

The search for the historical Jesus has been going on for nearly a century. With each new wave of research, scholars are able to hone in more closely on who the person of Jesus might have been. This process has brought its share of controversy and disagreement as each new voice adds to the discussion of what Jesus really said, which documents accurately portray his actions, and what kind of being he thought he was. Marcus Borg, one of the leading scholars in this academic quest in his own right, discusses the various approaches to the historical Jesus by the early 1990s in an article entitled, "Portraits of Jesus in Contemporary North American Scholarship." Borg focuses on how five different presentations of the historical Jesus answer two questions: "What role does eschatology play in each image or construal of Jesus?" and "How is Jesus seen in relationship to his social world?"<sup>1</sup> The following is a review of Borg's presentation, an evaluation of the most salient features of each portrait, and a preliminary attempt to formulate my own portrait of Jesus from the ideas that I am studying.

Borg's article is a succinct and clear presentation of five portraits of Jesus based on the work of E. P. Sanders, Burton Mack, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Richard Horsley, and Borg himself. In each portrait, Borg illustrates how each scholar answers questions relating to the role of eschatology and Jesus' participation in his social world. In addition to providing a brief summary of each scholar's perspective, Borg also gives the primary evidence that the writers use to defend their position. He appears to be very even-handed, which is a good feat considering that Borg's own portrait is presented with the others. In addition to providing the scholars' main arguments, Borg compares the approaches for the reader; he also outlines the questions about the

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Borg, "Portraits of Jesus in Contemporary North American Scholarship," *Harvard Theological Review* 84, no. 1 (1991): 2-3.

historical Jesus that he believes are left out of the picture gallery he describes. Below is a brief walking tour of the portraits.

According to Borg, E. P. Sanders presents Jesus as an "eschatological prophet" who believed that the Jewish temple was to be restored through his own works and God's intervention. Sanders focuses on the Jewishness of Jesus and believes that Jesus was not interested in changing the social world around him. Because God would intervene to finish the restoration of the temple and create a new world order, Jesus was not concerned with creating that social change by his own ministry. Sanders bases his argument on his research into Judaism in Palestine during the life of Jesus. He then uses eight "facts" that he establishes to show that Jesus lived up to this understanding of Jewishness. For Sanders, Jesus is eschatological but not interested in his social world.<sup>2</sup>

Burton Mack believes that Jesus was a "cynic sage" in the tradition of the traveling Greek philosophers. The focus, then, for Mack, is not Jesus' Jewishness but rather his Greekness. Mack believes that Jesus is not interested in eschatology (that came later, Mack argues, after the writing of the Gospels) nor is he interested in changing his social world. Instead, Mack suggests that Jesus wants to speak in aphorisms to individuals about their own personal behavior, not preach to communities. He makes this argument by referring to the fact that the sayings are the oldest, and most representative, part of the Jesus tradition. Mack sees Jesus as non-eschatological and not interested in the social world around him.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Borg, "Portraits," 3.

<sup>3</sup> Borg, "Portraits," 5.

Richard Horsley believes that Jesus is a "social prophet." Like Sanders, he sees Jesus as a Jew who worked for the restoration of Israel; however, Horsley bases his argument on the sociological study of pre-industrial colonial communities. Horsley believes that Jesus' sayings were directed at the people of Israel in order to create a more cooperative community. He also believes Jesus should be understood as holding an imminent eschatology. For Horsley, Jesus believed that God was to finish the revolution begun by Jesus and his followers by establishing a new political structure in the near future. Horsley sees Jesus both as interested in eschatology and involved in his social world.<sup>4</sup>

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza sees Jesus as a "wisdom prophet" concerned with Jewish renewal and with radical social praxis. She believes that the scriptural example of the "discipleship of equals" demonstrates Jesus' unique understanding of an egalitarian society. According to Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus was also against the purity laws that were in place to help keep the society stratified. As a feminist, Schüssler Fiorenza views Jesus and his ministry as part of divine wisdom, as a prophet of Sophia. She believes that through this wisdom, Jesus strove to create a new community for Israel. Her arguments center on interpretation of scripture and textual analysis. Jesus was primarily interested in changing his social world and saw eschatology as the reign of God on earth now, according to Schüssler Fiorenza.<sup>5</sup>

Marcus Borg's portrait shows Jesus as a "charismatic healer," a "subversive sage," a "social prophet," and a "movement founder" for the restoration of Israel. Like Schüssler Fiorenza, Borg believes Jesus is against the purity laws; he goes further to suggest that, as such,

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<sup>4</sup> Borg, "Portraits," 15.

<sup>5</sup> Borg, "Portraits," 9.

Jesus was dedicated to compassion rather than holiness. Borg sees Jesus as non-eschatological primarily because he was so involved with the social world around him. To support this view, Borg explains that the idea of Jesus' second coming was created after his death, was not a part of the body of his real sayings, and, therefore, was not part of his actual ministry. Borg also sees Jesus as preaching "life in the spirit" by looking at his sayings in the cross-cultural context of wisdom literature. Borg, then, sees Jesus as non-eschatological because he was very involved in his social world.

Schüssler Fiorenza's and Borg's portraits seem the most convincing to me. This historical Jesus appeals to me most, primarily because of what I want Jesus to be rather than what I know about New Testament scholarship. However, there are a few reasons why I can justify my preference for these two pictures over the other three. First, let me explain the problems I have with Sanders, Mack and Horsley. While some angles of the portraits by Sanders and Mack are compelling, their position that Jesus was not interested in his social world seems unsatisfactory. Sanders' view that Jesus is apolitical does not work if one attributes the Sermon on the Mount sayings to the historical Jesus. Mack's understanding that Jesus' concern for his social world was written into the scripture by early church groups is refuted by those who suggest that Jesus held a radical view of women's place in society.<sup>6</sup> Horsley's portrait, while entirely focused on Jesus' interest in the social world, makes him appear merely as a social reformer rather than a deeply spiritual, almost mystic individual.

As I begin my portrait of the historical Jesus, let me briefly explain how I view eschatology and the kingdom of God in relationship to my understanding of the historical Jesus.

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<sup>6</sup> Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 113.

I believe eschatology has to do with the end of things as we know it. I do not believe that it necessarily involves a molecular meltdown of our planet or solar system, particularly because first-century Palestinians would have very little understanding of what the end of the planet would mean. I think it could mean the end of a political era or the end of one's life. I do not think that eschatology must encompass a belief in an afterlife or a teleological understanding of the ultimate.<sup>7</sup> Kingdom of God is easier for me to define since my theology is clearer about it. I prefer *basileia*, the term that Schüssler Fiorenza uses. The *basileia* that Jesus preaches is a new realm of God on earth, a realm which one participates in creating when one follows his he writes, "To identify our vision of salvation with what Jesus called the *Basileia* of God requires that we believe that God is working toward such an end."<sup>8</sup> I agree with Cobb that the *basileia* is a commitment to the wholeness of God's people and does not refer to individual afterlife.

From my definitions of eschatology and kingdom of God, my portrait follows. I see Jesus as a social prophet who was interested and engaged in his social world. I would combine Borg's compassionate Jesus with Schüssler Fiorenza's "discipleship of equals." This would make Jesus a man more interested in the welfare of people in community instead of in the purity of an individual. This would also make Jesus interested in establishing an egalitarian community. The church that would follow this historical Jesus would be one centered around a community of believers that works toward social change for the benefit of people. I believe that this was Jesus' *basileia* of God. In Borg's later portrait of the historical Jesus, he presents the realm of God on

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<sup>7</sup> Borg, "Portraits," 19.

<sup>8</sup> John B. Cobb, Jr., *Transforming the Church: Where Mainline Churches Went Wrong and What to Do About It* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 68.

earth as Jesus acting with compassion and in the spirit of God to reform the temple.<sup>9</sup> Like Borg, I also see Jesus as a spiritual being, though I am not sure what this means historically. I do not think Jesus intended to be a hero, although Hellenized followers chose to describe him in those terms, as Greg Riley suggests.<sup>10</sup>

What historical research provides for the contemporary reader certainly only gives us a glimpse of the full portrait of Jesus. The writings about him in the canonical scripture may cloud our vision of him, but through sustained effort and further research into the anthropological, sociological, political, and historical terms of his day, we may come to a better understanding of what he indeed might have been.

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<sup>9</sup> Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), 46.

<sup>10</sup> Gregory J. Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs: How Jesus Inspired Not One True Christianity, But Many* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1997), 69.

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