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BOOK REVIEW

Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006). 290 pp. Hdbk. US\$21.00

In every generation there have been authors who make radical claims about Jesus and the Bible. However, there seems to be an increase of such books in this postmodern age where it is fashionable to question all forms of authority, including the Bible and the Church. This has been demonstrated by the unprecedented popularity of Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code*. With so many challenges to traditional Christianity, it is difficult for many in the Church to know where to turn for clarification of the facts. While many scholars have written response books to specific claims, Craig Evans's *Fabricating Jesus* has one of the most ambitious goals: dealing with almost every popular and radical challenge to the traditional view of Jesus. In this book, Evans tackles the Jesus Seminar, Gnostic Gospels, Dan Brown, Bart Ehrman, Barbara Thiering, James Tabor, Tom Harpur, and many more.

Paralleling Bart Ehrman's powerful testimony of his journey from faith to unbelief in *Misquoting Jesus*, Craig Evans begins his book with a preface recounting his own journey into academia with the result that Evans, unlike Ehrman, found his faith and confidence in the Bible strengthened. This sets the tone of the book, not just as a resource for scholars, but as an almost pastoral counsel for those struggling with challenges against the Bible. In his introduction, Evans is explicit in his purpose for this book. There are four targeted readers: (1) those confused by wild theories and conflicting portraits of Jesus, (2) those interested in Jesus but who are having trouble sorting through the contradictory claims, (3) skeptics who have embraced some of the radical

theories, and (4) the guild of scholars, calling them to a higher level of scholarship that does not equate skepticism with scholarship.

In the first chapter, Evans treats what he calls “old school skeptics,” such as Robert Funk and James Robinson, and “new school skeptics,” such as Robert Price and Bart Ehrman. The difference is that the old school, while liberal and critical of evangelical interpretations, still retains the language of traditional Christianity, while the new school is much more radical and skeptical of the biblical witness.

In the second chapter, Evans treats the issue of authenticity, critiquing the work of the Jesus Seminar and summarizing the tools of more balanced historical Jesus scholarship.

Evans then goes on to spend a number of chapters on texts such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, *Gospel of Peter*, *Egerton Gospel*, *Gospel of Mary* and the *Secret Gospel of Mark*. In these chapters, Evans interacts especially with the scholarship of John Dominic Crossan. Evans responds to Crossan’s claim that Jesus should be understood primarily as a traveling Cynic rather than in terms of a Jewish messiah. Evans demonstrates that Greco-Roman texts on Cynicism themselves refute the claim that Jesus was a Cynic.

In the sixth chapter, Evans refutes attempts to isolate sayings of Jesus from their historical and interpretive contexts. If the sayings of Jesus are controversial, so much more are the claims of supernatural deeds in our post-enlightenment world. Evans tackles this issue, including comparisons with other first-century miracle workers, and concludes that Jesus was indeed known from the beginning as a miracle worker.

Josephus is one of the most important historical witnesses to first-century Judaism, including to the existence of Jesus. Unfortunately, Josephus is often twisted to fit very specific agendas. Evans takes some time to bring a balanced view of Josephus and his value for historical Jesus scholarship.

It has also become fashionable in recent years to claim that there were multiple and parallel Christianities in the earliest years with the orthodox faith only gradually winning out once gaining political power. Evans examines these claims, including

a look at Gnostic Christianity. He then gathers up a number of divergent and radical claims for some short responses, including those of Barbara Thiering, Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, James Tabor, and Tom Harpur. While these theories differ in detail, they hold in common attempts to turn upside down traditional beliefs, at the same time lacking biblical, historical and archaeological support.

Rather than just tearing down the theories of others, Evans presents a balanced view of the historical Jesus in his last chapter entitled: "Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?" In this chapter Evans takes seriously the Jewish context of Jesus and demonstrates how to use the biblical witness as a valuable historical resource.

If there is any weakness to *Fabricating Jesus*, it is that Evans seems to take on too much. He seems to have gathered every radical and unscholarly theory about Jesus and attempted to respond to them in one relatively short book. Evans's arguments might have been tighter if he had left out some of the more fringe claims and focused on the theories that share some issues in common.

However, despite the very wide net that Evans casts, he does an excellent job of responding to today's radical theories about Jesus. This is a resource that is valuable both for laypeople and scholars. This book includes many sidebars and explanations about texts, theories and definitions so that interested laypeople can understand the underlying issues. At the same time, Evans provides excellent footnotes and lists of resources so that scholars can dig deeper into any of the issues touched on in the book. *Fabricating Jesus* is a valuable source of balanced scholarship and intelligent criticism of modern radical theories and will be of great use to concerned Christians and Jesus scholars for many years to come.

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