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- [Message Boards](#)

Review

First Light: Jesus and the Kingdom

Book Info

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If you're looking for a resource
 *to help people get beyond the idea that the Kingdom of God is about heavenly reward,
 *to help people understand the Biblical and historical underpinnings of the Kingdom of God as Jesus lived and taught it, and
 *to help people articulate the understanding that the Kingdom of God is a present reality distinct from and often opposed to other kingdoms of our world, then take a good look at the latest Living the Questions DVD "First Light - Jesus and the Kingdom of God," featuring Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan.

A disclaimer: I was a participant on the pilgrimage to Israel in the spring of 2008 during which this series was filmed. I didn't know about the filming when I signed up, and was frankly a little disappointed, as I was concerned that the leaders would be more focused on the final product than on the pilgrimage itself. Nonetheless, I was eager to see how they put it all together - the lectures, the landscapes and locations.

Nothing can replace the experience of actually traveling in the Galilee and Jerusalem. But in terms of learning what these two progressive Biblical scholars are currently thinking about Jesus and the kingdom, I find "First Light" actually as good if not better than what we experienced from the evening lectures on the trip. Each segment is tightly edited and the discussion is interwoven with film shot on site, as well as still photos of art depicting Jesus' life and teachings, many of them taken from the exquisite murals at St. Gabriel's Church in Nazareth. The first six sections are especially well-edited, while the last six tend toward primarily "talking heads." Yet the talk alone is engaging and easy to follow. The segments are

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*An approach
to Christianity
that is inclusive,
innovative,
informed...*

information-laden but not heavy.

Each segment provides roughly 22 minutes of Borg and/or Crossan discussing a specific aspect of the Kingdom of God in its first century Palestinian setting. What were the people expecting? How did John the Baptist and Jesus differ in their understanding of the Kingdom? Why was the Sea of Galilee so important to Jesus' project? What did the language of "Jesus as Lord" mean? And what does that language mean for us today, particularly living in our own empire as we are?

Four sessions in particular stand out:

- *The Matrix of Jesus is a very effective introduction to the social, political, and historical world of Jesus
- *The Lake as the World will prompt people to consider Jesus' ministry at the Sea of Galilee in a whole new light
- *Jesus as Lord puts the messianic vocabulary into a whole new setting when placed alongside identical vocabulary for Caesar
- *Substitutionary Atonement is as helpful and concise a summary of alternative ways of understanding Jesus' death on the cross as anything I have seen.

Three sessions are apt to provoke lively discussion. Crossan has moved away from thinking about communion as a symbol of radical hospitality and table-sharing to thinking of communion as a statement of commitment to the equal distribution of the world's goods - a commitment made at the risk of spilling one's blood. That will get your group talking about communion!

The last two sessions, on resurrection and on empire, are also provocative. Borg's explanation of the meaning of the resurrection is compelling, but his sense that there was no physical resurrection of Jesus' body is apt to set off alarms for many. And finally, America as the New Rome may well be challenging, but critical to understanding what it means to follow the path of Jesus. Borg and Crossan handle it with delicacy yet honesty.

I have one major drawback and one wish about this new series.

The drawback: the DVD costs \$300 for the initial outlay and comes with a \$50 annual renewal fee for access to web-based study materials. I haven't yet seen the materials and can't yet comment on them.

The wish: this series is information rich and will help change how people experience and live their faith. Yet that change could come

more readily and at greater depth if there were a faith formation element to it - think how that would enrich its use in Adult Ed settings, for instance. On our Israel Pilgrimage the formation element came out of daily morning meditations led by Canon Marianne Borg. The meditations were sublime and enhanced the rest of the trip immeasurably. They are still with me. I hope someone will think to film these meditations at some point and add them to this, and other, Living the Question resources.

The bottom line: I've used the DVD with two groups of widely differing ages and faith experience, and what I've seen has convinced me that the price, while steep, is worth it. I plan to make extensive use of individual segments as stand alone teaching aids in new member classes, confirmation, and adult study classes.

And finally, filmmaker David Ice and editor Jeff Proctor-Murphy deserve special mention - they made "First Light" a visual treat that takes it well beyond the usual Living the Questions offerings.

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