



Evans, Craig A.

Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Craig A. Evans provides the laity with a concise and scholarly approach to defending the historical Jesus in this 11 chapter volume entitled *Fabricating Jesus*. With the recent slew of books presenting theories of alternative Jesus(es) and Christianities in the last few years (e.g. *The Da Vinci Code*; *The Jesus Papers*; *The Jesus Dynasty*; *Misquoting Jesus*; etc.) Evans decided to weigh in with a fair and careful approach to the subject of the historical Jesus and early Christianity.

Evans is a credentialed scholar (PhD from Claremont Graduate University in Biblical Studies) with experience in all of the necessary fields of research (i.e. Second Temple Judaism; archeology; Rabbinic literature; textual criticism; Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Coptic; etc.) to set forth a meaningful response to what has been published on this subject in recent (and some not so recent) years. He begins the book with a brief testimony recounting his college career and subsequent conversion that led him from dreams of law school into seminary. He tells of taking an advanced course in Greek where he read the synoptic gospels in one semester and became “hooked on the life, teaching, and world of Jesus.” (9) This led to his pursuit of a doctorate in Biblical Studies.

Evans makes it clear that this book was “written at the popular level and is primarily intended for nonexperts who find much that has been said about Jesus in recent years terribly confusing.” (14) Well, mission accomplished, as Evans has produced a volume that is reader friendly no matter what your background in Biblical studies may be. He takes the time to carefully define terms and then use them consistently throughout, not falling into the excessive synonym trap that so many popular authors do in an attempt to diversify their writing. And Evans has an uncanny way of making even the most complicated and admittedly boring subject matter (e.g. papyri fragments of late 2nd century Gnostic literature) fun to read about and easy to understand.

In his first chapter entitled “Misplaced Faith and Misguided Suspicions” Evans outlines what he believes to be the two most common kind of critics (i.e. Old and New School Skeptics)—but this does not come before criticizing some conservative Christian apologetic methods first (i.e. C.S. Lewis’ Trilemma [20]) which only show Evans’ even-handed approach to the subject. He is not blindly holding to a position for the sake of its tradition but rather is honestly and critically examining the evidence and drawing his conclusions from there, and for this he should be commended.

Evans says in defining the terms used in the title of the chapter:

By misplaced faith I mean placing one’s in the wrong thing, such as believing that the Scriptures must be inerrant according to rather strict idiosyncratic standards and that we must be able to harmonize the four Gospels. If our faith depends on these ideas, especially in rigid terms, then scholarly study may well lead to a collapse of faith. (21)

Before my Evangelical brethren jump out of their skin and get the torture stake and torches ready, Evans is making a very important point, that being that the Bible was not composed by Evangelical, fundamentalist Christians, so for us to impose such modern views on the text itself is wrong and when careful and serious research is done, these views may crumble. He is not contending that God is able to err in some way or that the Scriptures are not trustworthy, but he is being honest and placing things in perspective.

He goes on to make what I feel is a very important and foundational point in saying:

By misguided suspicions I mean the unreasonable assumption that Jesus’ contemporaries (that is, the first generation of his movement) were either incapable of remembering or uninterested in recalling accurately what Jesus said

and did, and in passing it on. What we have here is a form of hypercriticism that is all too common in scholarly circles and sometimes seems to arise from confusing criticism with skepticism—that is, thinking that the more skeptical the position, the more critical it is. Radical skepticism is no more critical than is credulity. (21)

Truer words have never been spoken as it is clearly the postmodern mindset to discount the Gospels and what they tell of the historical Jesus because they were written by (God forbid) believers.

In the following chapter “Cramped Starting Points and Overly Strict Critical Methods,” Evans documents some of the presuppositions held and some of the methodology used by radical groups such as the Jesus Seminar in their approach to New Testament and historical Jesus studies. In this chapter he asks and answers some questions that are raised by critical scholars such as: Was Jesus Illiterate? Was Jesus Interested in Scripture? Was Jesus Interested in Eschatology? Did Jesus Understand Himself to be Israel’s Messiah? And from there he goes on to discuss the criteria of authenticity (e.g. Historical Coherence, Multiple Attestation, Embarrassment, Dissimilarity, Semitisms and Palestinian Background, Consistency) and reiterates a point that he made in the opening chapter. Again Evans says:

Some scholars seem to think that the more skeptical they are, the more critical they are. But adopting an excessive and unwarranted stance is no more critical than gullibly accepting whatever comes along. In my view, a lot of what passes for critical is not critical at all; it is nothing more than skepticism masking itself as scholarship. (46)

He then spends the next two chapters examining questionable texts to include the Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Peter, the Egerton Gospel, the Gospel of Mary, and the Secret Gospel of Mark. After thoroughly examining these documents according to their manuscript evidence, their historical contexts, and their theological leanings, Evans concludes that all of them are of late origin and certainly not capable of telling us anything about the historical Jesus, especially over and against the first century New Testament Gospels.

In chapter 5 entitled “Alien Contexts,” Evans dismantles the theory that Jesus was a cynic or that he had ever even come into contact with a cynic or been exposed to cynicism. His method for doing so was concise yet meticulous. He documents everything from the geographical area of Nazareth in relation to the next major city Sepphoris and the thorough Jewishness of these areas (with the utter absence of cynicism) based on archeological investigation and primary historical

sources, to the practices of ancient cynics and Jesus' contradiction of such practices as recorded in the Gospels.

In chapter 7 Evans discusses the healings and miracles of Jesus and provides us with a very important insight that is overlooked by the hyper-skeptical scholars¹ when he says:

Today, scholars are more open to talking about the miracles of Jesus because they rightly recognize that the task of the historian is to describe what people reported and recorded. It isn't the historian's task to engage in science and metaphysics. In other words, it is enough that historians acknowledge that Jesus' contemporaries observed what they believed were miracles; historians should not try to explain exactly what Jesus did or how he did it. (139)

Evans follows up with a chapter on the "Dubious Uses of Josephus" wherein he documents the skeptic's tendency to take Josephus on face value without accounting for the social and political climate surrounding him—a climate that colored his reporting of the facts. He records Josephus' accounts of Jesus, John the Baptist, James the brother of Jesus, Pontius Pilate, and the high priests Annas and Caiaphas. He also makes mention of Josephus' contemporary Philo of Alexandria and his documentation of the historical Jesus.

In chapter 9 Evans speaks of the origins and beliefs of early Christianity while completely refuting the idea of multiple Christianities and a host of lost gospels in the first century. Chapter 10 has Evans exposing the fraudulence of "Hokum History and Bogus Findings" wherein he dismantles everything from Barbara Thiering's private interpretations of ancient documents via ciphers and codes that no one but she understands, to Michael Baigent's acceptance of legends such as the Holy Grail, to respected and credentialed scholar Dr. James Tabor's assertion that Jesus' father was a Roman Soldier names Pantera (Panthera) based on the testimony of an 3rd century heretic names Celcus and early Patristic writers' reactions to these claims, as well as the tombstone of a Roman Solider found in Germany in 1859! This is hardly the stuff that good history is made of.

Evans closes out the book with a chapter setting Jesus in his historical context of second temple Judaism. He documents Jesus' self-understanding as well as his disciples' understanding of him. The crucifixion and resurrection are addressed as well as the rise of early Christianity in response to these events. The book is rounded out with two appendices, one on the Agrapha that

¹ For an example of this see the transcript (9-13) to Bart Ehrman and William Lane Craig's debate on the resurrection available at: <http://www.freewebs.com/deityofchrist/resurrection-debate-transcript.pdf>

documents a handful of non-canonical sayings that are attributed to Jesus and critiquing them. The ultimate conclusion is that they give us no new information either way about what Jesus did or taught—and the other appendix on the Gospel of Judas which Evans was a part of the research team put together by the National Geographic Society to study. The conclusion there was that it is a real document that is too late to tell us anything of vital importance about the historical Jesus and it does not offer a valid rivalry to the New Testament Gospels.

Evans also included a helpful glossary and endnotes for further research into the subject matter of this work. The recommended reading list is also a nice little bonus as there are some great titles in it. I recommend this book for anyone interested in the historical Jesus as well as those who are tired of hearing the ridiculous claims that seem to be made every Christmas and Easter season concerning our Lord and Savior. I also recommend this for the intellectually honest skeptic who is willing to examine the evidence in context.