



Bock, Darrell L. and Daniel B. Wallace.

Dethroning Jesus: Exposing Popular Culture's Quest to Unseat the Biblical Christ

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Dethroning Jesus is the latest work of scholars and fellow bloggers Darrell Bock and Dan Wallace, both of Dallas Theological Seminary. This book is another round of ammunition in the already full clip of popular Christian apologetics. The authors here seek to dismantle various claims (six in all) posed by liberal scholars about the Biblical Christ, the New Testament, and Early Christian history. Anyone who is familiar with Bock's and Wallace's various contributions to the fields they speak on in this book will find little in terms of new material. Large sections of this work are simply reorganized parts of previous books (*The Missing Gospels* – Bock; *Reinventing Jesus* – Wallace) in which they have addressed the same or similar subjects.

The book begins by asserting that Judaism was a “culture of memory” (3) so we should rest assured that the picture of Jesus the New Testament presents is more accurate than not. This is a point that James McGrath criticized in his review¹ of the same volume. While I'm not nearly as well read on the subject as these men, I believe it a safe assumption that ancient cultures were more accustomed to memorization than modern day Westerners are. Bock then sets out the thesis of the book, which is that there is a vast difference between Christianity and what Bock calls Jesusanity. He defines them as follows:

Christianity involves the claim that Jesus was anointed by God to represent both God and humanity in the restoration of a broken relationship existing between the Creator and his creation. [...] *Jesusanity* is a coined term for the alternative story about Jesus. Here the center of the story is still Jesus, but Jesus as either a prophet or a teacher of religious wisdom. [...] He is one among many—the best, perhaps, and one worthy to learn from and follow. (4-5)

¹ <http://exploringourmatrix.blogspot.com/2007/12/dethroning-jesusanity.html>

Bock goes on to show the various portraits of Jesus painted by different scholars, all of which paint a different picture. E.P. Sanders' Jesus is an eschatological prophet while Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's Jesus is an egalitarian (God forbid!). Borg's Jesus is a spirit person and Crossan's is a peasant. On the other end of the spectrum we have N.T. Wright, John Meier, and Ben Meyer whose Jesus was thoroughly Jewish and "*operated in a more messianically inclined direction.*" (13) This is enough to push these authors towards Christianity. Somewhere in the middle sits Paula Fredriksen with her Jesus who developed over time into a Messianic figure. Various points are considered and discussed before moving into addressing Claim #1 which is that the original New Testament has been corrupted so badly by copyists that it can't be recovered.

Of course Daniel Wallace, text critic extraordinaire, fields this claim. To be quite honest, I was disappointed with this chapter largely because it targeted text critic and self-proclaimed "happy agnostic" Bart Ehrman and treated him as a whipping boy throughout. This wouldn't have been a problem if Ehrman was actually guilty of the things that were attributed to him. For example, at one point Wallace takes Ehrman's claim that we don't have third or fourth generation NT manuscripts and compares this to the telephone game. He says that the "*telephone game is a poor analogy for New Testament copying practices*" yet goes on to admit that "*Ehrman never makes this analogy, but when he speaks of our lack of 'copies of the copies of the copies of the originals,' the impression that one gets is that the telephone game is comparable.*" (47) That this is a straw man argument is self-evident, but I also regret Wallace's presuming to know what impression people get when reading Ehrman's work. I personally didn't get such an impression when reading *Misquoting Jesus*.

This chapter is riddled with similar caricatures of Ehrman and criticisms for his not saying something that Wallace felt he should have said. At one point he says, "*it's not what Ehrman puts into the book that is so troubling, but what he leaves out*" (50-51), and then continues to talk about the impression that one may get from Ehrman. Wallace is also guilty of taking Ehrman out of context when he quotes him saying:

Elsewhere he gives vent to the despair: "Given these problems [of corrupt manuscripts], how can we hope to get back to anything like the original text, the text that an author actually wrote? It is an enormous problem. In fact, it is such an enormous problem that a number of textual critics have started to claim that we may as well suspend any discussion of the 'original' text, because it is inaccessible to us" (Ehrman 2005a, 58). (53, brackets theirs)

To take a page from Wallace's book, it's not what Wallace put into the quote that is so troubling, but what he leaves out. Ehrman goes on to say, "***This may be going too far, but a concrete example or two taken from the New Testament writings can show the problems***" (Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 58, bold mine). Ehrman says elsewhere in the book that we can get "*back to the earliest attainable version*" and that the "*oldest form of the text is no doubt closely (very closely) related to what the author originally wrote*" (Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 62).

Even with all the mischaracterization, this chapter isn't completely lost. Wallace goes on to point out some very useful information for anyone who might fear that the multitude of textual variants that exist in our manuscripts somehow makes the NT untrustworthy. But again, this is nothing that Wallace hasn't said before either on his website², the blog³ he posts on, or in previous books.

Bock goes on in the next two chapters to address the Gospels of Judas and Thomas. He gives a point by point summary of the Gospel of Judas before concluding that it “*teaches a great divorce between God and the creation that neither Judaism nor Christianity embraces. In Christianity as in Judaism, the creature is responsible to a Creator who directly created.*” (102) He contends that it is “*historically false*” to claim that these Gnostic gospels “*are evidence of a very early, legitimate alternative Christianity...*” (103) He characterizes such claims as “*an anachronistic attempt to write a revisionist history*” and on this point I am inclined to agree. The Gospel of Judas doesn't tell us anything of value about Jesus, it's date is too late to be valuable for determining anything of the earliest Christian communities, and it doesn't appear to be built on any older, pre-existing foundation that would lead us to believe otherwise.

The chapter on Thomas is par for the course as far as conservative Christian apologies go. He dates the gospel somewhere between the early to mid-second century, acknowledges that some of the sayings may be authentic, and points out that it departs from the canonical Gospels in many respects concerning its portrait of Jesus. One would do better to read Bock's *The Missing Gospels* for a more thorough treatment, but I'd recommend Craig A. Evans' *Fabricating Jesus* above and beyond them both.

They also challenge the view of some scholars (Borg and Crossan) that Jesus was some sort of a radical/revolutionary whose mission was merely social and political reform. They acknowledge that this was part and parcel of what Jesus came to do but the greater mission was proclaiming the kingdom of God and calling people back to right relationship with God. In this chapter they go through the Passion Week day by day and examine it in light of Crossan and Borg's take on it. Space prohibits me from detailing their conclusions from each day but this one jumped out at me. They said:

Borg and Crossan portray Jesus as a prophet who points to the arrival of God's challenge to the world through a program that tackles values. Christianity argues beyond this program-oriented picture that Jesus presents himself in actions that show his role. These actions reveal a spiritual dimension that informs Jesus' revolutionary values; indeed, this spiritual dimension is the core of Jesus' purpose in coming to earth. More than being a “decisive Jewish voice” (Borg and Crossan 2006, 30), Jesus is the turning point figure in this drama who reveals by his actions in Mark that he is the King with a humble but decisive calling. (137-38)

² http://www.bible.org/author.php?author_id=1&scid=0

³ <http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/category/dan-wallace-contra-mundane/>

The next chapter singles out James Tabor and his recent work *The Jesus Dynasty*. Bock notes that Tabor's historical work is mostly sound but he approaches it with some faulty assumptions (e.g., naturalism) and draws some faulty conclusions (e.g., that a Roman soldier named Pantera was Jesus' father). They summarize Tabor's view of early Christianity as basically him saying that Peter, James, and John represent the Jewish school of Torah observance and works, whose Messiah had died but succeeded nonetheless because he would be vindicated in the end. Paul showed up and de-emphasized the works aspect and "*went his own way with a more mystical, visionary faith, which eventually won out and became orthodox Christianity.*" (182)

Bock gives place to "*some variation within the new faith*" (183) saying that Paul shows serious conflict with those who taught that Torah observance was required for salvation. He notes however Paul and James' agreement of the law being fulfilled in love (see Gal. 5:14, cf., Jas. 2:8) and asserts that there's no contradiction between their seemingly opposing statements on justification because they are asking different questions. "*James is asking about how justification looks by considering its product after time has passed, while Paul is asking what justification involves coming into it at the start.*" (184) He concludes that "*what Tabor's study represents is a type of reverse Marcionism.*" (191) While Marcion wanted to remove the Jewishness from Christianity Tabor seemingly wants to downplay Paul and Luke-Acts. The irony of it all as Bock rightly notes is that, "*Tabor, who in seeking to maintain the Jewishness actually excludes the contributions of the of the most Jewish-instructed of all the apostles, Paul.*" (191)

The final chapter examined the Talpiot Tomb finding. One gets the impression that the Talpiot Tomb is more significant than it actually is from all the attention it has received from Christian apologists. They examine the statistical problems, the mitochondrial DNA problems, the historical problems, the problems with the names, and last but not least, the contrary testimony of the New Testament. All in all, they say the same things that we've heard Ben Witherington⁴, Craig Evans⁵, James White⁶, Gary Habermas⁷, and just about every other NT scholar and apologist (to include Bock who was present for a post documentary discussion on the Discovery Channel when it originally aired, and Wallace who discussed the issue on an internet radio broadcast *Converse with Scholars*⁸) have said since the book was released and the documentary aired back in Feb. — Mar. 2007. I didn't understand why it received so much attention then and I can't understand why it has received even more now. In my opinion this chapter was the appendix of the book that would not have been harmful to remove.

I hate to say it, but this book is more of the same. I've come to expect a very high level of writing and argument from both authors and while there is much of that here, I don't feel it measures up to their previous work. In the last 2-3 years there has been no shortage of apologetic works written for laypersons which argue against the likes of the

⁴ <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2007/02/jesus-tomb-titanic-talpiot-tomb-theory.html>

⁵ <http://www.craigaeavans.com/tombofjesus.htm>

⁶ <http://www.aomin.org/index.php?catid=21&blogid=1>

⁷ http://www.garyhabermas.com/articles/The_Lost_Tomb_of_Jesus/losttombofjesus_response.htm

⁸ <http://conversewithscholars.reclaimingthemind.org/content/files/CWS/cwstalpiot.mp3>

Jesus Seminar, Bart Ehrman, Elaine Pagels, et al. and this just adds to the stack. In the end I find myself agreeing with their conclusions on the majority of issues addressed, although I found myself less than impressed with their methodology at times. I would recommend this title to anyone who hasn't already read *The Missing Gospels*, *Reinventing Jesus*, *Misquoting Truth*, or *Fabricating Jesus*. However, if you have read these titles then I can't see that this one will add much to what you've already encountered.