

Christianity in the Making: Beginning From Jerusalem

Part Seven is massive. It considers such topics as the earliest community, the Hellenists, the emergence of Paul, the mission of Peter, and the crisis which eventuated in the first Apostolic Council. Dunn assembles loads of information, most of it drawn strictly from the New Testament. Where else, after all, could he have found it?

And that brings me to my chief criticism of Dunn's work: it is simply, when all is said and done, a very fine retelling of the biblical narrative with snippets and splatters of extra-biblical materials tossed in as a sort of supporting cast.

Certainly, Dunn has not a few interesting remarks to make. But these are buried so deeply amidst the mountain of material that by the time the reader reaches the summit where these materials are found, he is exhausted and nearly oxygen deprived. For instance, 'That Jesus' Galilean disciples should have abandoned so completely the region where Jesus had conducted his most successful mission (Galilee) is quite remarkable' (p. 167). It is remarkable indeed. And a thought worth pondering. But it ignores the fact that Acts doesn't, and couldn't, record everything that happened in the early Church. There may be no mention of a mission to Galilee but that doesn't mean, or prove, there wasn't one.

Of course there is value in writing much. And in much of Dunn's writing. But there is also something to be said for brevity, getting to the point, and then moving on. Much of what Dunn says here he has said before, most notably in his earlier works on Jesus and the Spirit.

Yet Dunn is clearly capable of moments of clarity and lucidity, such as when he writes concerning the layout of the city of Jerusalem 'more or less all is guesswork' (p. 176). Truer words were never spoken and could be applied to 95% of what is asserted by Dunn himself about early Christianity. Section Seven consists primarily of a retelling of the biblical narrative supported by guesswork and supposition. Indeed, Dunn writes 'My own guess is that Jesus was not initially remembered as speaking of his return, either during his mission or during his post-resurrection instructions' (p. 225).

I'm not faulting Dunn for guessing. There's simply nothing else that can really be done when we discuss a period of time for which we have only theological materials as historical source. Theological materials, or for lack of a more accurate term, sermons, are not the best sorts of sources on which to build a historical narrative. It's rather like attempting to narrate modern events based on the Sunday sermon from the local vicar.

Section eight next. Stay tuned.