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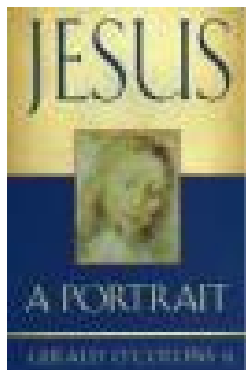
Scholarly works on Jesus offer complementary perspectives

by Brian Welter by Catholic News Service by Catholic News Service

JESUS: WORD MADE FLESH by Gerard S. Sloyan. Liturgical Press (Collegeville, Minn., 2008). 194 pp., \$19.95.

JESUS: A PORTRAIT by Gerald O'Collins, S.J. Orbis (Maryknoll, N.Y., 2008). 246 pp., \$25.

Fr. Gerard S. Sloyan's *Jesus: Word Made Flesh* and *Jesus: A Portrait* by Jesuit Fr. Gerald O'Collins offer complementary rather than competing discussions on Jesus. Both are demanding, scholarly authors; Sloyan closely analyzes the New Testament account of Jesus, while O'Collins starts with theology before turning to the biblical evidence.



O'Collins offers a faith-based approach that often reads like a Sunday homily, making

the book slightly more accessible than Sloyan's. He has a sense of the Jesus of faith for whom Christians hunger. He therefore takes a liberal approach with filling in the gaps in the record on Jesus' life.

"Jesus embodied the message of the divine kingdom before preaching it," O'Collins writes. "His life at

Nazareth expressed in advance the hidden, humble quality of the kingdom." At this point, he turns to Scripture to find something specific.

O'Collins loves to think about the kinds of experiences Jesus must have had. He takes the interesting viewpoint that we can learn about Jesus' early life from the parables, so many of which were agricultural. Jesus would have witnessed repeatedly and at close range the workings of vineyards and winemaking, sowing and harvesting, and even dishonest management of these operations, as attested to by one of his parables.

This simplicity came through more generally in Jesus' personality and the "hereness and nowness" of his approach. Jesus did not concern himself with history or old feuds, but with the lives of the people he met every day. His language was "earthly" and therefore accessible to the poor, illiterate people who followed him.

O'Collins manages to keep his focus on an intimate portrayal of Jesus that is nonetheless faithful to the church's teachings and to the biblical account. His faith-based approach allows him to be pastoral with the reader, including the following zinger, which is more about Jesus' followers (and potential followers) than about Jesus himself: "I continue to suspect that it is the significance rather than the fact of these miracles which poses a problem for some or even many people."



Sloyan gets his theology about Jesus from a much closer reading of the New Testament

witness than O'Collins, and this can at times bog things down. Rather than presenting a coherent vision of Jesus, which is most helpful in the case of O'Collins, he gives a coherent vision of the New Testament writings.

In fact, the book is more about the New Testament and how we can interpret its various writings than it is about Jesus. The reader will probably be closer to the Bible at the end of the reading, but not necessarily closer to Christ.

The book does offer some thoughts that can help us more deeply understand Jesus at a personal level, though this closely follows the New Testament perspective, as in the discussion of the Gospel of Mark: "His (Jesus') business was to proclaim God his father, not himself or the redemptive act, if indeed he knew anything of it beforehand."

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The author has interesting things to say about Paul's vision of Jesus. This is a refreshing discussion, as Sloyan pushes the reader none too gently past the 1970s' Jesus-is-your-best-friend spirituality, and invokes the view of "Christ now in glory with the Father, with whom every baptized member in all the churches is in an intimate personal relation."

Sloyan holds doctorates in both theology and Scripture, so he naturally bases his theology on a close reading of the various biblical Greek writings. This makes for very energetic scholarship and advanced theology, as at a third-year university level. But it doesn't offer much to those who don't have a more basic training in the Bible or theology.

In this case, the more pastoral and freely written book by O'Collins does the trick.

(Welter is a freelance contributor to the B.C. Catholic, the newspaper of the Archdiocese of Vancouver, British Columbia, and is studying for his doctorate in systematic theology.)

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