Jesus in faith and history

by William Brosend in the April 7, 1999 issue

Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright, The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions (*HarperSanFrancisco, 288 pp.)*

Few New Testament scholars have had as wide and important an impact on current discussions of the historical Jesus as Marcus Borg and Tom Wright, and for good reason--their scholarship is impeccable, their arguments cogent and their Christian commitment overt. How then did they come to such different conclusions about Jesus?

Borg and Wright come from markedly different backgrounds--Borg a North Dakota Lutheran and Wright an Anglican from the north of England. The guild of biblical scholars has caricatured them quite differently: Borg has been narrowly cast as a "Jesus Seminar" liberal and Wright as a traditionalist British conservative. Yet they share a common academic pedigree. Both studied at Oxford with G. B. Caird in the late 1960s and early '70s. And they "are both committed to the vigorous practice of the Christian faith and the rigorous study of its historical origins and to the belief, which we find constantly reinforced, that these two activities are not, as is often supposed, ultimately hostile to each other." Out of their differences, scholarship, friendship and common faith they have fashioned an important discussion of the meaning of Jesus for the life of faith and church.

Their jointly authored book consists of crisp, alternating chapters by the two on the same topics. Borg and Wright cover the range of issues confronting Jesus studies today, from historical methodology to the mechanics of miracles, from virgin conceptions to bodily resurrections. While neither offers views he has not presented in earlier works, the juxtaposition, interchange and contrasts make for clear and lively reading.

Borg and Wright agree that "we know about Jesus in two ways: history and faith," as Wright puts it. They do not agree on what that means in practice. Borg is confident that critics can discern what can correctly be attributed to Jesus within the layers of biblical material and the traditions behind it. Wright is less sure that scholarship

some 1,900 years removed from both the events and the writing about them is able to make such clear distinctions. Paradoxically, Wright uses biblical and extrabiblical material more freely in drawing his historical portrait, while Borg, distinguishing "history remembered" from "history metaphorized," is more cautious.

As to faith, again it is Borg who draws the sharper distinction, here between the "pre-Easter Jesus" (Jesus in his historical lifetime) and the "post-Easter Jesus" (what Jesus became after his death). Wright rejects Enlightenment distinctions between faith's and history's ways of knowing (and the privilege invariably accorded history's way). He argues not just for continuity between the Jesus discovered through historical research and the Jesus experienced in the practice of faith (as would Borg), but for "integration" of the two. "The Jesus I know in prayer, in the sacraments, in the faces of those in need, is the Jesus I meet in the historical evidence--including the New Testament, of course, but the New Testament read not so much as the church has told me to read it but as I read it with my historical consciousness fully operative."

Borg is skeptical of Wright's position, wondering if "knowing by faith, for example, help[s] in making a judgment about whether the story of Jesus walking on the water or feeding the multitude with a few loaves and fishes is based on history remembered rather than being a metaphorical narrative." Not surprisingly, they never resolve this crucial difference.

Wright's encompassing vision of Jesus sketched in his chapter on "The Mission and Message of Jesus" is distilled from his Jesus and the Victory of God. In that book Wright presents the following portrait: Jesus was "a first-century Jewish prophet" who "announc[ed] God's kingdom" and who "believed that the kingdom was breaking into Israel's history in and through his own presence and work," and so summoned "other Jews to abandon alternative kingdom visions and join him in his." Jesus also warned his listeners "of dire consequences for the nation, for Jerusalem, and for the temple, if his summons was ignored." Jesus' "kingdom agenda" for Israel "demanded that Israel leave off its . . . self-defense . . . and embrace instead the vocation to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth." This demand "led him into a symbolic clash with those who embrace other [agendas], and this, together with the positive symbols of his own kingdom agenda, point to the way in which he saw his inaugurated kingdom moving toward accomplishment . . . indicating in symbolic actions and in cryptic and coded sayings, that he believed he was Israel's messiah."

Borg, like Wright, begins by emphasizing the crucial importance of understanding Jesus within the context of Judaism, but moves outward from this context to a broad consideration of Jesus' ancient Mediterranean social world and to the cross-cultural study of religion. He sees Jesus as a Jewish mystic or spirit person (and, as such, a healer and exorcist), a teacher of subversive and alternative wisdom, a social prophet and the initiator of a movement.

Borg and Wright disagree on one of the most important questions for Jesus studies: what in shorthand may be referred to as "Jesus' messianic self-consciousness." On this question, Wright even draws a different conclusion from Borg's work than Borg himself does. When Borg says that "Jesus acted and spoke in ways consistent with his launching a veiled claim to be messiah, and inconsistent with his having no intention of making such a claim," Wright thinks he is offering an historical hypothesis that can be upheld. "If Jesus was all the things Marcus says he was," Wright says, "then, in a century that saw many would-be messiahs and royal personages come and go, leading movements, announcing the kingdom, going to Jerusalem and doing things about the temple, it is highly likely that Marcus's 'Jewish mystic,' if he was indeed a Spirit person, a social prophet, and a movement initiator, would have faced the question both from onlookers and from within his own heart and mind: was he, then, the messiah?"

But Borg concludes that "the Christian conviction that Jesus is the messiah cannot . . . be based on the probability judgment that Jesus thought he was. It is instead a confessional statement." This crucial difference is not resolved. Nor, the authors finally maintain, need it be.

In the last two chapters the authors explore the implications of their visions of Jesus for the Christian life. Wright, moving between worship and mission as the two poles of the Christian life, briefly explicates these implications for our spirituality, theology, politics and healing. He concludes with a strong claim, over against Borg, for a vision of Jesus that "integrates" the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith; the Jewish messiah and Christian Lord; the many facets of Christian experience; history and eschatology; and history and faith.

Borg calls for "a life full of God," a God who is near and can be experienced, is immediately accessible, compassionate, and passionate about justice. "Jesus," Borg writes, "is . . . the decisive revelation of what a life full of God is like."

Someone had to have "the last word," Borg says in an endnote, but I wish Borg had not. Borg does an admirable job of summarizing his understanding of Wright's positions and of the differences between his and Wright's thinking, and he is certainly correct in stating that their major differences grow out of how differently they view and use their sources. But a parallel summary by Wright would have been welcome.