

Reviews:

Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006.

Review by S. D. Charlesworth

Fabricating Jesus, like many similar works, is a response to increasingly sensational claims about the historical Jesus. Evans is eminently qualified to undertake such a work and in his hands careful polemic can hardly be dismissed as evangelical diatribe. Though written at a popular level, the book comes with an impressive array of scholarly endorsements. A glossary explains scholarly terms and minimal but informative endnotes are meant to facilitate further study for interested readers. Blocks of shaded text which feature throughout contain helpful explanatory and additional information.

Evans introduces the examination of specific non-canonical texts by discussing briefly four scholars who have written about their personal faith journeys (chapter 1). After differentiating between moderate or 'old school' sceptics (Robert Funk and James Robinson) and radical or 'new school' sceptics (Robert Price and Bart Ehrman), he finds a common denominator—all four have rejected the 'rigid, fundamentalist' (i.e., verbal inspiration) view of Scripture of their formative years. Yet similar expectations of Scripture underlie their rejection of much of the material in the canonical Gospels.

Flawed starting points also generate incorrect conclusions. In chapter 2 Evans addresses the claims of members of the Jesus Seminar that Jesus was illiterate, had no interest in Scripture or eschatology, and did not think of himself as divine or the Messiah of Israel. The fact that Jesus was frequently called 'teacher', had disciples, and interpreted the meaning of Scripture strongly implies that he was literate. The question 'have you not read?' (see Mt. 12:3, 5; 19:4; Mk. 2:25; 12:10, 26; Lk. 10:26) would leave him open to ridicule if he himself could not read. These same verses also show that his teaching was rooted in Scripture. As for the Jewish Scriptures, Jesus cites or alludes to all of the books of the Law, most of the Prophets, and some of the Writings. Historically, there can be no radical disconnect between Jesus and his Jewish world. For Evans, speculation is unnecessary: the Jewish Scriptures explain the expression 'kingdom of God' as the rule of God. However, his assertion that Jesus did not proclaim the end of the world as part of his eschatology is questionable (see Mk. 13 and parallels). As for a messianic self-understanding, Jesus describes his activity by allusions to messianic passages in the Jewish Scriptures, and contemporary documents among the Dead Sea Scrolls contain a similar understanding of the person and role of the Messiah.

Hyper-'critical' scholars have often used extreme criteria for establishing the authenticity of Jesus traditions with the

result that only a very limited number of the sayings and deeds of Jesus are accepted as 'authentic'. In contrast, Evans believes that appropriate use of criteria can demonstrate that the Gospel narratives are historically reliable. In the last part of the same chapter he concludes his introduction by outlining a number of such criteria. Two of the more self-evident are Semitisms and Palestinian background. However, the assumption of much historical Jesus research (and Evans himself), that Jesus spoke and taught only or almost exclusively in Aramaic, overlooks the implications of the Greek evidence. It is likely that some of the sayings of Jesus were spoken in Greek.

In the body of the book Evans turns his attention to non-canonical Gospels. Given the space constraints his treatment of the Gospels of Thomas (chapter 3), Peter, Mary, and the so-called Egerton Gospel (chapter 4), is fair and balanced. All of the Greek fragments, apart from the Akhmîm fragment, are to be dated to the second half of the second century and are certainly secondary or dependent on the canonical Gospels. In addition, there is no proof that the much later Akhmîm fragment is actually from *Peter*, and considerable questions surround the identification of the second-century Greek fragments with *Peter*. Rather than saving faith, in *Thomas* and *Mary* the emphasis is on secret or esoteric knowledge (*gnôsis* in Greek) available only to a select few. *Peter* and the Egerton Gospel imitate the narrative style of the canonical Gospels and introduce their own individualistic material. Since all of these writings are reacting in some way to the canonical Gospels, Evans is rightly very negative about the possibility of finding primitive, pre-synoptic tradition among or behind the secondary material.

The case for a Cynic Jesus is critiqued in chapter 5. Evans points to the lack of evidence for first-century Galilean Cynics, antipathy to Roman rule as revealed in the Jewish revolt of AD 66-70, commitment to Jewish laws and customs as demonstrated by the exclusive use of Jewish pottery by Jews in Galilee, and in particular the Jewish and non-Roman character of Sepphoris prior to 70. All of this amounts to a hometown. Nazareth was close to Sepphoris, and a region that was hardly touched by Greek culture. But Sepphoris was also a regional centre where Greek was the language of administration and administrative interaction between city and country. The influence of the Greek-speaking cities surrounding Galilee should also be considered. To be clear, there is no case for Jesus the Cynic, but Greek influences – particularly when it comes to language – should not be underestimated.

Chapter 6 deals with the propensity to extract sayings of Jesus from their contexts by attributing their narrative settings to the early church rather than to the life context of the historical Jesus. The next step for some is to differentiate between sayings of Jesus and 'sayings' of the church. As Evans counters, the evangelists did situate traditions, but not with deceptive intent. The similar content of a number of rabbinic parables demonstrates the folly of

rejecting authenticity because the actions of protagonists seem exaggerated or incredible. Using the parable of the wicked tenants as an example (Mk. 12:1-12), he surveys a number of interpretations that reject the context (see Isa. 5:1-7; Ps. 118:22-23). However, while the point is well taken that context is important, the argument that literal Israel can only be the vineyard of God overlooks the fact that Israel has always been spiritual as well (see Rom. 2:28-29; 9:6-8).

Evans appeals again to criteria – multiple attestation, dissimilarity (to contemporaneous magic and sorcery), potential for embarrassment (e.g., inability to work miracles in some places because of unbelief) – to establish the authenticity of Jesus’ healings and miracles (chapter 7). To reject the miraculous is to overlook important aspects of Jesus’ work. Contemporaries recognised the extraordinary nature of his powerful works (see Mt. 9:8; Mk. 1:22, 27; 9:38-40; 12:42; and parallels) in which the kingdom (or rule) of God and his Messiah was present and revealed and the kingdom of darkness overcome.

Other subjects covered are dubious uses of Josephus with respect to John the Baptist and Pilate (chapter 8), and the invention – often by projecting the second century back on to the first – of multiple, competing ‘Christianities’ and Gospels (chapter 9). The latter has encouraged a plethora of books – by authors such as Barbara Thiering, Michael Baigent (whose claims and methodology are faintly reminiscent of Morton Smith and the so-called ‘Secret Gospel of Mark’), Dan Brown and, to some extent, James Tabor – which ignore historical evidence and exploit the ignorance and gullibility of modern society (chapter 10). Evans concludes by reviewing a number of important aspects of

Jesus and the movement he founded. These include his relationship to Judaism, his self-understanding and aims (again driven by the mistaken view that Jesus wanted to restore the sovereignty of literal Israel), his death and the meaning of his resurrection for the early church, and the reliability of the ‘essential core’ of the Gospel accounts. Finally, two brief appendices negatively evaluate *agrapha* (isolated sayings, possibly by Jesus, from various sources) and the *Gospel of Judas*.

The value of this book lies in its willingness to meet sceptical scholars on their own ground. By fair and careful use of historical method Evans demonstrates the shortcomings of radical criticism. As D. Moody Smith said some years ago, ‘I think it is not unfair to suggest that we are seeing now a willingness or propensity to credit the independence and antiquity of the apocryphal Gospels that is somewhat surprising in view of what is allowed in the case of the canonicals’ (‘The Problem of John and the Synoptics in Light of the Relation Between Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels’, in A. Denaux (ed.), *John and the Synoptics*, BETL 101; Leuven: Peeters and Leuven University Press, 1992, 151). This is precisely the kind of unhistorical bias that characterizes radical scholarship. Evans is right to conclude that the ‘old story’ is ‘far more compelling than the newer, radical, minimalist, revisionist, obscurantist and faddish versions of the Jesus story that have been put forward in recent years’ (235).

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