

I am going to take a break for three or four days from my response to Craig Evans's critique of my view of Jesus' burial. There are more things that I need to say - and I have not yet gotten to what I think are his two best arguments. But my sense is that some people are getting a little tired of a steady dose of posts on the burial stories, so... I'm going to break to deal with something else of more general interest.

I have had several people respond to my argument that Jesus was not really buried by Joseph of Arimathea on the day of his crucifixion by asking me: Why are you trashing the Gospels?

It's a fair question, and deserves a fair answer.

The short story is that I'm not intending or trying to trash the Gospels. In my view, what I'm doing is showing what the Gospels really are and what they really are not. And that is not a matter of trashing them. It's a matter of revealing their true character, rather than foisting a false character on them.

To be sure, by arguing that the Gospels are not historically accurate I am contesting and challenging views of the Gospels that many Christians unreflectively have (and that some Christian scholars reflectively have). But urging a different understanding of the Gospels is not the same thing as trashing them. On the contrary if my views of the Gospels are right, then I'm illuminating the Gospels and showing both what kinds of books they are and how they ought to be read. That's a good, positive thing, not a bad, negative one.

I should hasten to add that the views that I have of the Gospels are not ones that *I* came up with on my own. I'm not that smart or inventive. These are and have long been common views among critical scholars who have committed their lives to studying the Gospels. I'm not saying that everyone who has these same basic views agrees with everything I say about the Gospels. Most Gospel scholars, for example, if asked, would say that they are reasonably certain that Jesus was given a decent burial by Joseph of Arimathea. But in *principle* they would not necessarily be opposed to the alternative view that I've been mapping out. The reality is that - to my knowledge - no one until now has argued very vociferously or thoroughly for this view in the way that I am. So I don't know what most scholars would say about it. But in principle they wouldn't be against it, because of our shared views of the Gospels.

Among other things, these views insist that the Gospels are not always historically accurate in what they say about Jesus. That has been acknowledged by critical scholars of the New Testament as long as there have been critical scholars of the New Testament - for over 300 years. So it's nothing new, even though I hear from people nearly every week who tell me that it's news to them. It's news to them because scholars can be among the worse communicators on earth, and biblical scholars in particular have done a truly dismal job of telling non-scholars what they have come to think and what they have tried to demonstrate in their research - for example about the accuracy of the Gospels.

Different scholars have different assessments of *just* how inaccurate the Gospels are. Some think they are reliable in most of the basics, with lots of details being unreliable; others think that major stories are not historically accurate (birth narratives, e.g.); others think that in fact very many of the stories need to be questioned. But for all of these scholars there is a basic sense that, at the end of the day, the Gospels are not dispassionate, accurate accounts of the things Jesus said and did. Some things in them are accurate. Some things are not accurate. And one of the tasks is to figure out which is which: which

stories actually describe something that happened (e.g., Jesus' baptism, his proclamation of the coming kingdom, his crucifixion) and which stories describe things that, historically, did not actually happen (e.g., Jesus' Temptations in the wilderness or his Transfiguration or his turning water into wine).

These decisions are not made simply on an ad hoc basis or by guessing. They are made by slow, deliberate, conscientious, rigorous application of historical criteria based on a very wide range of knowledge of the surviving texts and of lots of other things (history of Palestine; Roman world; Greek language; history of early Christianity - and more). It's not a matter of picking and choosing what you like or don't like.

But even with stories that are judged to be basically accurate, one needs to decide what parts of the story are accurate. Was Jesus baptized? Almost certainly yes. By John the Baptist? Yes. In the Jordan River? Yes. At the beginning of his ministry? Yes. Did a dove land on his head? Did the heavens split open? Did a voice come thundering from heaven? Well, probably not.

I should stress that the views critical scholars have of the Gospels do not simply involve the question of what is historically accurate. There are two other issues that are equally important. The first is this: if something is not accurate, how and why did that story or part of the story come into existence? For the dove and voice from heaven at the baptism, for example: even if those things didn't happen, they are there for a reason: they show that at the beginning of Jesus' ministry he was declared to be the Son of God—a very important theological point. But probably not a historical reality (in terms of what actually happened).

The second thing is closely related to the first: studying the Gospels is not simply a matter of seeing what really happened and why the stories came to be altered into the form we now know them; it is also a matter of literary and theological interpretation. Whether or not a story "happened" - what does it *mean*? What is it saying about Jesus? What is the theological or ethical message that is being conveyed? And for people who are doing this who are Christian - how does or should this message affect one's life, one's beliefs, one's activities, one's ethics, one's relationships, one's understanding of the world, and so forth and so on.

Again, different scholars will have different evaluations of just how historical this or that story is, and about why this or that detail was added or omitted or changed, and about what the story is trying to teach. But all critical scholars will agree that studying the Gospels involves (at least) these three basic tasks. Fundamentalists would say that the first two tasks involve trashing the Gospels. I say that the fundamentalists are wrong about that. Understanding what the Gospels really are - stories about Jesus intending to teach theological lessons rather than historically accurate narratives - celebrates the Gospels for what they really are, rather than falsely glorify them for what they are not.



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