

BOOK REVIEW

Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007). 479 pp. Pbk. US\$24.99.

The stated goal of Eddy and Boyd's book is 'to investigate the extent to which the portrait(s) of Jesus in the canonical Gospels—particularly the Synoptic Gospels—are generally judged as reliable history, on one hand, or as fictional legend, on the other' (p. 13). It intends, more specifically, to debunk the latter position, which they refer to as the 'legendary Jesus' thesis. They see the argument for the legendary Jesus having essentially seven planks: (1) naturalism, (2) Hellenistic Judaism, (3) legendary parallels to the Jesus story, (4) silence in non-Christian sources, (5) silence in Paul, (6) free-form fabrication of the oral tradition of Jesus and (7) the historical unreliability of the Gospels (pp. 27-35).

Eddy and Boyd respond to the first three of these in Part One: 'Historical Method and the Jesus Tradition'. The first chapter is what would be expected in a work such as this. It provides a history of the development of the historical-critical method, highlighting the introduction of naturalistic presuppositions along the way. In the place of the prevailing naturalistic historical-critical methodology, they propose an 'open' historical-critical methodology, in which non-naturalistic explanations are viable when the data is not explicable with strictly naturalistic categories. They claim that 'this methodology is not *less critical* than the naturalistic historical-critical method; rather, it is *more critical*. For, as we will argue more fully below, this method requires that Western scholars be critical of their commitments to their own culturally conditioned presuppositions' (p. 53, emphasis theirs). But this seems to be an equivocation of meaning since by 'critical' biblical scholars do not typically mean critical of a worldview, but have a more technical sense of the term in mind, having to do with the interpretation and analysis of a text. The method itself remains fairly underdeveloped,

as most of the time is spent answering possible objections to such a method, attempting to debunk the validity of naturalistic *a priori* in biblical interpretation, rather than putting forward a detailed historiographic model. There is a brief outline of the method at the end of the chapter. What they come up with has numerous points of contact with the critical-realism model of Ben Meyer and N.T. Wright, especially the emphasis on being critical of one's worldview and assumptions. In practice, their method basically involves collecting recent New Testament research that undermines each plank of the cumulative case for the legendary thesis.

The influence of paganism on Hellenistic Judaism is the topic of the second chapter. Its aim is to dismantle the notion that conceptions of Jesus' deity among his disciples could have emerged as the result of contemporary notions about God-like beings, such as Michael the archangel. They depend heavily here on the new history-of-religion school in developing their argument. Their strategy is essentially to reaffirm the exclusivity of Second Temple creational monotheism and argue, with Larry Hurtado, that early devotion to Jesus is best accounted for as due to a basically Jewish-Christian theological framework combined with revelatory experiences.

Boyd and Eddy introduce their primary dialogue partners in Chapter 3 where they consider supposed legendary parallels to Jesus' career. They include Burton Mack, Robert Price, Kurt Rudolf and Jonathan Smith, a surprisingly small pool of scholars considering how large the book is. The reader gets the impression at times that the legendary thesis is a major player in contemporary historical Jesus studies. It should have been more clearly acknowledged, however, that the view being criticized here is certainly not representative of mainstream New Testament scholarship. Their criticisms of equating legendary accounts, especially from Greco-Roman and Greco-Oriental mystery religions, to the story of Jesus include Jewish resistance to paganism, the late date of the sources we have for the mystery religions, their diversity and lack of profusion, the fallacy of parellomania, the tenuous nature of alleged parallels, the absence of dying and rising gods, the depiction of Jesus as a recent historical figure, and the evidence for the historical reliability of the New Testament documents. The hero myth theory is also argued to be problematic on the grounds that it involves circular reasoning, the fact that real (i.e. historical) heroes often fit the hero-myth pattern, and the numerous deviations in the life of Jesus from the hero-myth pattern.

The chapter concludes with a consideration of particular mythological heroes and proposes that the Jesus story might be an example of a ‘true myth’.

The second major section of the book considers the role of ‘other witnesses’; that is, witnesses outside of the New Testament, and references to Jesus in Paul. The first chapter in this section (Chapter 4) is well done. It analyzes non-Christian testimonies to the historical Jesus. All the major issues here are raised, including the degree of probability that classical academic literature would have any interest in a Jewish messiah figure, Typhro’s dialogue with Justin, and a fairly comprehensive consideration of Jewish and Greek sources. The authors are careful not to overstate their case, treating sources on a graduating scale of significance. Dubious references include those sometimes noted in rabbinic and Qumran sources. Sources of minimal value, usually due to various ambiguities, include Thallus, Mara bar Serapion, Pliny, Suetonius, Celsus and Lucian. Tacitus and Josephus are viewed as the most important references to Jesus in non-Christian sources and the validity of the references here are convincingly defended. The argument put forward here is also well grounded: that we should not expect too much reference to a marginalized uneducated Jewish prophet in the great histories and literary works of the classical world and what few references we do find are more than one would expect.

The fifth chapter deals with the supposed silence of Paul concerning the historical Jesus. The major problems, as the authors see it, for the notion that Paul was silent about Jesus include the reliability of the Gospels, the lack of evidence for Paul’s incorporation of the mystery religions, Paul’s reference to James as the Lord’s brother (Gal. 1.19), and Paul’s claim to be a recent witness of Jesus’ resurrection. This evidence is supplemented by a detailed analysis of Paul’s use of Jesus tradition—although I would have expected a treatment of issues of continuity and discontinuity between Jesus and Paul here.

Part Three treats the reliability of the oral tradition. Chapter 6 focuses on the relationship between literacy and orality and argues that writing probably played more of a role in the transmission of the text in its early stages than is sometimes assumed. The work of Catherine Hezser on this topic is surprisingly overlooked, but would have helped their case significantly. The possibility of transmitting long oral narratives, based on the analysis of other orally-based cultures, is also briefly

explored, and the assumption that the Gospel writers had no biographical interests when composing their accounts is undermined.

The seventh chapter examines the role of memory and eyewitness testimony in the ancient world. Against the idea that oral Jesus tradition was significantly indebted to creative prophets in the early church they argue that the fact that 'orally dominate communities tend to have a vested interest in protecting their historically rooted traditions against substantial modification counts against this thesis, as does the fact that most issues we know the early church wrestled with are absent in the Jesus tradition that came to be recorded in the Gospels' (p. 306).

The final part of the book takes on the seventh major argument for the legendary thesis, dealing with the reliability of the Synoptic tradition. The first chapter in this section (Chapter 8) addresses the issue of genre. The underlying assumption is that history and biography were both 'to a significant degree concerned to report the past *as it actually took place*' (p. 325). This assumption is far from obvious to most scholars working with the literary contexts for the Gospels and Acts, however. The fact/fiction dichotomy was actually quite blurred in Greek literature, including biography and history, and the whole question is in many ways anachronistic as scholars like Loveday Alexander have pointed out on numerous occasions. This is not to say that the Gospels are, therefore, unhistorical. It is just to note that most would now probably grant that the problem of genre does not solve the problem of historicity, as Boyd and Eddy assume. There is some attempt to preempt this objection when they admit that certain historians were not as inclined to a truthful recording of events as others, but they insist that, based on a quote from Lucian, 'at least *some* ancient historians knew and cared about such things' (p. 334, emphasis theirs). But how do we know that the Gospel writers were among these historians? Apart from this unstable leading assumption, the chapter provides a very helpful overview of recent research on the genre of the Gospels.

The ninth chapter of the book turns more directly to the question of historical reliability. It argues that Gospel texts should be considered to be trustworthy *prima facie* until proven otherwise, that the methodological validity of naturalistic governing assumptions should be reconsidered, and that the textual tradition underlying the Synoptics is reliable.

The book closes with a summary chapter, collecting the streams of evidence presented in the previous two chapters into a good cumulative

case for the reliability of the Synoptic Jesus tradition by asking six diagnostic questions of Mark that historians normally ask of ancient documents: (1) Is there inclusion of self-damaging details? (2) Is there inclusion of incidental details or casual information? (3) Does the story have internal consistency? (4) Is there inclusion of ‘inherently improbable events’? (5) Is there external corroboration in literary evidence? (6) Is there external corroboration in archeological evidence? Not unexpectedly, they argue for answers to all six questions that affirm the historicity of the Synoptic tradition.

Before I assess the merits and weaknesses of the *The Jesus Legend*, an important question lingers: what kind of book is it intended to be? Is it meant to be a contribution to New Testament scholarship or Christian apologetics? Its command of and frequent reference to advances in the study of the New Testament would seem to indicate at least some connection there, but it also engages (although minimally) scholars like Norman Geisler and atheists like Michael Martin, which would align it more with apologetics.

I would have trouble describing it as an important work in New Testament scholarship, other than as a very helpful introductory textbook, since the contribution it makes to the field is actually quite minimal relative to its size. It does, however, show that some of the major arguments of advocates of the legendary thesis are out of step with the assumptions of contemporary New Testament scholarship. It has something important to say about the development of tradition in orally-based societies, but beyond this it usually amounts to compiling previous research in support of individual points rather than pressing the discussion forward by utilizing new methodologies or introducing new evidence.

As a book on Christian apologetics, however, I think it does the job quite well. It is thoroughly researched, up-to-date, well structured and convincingly argued—virtues far too often lacking in works on Christian apologetics. As a textbook on Jesus studies and as a work defending the historical reliability of the Jesus tradition in the Synoptic accounts, I highly recommend it. The authors have effectively executed their goal.

Andrew W. Pitts
McMaster Divinity College