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BOOK REVIEW

Raphael Lataster. *Questioning the Historicity of Jesus: Why a Philosophical Analysis Elucidates the Historical Discourse*. Value Inquiry Book Series (Philosophy and Religion) 336. Leiden: Brill | Rodopi, 2019. xii + 494 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-0-9044-0878-4. \$210.00.

There are relatively few peer-reviewed books on the subject of the ahistoricity of Jesus of Nazareth. In the last fifty years, there are only four (since 1993) mythicist works that have passed peer review, including this one. Thus, this volume is historically noteworthy in this regard, especially coming from as respected a publisher as Brill. For this reason, Raphael Lataster (who holds a PhD from the University of Sydney and is referred to as “L” from here forward) has certainly produced a memorable work. Also notable is the endorsement it receives in the foreword by James G. Crossley.

The book is divided into three primary sections. The introduction details L’s various positions within current debates in the field, his views on the qualifications of New Testament scholars, and his desire to wholly exclude Christians from the discussion of the historicity of Jesus. He also provides relevant terminology and distinguishes three categories of theoretical thought about Jesus’ historicity: historicism (that Jesus most likely existed), agnosticism (we cannot determine if he existed or not), and mythicism (he most likely did not exist). Part 1 of the book goes through L’s excessive, uncharitable, and often pot-shot-laden analysis of the “case for historicity.” For example, he accuses the late Maurice Casey of being a liar, a bad researcher, and more. He goes through two books by historicists in significant depth, one by Bart Ehrman and one by Casey (the most impressive, and in my opinion convincing element is L’s rebuttal to Ehrman’s

questionable use of hypothetical sources to establish Jesus's historicity). Part 2 of the book lays out L's case for agnosticism (the position that Jesus's historicity cannot be determined). This entails arguing that all of the primary sources are inadequate for establishing Jesus' historicity, dismissing the criterion methodologies, and arguing that the "Jesus" of Paul's epistles is not based on a historical figure. Regarding the latter, his argument is largely under the influence of Richard Carrier's work. Instead of a historical figure, Paul could have conceived of Christ as a purely celestial figure appearing in visions. Part 3 lays out the case for mythicism (that Jesus probably never existed). This section mostly repeats the work of Carrier without much deviation, i.e., using Carrier's background evidence model, Bayesian analysis, calculations of the value of the sources and available evidence, etc.

There are numerous problems throughout the book. First, in the introduction, L has a clear bias in favor of his position, evidenced by the fact that he ignores virtually anything that would be of importance for looking at the sociological factors behind mythicism and agnosticism. For example, he outright rejects the (correct) claims of historicists that most mythicists are wholly unqualified to discuss matters of biblical history and are largely amateurs. He then turns around to argue that the whole of New Testament scholarship on the historicity of Jesus is invalid, literally attempting to make the case that no NT scholar is qualified to discuss the historicity of Jesus in any capacity (conveniently, analytical philosophers, with which L identifies, are qualified). In addition, he states that mythicism is no longer just a fringe theory accepted by antichristians. However, his only citations are Christopher Hartney, Carole M. Cusack, and Hector Avalos. Cusack was L's dissertation advisor, Hartney is a colleague of L's, and Avalos is a well-known antichristian. It is rather astonishing that L cannot spot the probable case of protectionism. It is most certainly not the case that scholars unaffiliated with agnostics/mythicists are defending Christianity. Rather, it is quite the opposite as Ehrman, Casey, Gullotta, and others have shown. The antichristian stance of L is most clearly demonstrable in his wish to exclude all Christians (even qualified Christian academics)

from the debate entirely. It is startling, but, as a result, this book has a number of parallels with previous Soviet mythicists, chiefly its attacks on Christianity (see Iosif A. Kryvelev, “Overcoming the Vestiges of Religion in the Lives of the Peoples of the USSR.” *Soviet Anthropology and Archaeology* 1 [1962] 11–21). Overall, there is much to find fault with here, as L seeks to create an arena of academic discussion that excludes a large portion of professional scholars on religious grounds, only giving a voice to the antireligious (for more information on the lack of inclusivity within the Christ Myth debate see, Christopher M. Hansen, “The Christ and the Discourse: A Critique of the Historical and Rhetorical Trends in the Christ Myth Debate.” *Northern Plains Ethics Journal* [Forthcoming]).

The actual analysis he provides of Jesus and the primary sources is likewise problematic. One clear case is his use of the fragmentary quotations of Marcion’s text of Galatians to argue that Gal 1:19 and 4:4 (which mentions the brother of Jesus, named James) were inauthentic. Yet, if one followed this through, one would also recognize that 1 Thess 2:14–16 is *authentic* based on Marcion’s text, as Marcion retains this passage (Jason BeDuhn, *The First Edition of the New Testament: Marcion’s Scriptural Canon*. Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 2013, 251). But instead, L just states that 1 Thess 2:14–16 is an interpolation without providing a single secondary source on this or any substantive argument. This issue is escalated by the fact that L does not cite or interact with well-known scholarship on Marcion’s *Apostolikon*. For instance, Clabeaux notes that in some cases where there are short but incomplete quotations, it may be because these are being used to reference larger portions of text as shorthand or as a memory citation (John J. Clabeaux, *A Lost Edition of the Letters of Paul: A Reassessment of the Text of the Pauline Corpus Attested by Marcion*. Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1989 [17]). In addition, L fails to note that the current consensus is that 1 Thess 2:14–16 is authentic. In fact, he regularly fails to note what is currently held as the consensus on most issues discussed in his book, and likewise fails to interact with notable work within the field. Another odd argument that L makes throughout is that sources which have

“absurd” or “miraculous” happenings are unreliable. The insinuation is that even ancient sources must be inherently atheistic and secular to be considered reliable.

Most of L’s argumentation runs parallel with the materials of his close compatriot Richard C. Carrier and his book *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014). These arguments include the pre-Christian Jesus in Philo of Alexandria (a notion requiring Philo to have misread the LXX Zech 4:9 and 6:11–13, and thinking his *logos* was named “Jesus” even though Philo never calls him such), the celestial Jesus in the Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah, and the Bayesian methodology (which he almost exclusively cites from Carrier), among other points. There is little said by L that Carrier has not already said (and been refuted on).

On another level, one may be sorely disappointed by the lack of interaction with secondary literature in this book. Most of James D. G. Dunn’s work on Paul goes unreferenced, there is little interaction with recent scholarship on the Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah (for instance, Norelli’s critical commentary is not cited at all, which is particularly important since Norelli provides a quite convincing argument contra Carrier and L that the long ending is authentic), he manages to go through the entire discussion of the *Testamonium Flavianum* without interacting with Alice Whealey’s work, and he ignores much of Gerd Theissen’s material arguing for Jesus’s historicity. Additionally, there is no interaction with French, German, Spanish, or Italian scholarship, all of which have contributed immensely on the numerous issues L covers. Perhaps there is a language barrier present, but one may then ask, “why write a book if you are unable to interact with the current scholarship and research?”

The one positive element this book has going for it is that it is enjoyable to read. L has a strong ability to engage and connect with his readers, certainly drawing them in with his often-vitriolic language (it is ironic that he spends much time on this particular point with Casey’s work, but is arguably no better). It does make the reading a positive experience and at least one can have some fun along the way. However, the enjoyable nature of the prose does not make up for the shortcomings that would be

spotted by nearly any academic familiar with the issues that he engages. There are a few occasions where L is to be somewhat commended for not being as extreme as his comrade Carrier (such as not conclusively saying that Philo calls his *logos* Jesus', even though Carrier explicitly does in *On the Historicity of Jesus*). This is, unfortunately, undermined by his acceptance of many of the same misreadings and mistakes, such as his claim that Romulus died and was resurrected (derived from Carrier's work), which is untrue as he is actually apotheosized alive in a number of sources, including Plutarch's *Romulus*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti*, Cicero's *De legibus* and *De republica*, and Dionysius's *Antiquitates romanae*.

In conclusion, I cannot recommend this book for much other than rebuttal. It most certainly does not add anything new to the discussion of historicity that previous literature by Robert M. Price, Richard C. Carrier, and Earl Doherty has not already covered in abundance. In addition, its lack of interaction with leading scholarship on the issues it covers means that all of its evaluations and conclusions are wholly lacking, as they simply do not account for other prominent arguments and positions. If one is interested, I could only recommend borrowing it from a university library because the volume is certainly not worth the expense of \$210. This work will no doubt be heralded and defended by those who continue to doubt and question the historicity of Jesus (which I recognize as a valid academic enterprise). However, it is far from the scholarly work that one would expect and, in fact, require for its arguments to be persuasive.

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