

BIBLICAL STUDIES AND SCRIPTURE

Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels, Craig A. Evans, InterVarsity Press, 2006 (ISBN 978-0-8308-3318-4), 290 pp., hb \$19.00

Jesus as a historical figure continues to attract attention at all kinds of level. Much of it has, over the past two centuries, been of high quality, though there have always been eccentric theories, making much out of little or viewing the evidence through the strangest of spectacles. Recent years have, however, seen a rash of such theories, embodied both in what purport to be learned studies or else in novels like *The Da Vinci Code*, apparently possessed by most of the population, and supposed works of history. Meanwhile scholarship has gone its own way, itself not free from prejudice and various kinds of distortion. One would expect this range of treatment in the case of such a subject: where the evidence is relatively meager and dates from long ago, and where so many different kinds of reaction to the subject have always been present, from the deepest devotion to eccentric attachment and fierce rejection. Craig A. Evans, a well-known North American scholar of the Gospels and the life of Jesus, has written an efficient and practical guide to recent trends and writings in this area, decisively exposing their abundant weaknesses. He is perhaps a little too ready to underplay his own biases: he is a Protestant Christian, with a firm belief in the central place of scripture. Though he is far from being removed from current biblical criticism, he does not permit it to go beyond a certain point. For instance, some of those he attacks for their wild credulity may find his own account of the details of Jesus' life and teaching a little too trusting in the letter of the Gospels. Too often he seems to write as if he had the records of tape recordings, fortified by cine-photography, of episodes in Jesus' life, even though he readily tells us of the late first-century date of the Gospels. He is not very developed in recognizing that, as well as recording the past with such fidelity as they could summon, they were people of their time, with their own sense of how faith in Jesus should be brought out by way of their story. (He is also less than wise in not seeing why Mark deliberately ended his book at 16.8: it is a key to his poetry!)

Readers will be glad to have so efficient a discussion of subjects of which many will have heard, most notoriously the novel referred to above, together with *The Holy Blood* and the *Holy Grail*, but also more sober matters, such as the state of literacy in Jesus' Palestine, the age and character of the numerous 'gospels' and other Christian writings dating from the subsequent few centuries, the work of the Jewish writer, Josephus, and the evidence (or lack thereof) for Jesus' association with Cynic philosophy. It is good to have what amounts to an education in the good and bad use of evidence in relation to the issues in hand. An admirable feature of this thorough survey is the abundance of insets giving brief key texts or lists of various kinds. These give flesh to the text itself.

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