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# Prophet and teacher: an introduction to the historical Jesus

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## **Prophet and Teacher: An Introduction to the Historical Jesus**

William R. Herzog II

Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005

xii + 243pp., \$29 paperback

Well, Bill Herzog has done it again. In the fine tradition of scholars such as John Dominic Crossan and Richard A. Horsley, Herzog has provided for those interested a fine thorough yet concise study of the Historical Jesus. In my judgment it stands out as the best yet written on this controversial subject. Below can be found my three chief reasons for such a judgment.

However, before I move ahead with my superlatives, I need to point out what I perceived initially as a downside. At first I found the first two chapters (pp. 1- 42) rather plodding, a bit on the ho-hum side. I felt frustrated and said to myself, “this is not the Bill Herzog who so gripped and inspired me in his earlier work, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, from page 1 to the finish. Boy, was I wrong! From Chapter 3 on *Prophet and Teacher* grabbed me and took me on the road of both scholarship and personal challenge. He had not lost his touch. Indeed, I discovered very soon that his first two chapters contributed to the book’s strengths. And here they are:

**Thoroughness:** In a mere 233 pages, Bill Herzog has embraced the entire range of Historical Jesus scholarship (its history, its methods, its leading scholars). And he presents a kind and fair assessment of the various thinkers engaged in such a quest, avoiding the sometimes nasty polemics and posturing of some involved in this field. Further, he introduces the reader to a brief overview of his own outlook. Thereupon he spells out in a most comprehensive way his own picture of Jesus and his ministry. Although he outlines that position around the three-fold notions of prophet, teacher and healer, I find the most profound aspect of the book to be the constant thread of Jesus as proclaimer of the “little (village) tradition” posited against the “great (elitist, imperial) tradition.” His Jesus is no “spiritualised” safe religious teacher avoiding confrontation in the name of some individual connectedness to God. As a solid Jew in the prophetic and teaching tradition, Herzog’s Jesus stands over against hierarchical values of success and “power over.” This Jesus is the imperialist’s nightmare, the thorn in the side of raw arrogant power which must be crushed brutally.

**Accessibility:** This book is perfect for a rather wide-ranging audience from laity who want brain and heart engaged in a deeper way, to an undergraduate and finally to a graduate text (seminary). In this sense, my initial reaction to the early pages was hasty, for the audience here suggested deserves to have the methodology for such a study spelled out clearly. Herzog does just that.

**Scholarship & Faith:** The genius of this book emerges in its dialectic of faith and scholarship. I see this also in the work of Horsley and Crossan, but I find that Herzog blends the two better than any other scholar in the field. I cannot read him without encountering the flesh-and-blood Jesus and finding myself pulled into the dangerous waters of discipleship. My scholarly hunger is satisfied and my heart is troubled and stirred to follow the one Herzog describes. When he speaks of the resurrection faith he describes it well: “it is clear that God’s redemption includes justice; the gospel includes the social gospel. No realm of human life is left untouched from the rulers to the beggars. It is also true that the ‘good news’ does not mean one thing for all. The good news is bad news when announced to the ruling elites’ but good news to the healed, women, the marginalized” (232).

I find it interesting that William Herzog teaches at the seminary where Walter Rauschenbusch taught almost a century ago. Thank you, Bill, for a life-transforming book. Thank you, Walter Rauschenbusch *redivivus!*

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### **Crossing the Divide: Luther, Feminism and the Cross**

Deanna A. Thompson

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004

184 pages, \$21.50 softcover

For Lutherans, immersed in the theology of the cross while insisting upon radical gender equality under the rubric of the Gospel, Deanna A. Thompson’s *Crossing the Divide: Luther, Feminism and the Cross* is a must. Having pursued my spiritual journey as a “justification by