

Living Jesus, by Luke Timothy Johnson

reviewed by [William Brosend](#) in the [June 30, 1999](#) issue

**Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel.**

*By Luke Timothy Johnson. Harper SanFrancisco, 210 pp.*

In an earlier book, *The Real Jesus* (1996), Luke Timothy Johnson criticized the style and self-promotion of the Jesus Seminar and questioned the methods and motives, if not the faith, of some of its members.

In *Living Jesus* he does not name the scholars, but they are present as the "historians" whose basic premise is that the church is mistaken in confessing that "Jesus is alive and powerfully if invisibly present to creation as its Lord." While Johnson's apologetic intent is clear, a confessional and autobiographical tone replaces the adversarial as he sifts the New Testament for a portrait of the Jesus who is "powerfully alive as Lord."

The reception of this book is not likely be without controversy. Johnson, a professor at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, draws a dichotomy between the historian's Jesus and the living Jesus of faith. The historian treats Jesus as "simply a figure of the past whose existence ceased with his human death. . . . What can be known about him must be learned in the same way we learn about any other figure of the past, which is to study what he said and did until his death." By contrast, "the confession of Jesus as resurrected . . . and as ruling as Lord of the church and world is what distinguishes the Christian view of Jesus from every other view. For everyone else, Jesus is another dead man; for Christians, he is the Living One." Will we be historians or Christians? Johnson insists we must choose.

Having rejected the historical-critical method as leading inexorably to a "dead Jesus," Johnson also sets aside the "so-called social sciences" (does he mean the "social-scientific criticism" prominent in historical Jesus studies?). These disciplines are flawed because they dismiss "considerations of freedom and interiority and treat human beings collectively, as though they were only a slightly more disorganized hive of bees." Johnson is left with text, community and tradition.

He begins by focusing on ways of "learning Jesus" through community and creed, with other disciples and with the saints of every age. Then he explores how we learn about Jesus as Living Lord in the Apocalypse, James, Hebrews and other epistles. He devotes a chapter to "Paul's Witness to Jesus." The book's second part offers a chapter on each evangelist and concludes with "The Continuing Mystery" of Jesus. Johnson builds on a distinction, attributed to Gabriel Marcel, between viewing people as problems to be solved or mysteries to be experienced. He illustrates this concept with loving examples from his own marriage.

The book's subtitle, *Learning the Heart of the Gospel*, leads one to expect that considerable attention will be paid to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Though this expectation is not disappointed, the discussion of the Gospels is the least satisfying part of the book. Mark develops a "complex image" of Jesus, emphasizing his role as teacher but offering few examples of Jesus' teaching. Matthew builds on Mark while "reducing Mark's verbosity" (the first time I have heard Mark called verbose in comparison to Matthew) and depicts Jesus as one who teaches, fulfills and personifies Torah. Luke/Acts focuses on Jesus as prophet, and John shows how Jesus reveals God. Though Johnson quotes an extraordinary number of Gospel verses, his portrait of Jesus is oddly dull.

Perhaps by setting aside so much as invalid or inadequate for the study of Jesus, Johnson has not left himself enough material from which to choose the colors and contours of his own Jesus portrait. Perhaps he wanted to leave readers a full palette for their own renditions, since we who affirm Johnson's "embrace of multiplicity" must still make choices of emphasis, nuance and shading in our depiction of the Jesus in whom we believe. While I did not expect Johnson to offer something as spare as John Dominic Crossan's concept of Jesus as "cynical Jewish peasant," I did hope to find something more rigorous than what is presented.

Finally, Johnson's dichotomy between historian and Christian is false. His statement that "as long as [people] both claim to hold Christian faith and seek to base that faith on a historically reconstructed Jesus, they are self-contradictory" is doubly unfortunate. It questions the faith of New Testament scholars who consider their work to be historical (which includes John Meier as well as Crossan, Tom Wright as well as Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza) and denies that critical historical study has the capacity to inform and enrich faith. To cede historical-critical and social-scientific study to those whose portraits of Jesus Johnson finds wanting is to give away too much.