Jesus as god/God; the contribution of John’s apocalyptic vision in Revelation; and various other themes (ch. 4). Dunn concludes this chapter with a critique of Bauckham’s proposal that the NT texts indicate that early Christians included Jesus within the “divine identity.” Citing the confusion associated with the language of “identity,” Dunn argues that “equation” is a better way of saying “that if Jesus is God he is not YHWH.”

As the conclusion makes clear, Dunn is concerned not only with the historical question but also with two modern, theological problems: the worship of Jesus to the neglect of God the Father, and the challenge of interfaith dialogue. By looking at the earliest available evidence, Dunn hopes “to clarify what lay behind the confession of Jesus as the Son of God in Trinitarian terms” (p. 1).

Few people are able to marshal the depth, breadth, and height of historical questions as skillfully as Dunn. His mastery of texts, critical judgment, and ability to make complicated matters accessible to a wide audience make him one of the most compelling voices in the study of Christian origins. Not everyone will agree with all of Dunn’s conclusions—including me—but he raises the relevant issues that require us to think and rethink the status accorded Jesus in our faith.

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Jesus and the Powers: Conflict, Covenant, and the Hope of the Poor
by Richard Horsley

Fortress, Minneapolis, 2011. 248 pp. $29.00.

AS I WRITE, MOVEMENTS of popular discontent are sweeping the globe, from the Arab world, to the Indian subcontinent, and on the streets of American cities in the form of the Occupy Wall Street protests. It is an interesting time to read Jesus and the Powers, because Richard Horsley views Jesus and his movement in similar terms. Rejecting “simplistic divisions” between religion and politics typical of the “standard biblical studies” approach, Horsley sees Jesus as the leader of a movement of disenfranchised peasants, smothered under Roman colonial power and choked by the repressive policies of their urban overlords. Battling against these life-draining conditions, Jesus sought to restore local communities to renewed covenantal existence, “to withstand the disintegrative effects of imperial power on village communities,” and to “revitalize mutual support and solidarity among component families of the villages” (p. 144). Citing modern anthropological studies of colonial Africa, Horsley argues that the “unclean spirits” Jesus exorcised were the reified, personalized effects of colonial domination. Jesus’ preaching about the kingdom of God is an instance of performative speech that brings into reality that which it announces; according to Horsley, Jesus did not believe that God was going to intervene in human affairs with an apocalyptic event.

Not surprisingly, the strengths of this book—its overarching theoretical framework, explanatory power, and moral vision—also contribute to its weaknesses. A scholar wielding a master theory must dismiss contrary evidence, and one often encounters versions of the phrase, “there is little evidence that. . . .” Some readers will be surprised to learn that resurrection belief was essentially irrelevant for inspiring the movement: “There is little or no indication that some sort of resurrection was decisive in inspiring formation or expansion” of the Jesus movement (p. 198). The disappointment and devastation of the disciples after the crucifixion is simply a “passing motif”: “There is no indication that their disappointment is a significant stage in the
overall story” (p. 195). Finally, if Jesus did stand at the head of a significant social movement, if his disciples were reliable co-workers in his mission, if indeed his entry into Jerusalem was an obvious and evident challenge to the Jerusalem authorities, why then were Jesus’ followers not rounded up by the authorities along with their teacher? Even with these important reservations, I anticipate using this book in class. It offers a coherent and compelling way of picturing Jesus and his mission.

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Redeeming the Gospel: The Christian Faith Reconsidered
by David Brondos


IN THIS CREATIVE AND insightful text, David Brondos seeks to honor the Lutheran principle of sola Scriptura even as he challenges many traditional Lutheran teachings around justification, sanctification, and salvation. He engages this hermeneutical task by delving deeply into Scripture in order to construct a more faithful presentation of the gospel message that speaks to the world in which we live today. In the first five chapters, Brondos re-examines key doctrines of the Christian faith, looking particularly at the Lutheran presentation of these doctrines in comparison with their articulation in early Judaism and Roman Catholicism. In the final sixth chapter, Brondos explicitly lays out his proposal, which is both exciting and challenging in some places.

In particular, Brondos seeks a new interpretation of salvation, one that places greater emphasis on our communal life in the “now,” and also lifts up the role of human response to God’s grace. His emphasis on the Christian community as a whole, and the fact that we are responsible for one another, is a welcome corrective to the traditional emphasis on the salvation of the individual alone. However, in the same way that Lutherans always have struggled with the tension between relying exclusively on God’s gracious action for our salvation and recognizing the importance of the human faithful response to God’s action, there are also places in this book where the wording around this tension is both unclear and unhelpful. For example, the statement, “Thus we are constantly directed to God rather than to ourselves, even though our salvation does indeed depend on what we do as well as what God does for us and in us” (p. 182), is confusing at best, and dangerous at worst.

Finally, one of the most interesting aspects of this book for Lutherans in particular is the way Brondos reinterprets core Lutheran doctrines that are presented in the Lutheran Confessions. Brondos does not try to avoid or dismiss what he is doing here, stating explicitly that his presentation of the gospel includes the recognition that “certain doctrines that have traditionally formed part of Lutheran teaching are no longer tenable in the form in which they appear in Luther’s writings and the Lutheran Confessional documents” (p. 211). As such, this book stands as an excellent example of how to engage faithfully with the tradition from a contemporary standpoint in a way that moves beyond mere representation and restatement, while still maintaining fidelity to the gospel message at the core of the tradition itself. For this reason alone, not to mention the valuable contemporary explication of