Robert Crotty writes ‘not primarily for professional theologians or biblical scholars’, but to help ‘intelligent people to participate in the debate on modern Jesus research’ (p. 1). The book provides an introduction to the issues of the historical search.

The first chapter describes the rise of historical interpretation of the Bible. This forms the background for a description of the ‘three quests’ for the historical Jesus. The author includes discussion of the response of the Roman Catholic Church to biblical interpretation. This is an aspect to which the author returns at various points throughout the work and which will be helpful for Catholic readers, in particular, without being sensed as a distraction by others.

The description of the quests is also handled in the context of the shift to postmodernism, an aspect which informs the book and its conclusions. Crotty’s espousal of postmodernism is reflected in his emphasis on literary method. The second chapter, ‘Reading Gospels as Literature: the Skills of the Interpreter’, introduces the methods of textual, source and form criticism. The treatment includes also the relevance of these for historical research.

The following two chapters, ‘Second Temple Judaism: the Gospel Context’ and ‘New Discoveries and Ancient Texts’ continue to provide the intelligent reader with important background information for the discussion. The chapter on second temple Judaism is strong on political and social history, but somewhat meagre on the religious ideas of the various strands of Judaism in the period. The chapter on texts focuses on the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi discoveries. While these have been the new discoveries, the book could leave the impression that other writings of the period are less significant. I would have thought that such an introduction would need some discussion of the many other writings of second temple Judaism, which have been ‘rediscovered’, so to speak, in recent decades. In a book which will place Thiering’s and Eisenman’s Jesus beside the reconstructions of Crossan, Borg and Meier, the prominence given to the Scrolls is disproportionate and perhaps gives those two constructions undue prominence.

In chapter 5 Crotty introduces the historical reconstructions of Crossan, Borg and Meier. The methodology of each is clearly described. The reader is given a fair and reasonably detailed picture
of each reconstruction. Crotty is careful to point out that Crossan draws the analogy with Cynics tentatively, a point often missed, partly because of Crossan’s use of the designation of Jesus as ‘a peasant Jewish Cynic’. It is disappointing to find no critical discussion of Crossan’s work. ‘For the moment it is sufficient to say that Crossan’s Jesus is plausible and well presented’ (p. 144). But the same descriptive mode continues in the account of Borg. Crotty writes: ‘Crossan and Borg rely on much the same sort of sources in order to reconstruct their respective historical Jesuses. The reader is left with a choice’ (p. 148). The same approach characterises the treatment of Meier. These are very informative descriptions of what these authors are saying and why they are saying it. Why no engagement with their scholarship?

The treatment of Thiering and Eisenman follows a similar pattern. First Crotty describes the emergence of the ‘consensus view’, as he describes it, and the grounds which underpin it. He then introduces Thiering’s view. It is not inappropriate in an Australian publication that her work be given fairly detailed treatment. It is a very clear and fair exposition. Crotty mentions that Thiering’s views have ‘affronted mainstream Christian belief’ (p. 167) and highlights her alternative explanation of the virginal conception and of the resurrection. But why not mention the response of critical scholars to her work? One is left with pop-postmodernist impression: one interpretation is as good as another.

The conclusion to the chapter comes closest to some critical assessment, but all in the space of a single paragraph (p. 175) in very general terms: Identifications of characters of the scrolls with characters of the gospels cannot be verified beyond doubt; ‘both deny that the recent carbon-14 results affect their theories.’ Crotty goes on to point out that we have no evidence that Jesus was connected with the Qumran community and there are significant differences between his historical life style and theirs. The final pages of the chapter include a discussion of the way the various constructions outlined in this and the previous chapter might impact on Christian faith. The focus is again primarily descriptive.

In the following chapter Crotty moves to judgement. It is to the effect that for Christian faith the foundation is not historical reconstructions but the Jesus-Myth. In a postmodern age we are to recognise the historical reconstructions as relative. I find a correlation between this perspective and the lack of critical engagement with the reconstructions. Instead the energy is towards arguing that the Jesus-myth such as we have it in Mark is what sustains faith. Much of this chapter is a lucid exposition of Mark. ‘The central feature of any literate religion is not its sacred text, ...but its quality of religious experience - the quality of human reaction that it aroused by a deep-felt contact with Ultimacy’ (p. 182). The text of Mark as expression of the Jesus-myth can evoke that sense and did so in the context of a mythological world view which saw Jesus as deliverer from the powers of evil.

Crotty’s argument is that the gospels need to be rediscovered as myth. The Enlightenment turn to history led to a clumsy misuse of Mark as history, a project which did not succeed. ‘The point being
laboured in this chapter is this: neither Mark nor any other gospel text has been found to be historical because they were never meant to be historical’ (p. 216). In his conclusion Crotty presses the point home. Mark’s myth does not require historical reliability. ‘Like all myths, it may or may not be historically true. Its utility does not depend on any historical verification’ (p. 220). He continues: ‘Salvation is by experience, and experience comes from myth and ritual, not history’. The failure of the reconstructions of historians has a ‘negative value but an important one. Christian faith obviously cannot be constructed on history’ (p. 220). The search must be for the authentic Jesus-myth, not the authentic historical Jesus.

For Crotty, ‘literary methodology ... controls the Christ of Faith’, not historical methodology (p. 221). Nevertheless, he argues, literary methodology requires sensitivity to the fact that the myth is ‘more easily read in the first century than in the twentieth’. He then acknowledges that this means that ‘reading a gospel text from the first century CE is not for children; it is for mature and skilled adults’. ‘Life seen through the focus of the Jesus-myth, with all of its Jewish trappings, would be an exciting vision’ (p. 223).

It will have been this kind of insight which led Crotty to write this book and to include in it the material about historical background so essential to understanding the myth. That then raises the question whether, if that is the case for ‘the Jewish trappings’, the historical information about the historical church, and, more to the point, the historical Jesus is not also relevant for understanding the myth. You cannot have it both ways. Once you give importance to one part of history for understanding myth, it must surely apply to all pertinent history.

There is much about the centrality of myth (whether historical or not) with which this reviewer agrees. Christian faith revolves around a living story, not least, as many would go on to say, a living Christ. Yet to make a virtue out of diversity among historical reconstruction is an old move and one which, to my mind, fails to come to terms with the issues. Historicity and its risks are part of the reality, including the unknown, with which Christian faith is saddled, as long as it has not cut loose the myth from history. People may weigh the relevance of that history differently, some as an instance others as unique incarnation in time.

For Crotty it is the Jesus-myth of the first century which has primary value. By contrast, Thiering’s is a twentieth century myth, and Eisenman’s, no myth at all; and the various attempts of Crossan, Borg, and Meier to make a link are failures. The book shows no interest in engaging them at a historical level. ‘The Historical Search’ (subtitle of the book) is irrelevant; only the Jesus-myth is the answer to ‘The Jesus Question.’ I am not so sure.

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