohibits applying the data in a procrustean fashion that selects the preferred model, applies it to the data, and ignores data that fails to fit the model. Then the historian asks what sort of acts and words must have originated with the historical agent in order to leave the impressions that remain. We may consider the differences between tradition criticism and holism with the familiar analogy of a detective. The holistic detective arrives on the scene and takes an inventory of all the data. He notes a gun in the hand of a dead man lying on the floor and asks whether the gun was in the man's hand when he died or whether it was planted there. This inquiry assists the detective when viewing the other data in terms of murder or suicide. On the other hand, the atomist detective first ascertains what authentic data can be ascertained. If the gun's existence cannot be verified in the sources, it is ignored throughout the investigation. In a similar manner, the method of the holistic historian places more data at his or her disposal throughout the course of the investigation, some of which is never considered by historians such as Crossan and John Meier because its

authenticity can never be verified prior to the beginning of the investigation, since it is quarantined from its context prior to questions of authenticity.

Thus, in holism, investigation ending with a portrait of Jesus begins with a broad brush that paints a broad outline rather than individual units. Since data are only understood within the context of a broad outline, the criteria of authenticity are general principles applied to the outlines, providing balances for weighing the various evidences rather than employed as concrete laws for the authenticity of individual sayings. However, Denton adds that without the personal experiences and knowledge of the historian, no capacity exists to grasp the historical object in its narrative intelligibility. “The sense we make of our present experience is the basis on which we discover the sense-making narratives of the actions of historical agents. . . . In the field of history, our knowledge of the past depends upon the narrativity we share with the past” (192).

## **Appendices**

Denton concludes the book with two appendices. The first looks at the role to be played by the criteria of authenticity. He notes the common criticisms that (1) while providing positive support for historicity, they cannot demonstrate that a tradition is inauthentic; (2) the criterion of dissimilarity has many logical faults when used as a sole criterion as many historians do; and (3) the criteria are frequently employed only after the application of form criticism, which, although a legitimate literary tool, is circular and imprecise when employed for the more robust task of identifying communities behind tradition. It also assumes that the principles of written tradition likewise apply to oral tradition. Denton says that because of these challenges, the criteria can produce a critically assured minimum of material, but they cannot produce an adequate historical core.

In the second appendix Denton considers varieties of critical realism. He notes that critical realism is gaining ground in New Testament studies and involves both hermeneutics and historiography. It acknowledges that something “real” is there to be known, hence “realism,” and that we come to know the real through an interaction between the knower and the thing known, hence “critical.” After discussing the history of critical realism, Denton describes how Longergan’s critical realism was improved by Meyer, whose critical realism then was improved by Wright. He contends that Wright’s critical realism can be improved with a few minor adjustments.

## **Remarks**

Readers will find this book very useful. Denton has provided a fine work that defines and contrasts the two major approaches in historical research. Three criticisms of the book are

in order. First, Denton's "narrative intelligibility" is interesting, but it would have been helpful if he had fleshed out his ideas in a few examples that illustrate its superiority over the general approach of holism. Second, Denton pushes forward toward eliminating more of the subjective element in historical investigation, but in the end it appears to me that he has completed a lap only to be greeted at the finish line by Meyer. Meyer's ultimate context in which data are to be considered is the knowledge and experience of the historian. Wright recognized the subjectivity and nonpublic nature of this and said the context must be the horizon of the historical agent. Denton agrees with Wright's assessment of Meyer's context but says the horizons of historical agents are too hard to determine and, thus, proposes the public context of narrative intelligibility. However, it is curious that he then brings the nonpublic personal experiences and knowledge of the historian back into the equation—and as a major component to boot (192). Third, while Denton has made a compelling case for holism over tradition criticism, one must question whether the differences between the two methods constitute the major reason for the different portraits of Jesus. These differ radically even among those employing tradition criticism like Crossan and John Meier. Similar differences exist in the portraits produced by holists such as E. P. Sanders and Wright. In fact, Meier's portrait of Jesus is closer to Wright's than is Sanders'. Thus, differences between these two methods do not seem to be able to account for the large differences present in the portraits that result. We are back to the challenge posited by differing horizons and metaphysics among historians.