Book Review


Maurice Casey, a leading New Testament scholar, has provided a useful book showing the basic errors and incompetence of the pseudo-scholarship that argues that there was no such historical person as Jesus. This is important both because there are widespread arguments on the Internet and in popular books, but also because a number of scholars have jumped on this bandwagon.

Casey provides a demolition job on the mythicists, as he terms them; mostly the mythicist material is not the kind of work worthy of being treated by a serious academic in this way (it is, though, worth studying as an aspect of contemporary popular culture). The types of issues Casey picks up are: the use of dated scholarship (often nineteenth century—although modern editions are cited which makes them look up-to-date); employment of unscholarly sources (cited as ‘authorities’) which include spiritualists claiming visions, untrained populist historians, and bloggers; the use of texts from different periods; and, a failure to understand the context and languages of the source material and its relevance to first-century Palestine. The catalogue of errors would be glaring within a first year undergraduate essay, although quite a few of the mythicists claim degrees or even scholarly positions.

Part of Casey’s analysis is that many of these mythicists are former Christian fundamentalists, and he argues an anti-scholarly disdain marks their worldview. Casey points out the difference, which seems to cause some problems, between the situation in the United Kingdom (and, it must be said, in many state/secular universities around the world), and the situation in the United States, from whence many mythicists write, and where many professors of biblical studies belong to religiously affiliated universities and write ‘scholarship’ from a devotional stance. Casey himself is open about being an atheist, while noting that properly critical Christian scholars also exist. As such he shows it is not about ‘religious’ biblical scholars having one view and ‘secular’ historians having another. I would, though, extend Casey’s concerns to the worrying blurring of the line between devotional (often evangelical) ‘scholarship’ and academia—places like the American Academy of Religion/The Society for Biblical Studies conference have high profile displays of evangelical Christian publishing houses which sometimes publish more critical scholarship (the pressure to publish for research assessment no doubt makes these publishers attractive, while they gain kudos through publishing genuine scholarship—a vicious cycle).

Having established that Casey’s work indubitably succeeds in its task, it is worth noting a few issues. First, Casey is scathing of many mythicists, quite rightly it may be said, but it can at times look like (so might be dismissed as?) *ad hominem*. Second, the language and writing is not always, I feel, suited to lay people and non-specialists, who are presumably a major audience. Third, I feel that Casey does not cite widely enough to show these ideas represent a consensus amongst scholars. Fourth, there is no further reading of
accessible texts listed for general readers, he simply refers readers elsewhere, which I feel is a big omission in a work of this nature. Fifth, he mistakes the pseudonym of one mythicist, Acharya Sanning (Dorothy Murdock), as being her first and last name, although the first is an anglicised Sanskrit honorific.

One area not fully addressed by Casey is scholarly attempts to dismiss Jesus; however, much of this writing no doubt post-dated his manuscript. Casey tackles Thomas L. Thompson, an Old Testament scholar, noting that he has gone outside his own specialism and used very unscholarly methods. Other scholarly mythicist attempts also tend to feature scholars writing outside their field and going beyond scholarly methods. Amongst writings I have seen, one strand argues that the methods of New Testament scholarship are completely flawed and suggests other methods; this, however, entirely ignores the standards of dealing with ancient history. Another strand uses some form of statistical or quantifiable system. However, the arguments I have seen go something along these lines: because a significant number of figures claimed to be gods are mythical (e.g. Zeus, etc.), it is therefore statistically likely that any other figures claimed to be divine are also mythical (e.g. Jesus). Does this also mean that Roman Emperors who claimed a divine status are mythic? Or Egyptian pharaohs? I have gone off topic by addressing what Casey does not, but it is in line with his concerns and illustrates the kind of bogus analysis offered. It is worrying, though, that people who appear to be members of the academy wish to propound sensationalist nonsense.

Not being a New Testament scholar, I also learnt quite a bit about the current state of scholarship, which rather overturns my knowledge from undergraduate days and subsequent reading. For instance, Casey discusses James Crossley’s *The Date of Mark’s Gospel* (2004) which argues that this Gospel should be dated to c. 40 CE (versus a traditional scholarly dating of c. 65–70 CE). The arguments presented seem very compelling from a scholarly standpoint, as do the points made on the relationship of this text to Matthew and Luke. In sum, this book will be a useful point of reference to which to direct anyone who has come across the mythicist claims, although I feel that a more evenly written and accessible account may still be offered. It also provides an interesting read for those whose New Testament and historical Jesus scholarship is rather rusty.

Paul Hedges
Nanyang Technological University