

LORD OR LEGEND?

Wrestling with the Jesus Dilemma

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and Paul Rhodes Eddy

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Wrestling with the Jesus Dilemma
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We dedicate this book to our siblings:

Debbie Sparrow, Anita Prosser, and Chris Boyd,
with fond childhood memories and heartfelt love,

Greg

and

Robert W. Eddy,
my brother and my friend,
I love and appreciate you, bro
(L.T. dude),
Paul

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Introduction

The Jesus of History and the Challenge of Faith

The *Challenge of Faith*: We would like to start with a confession or two. The authors of this work are both Christian. Thus, with respect to the question of worldview, we both embrace Christian theism—but not always comfortably so. In terms of full-time vocation, one of us (Greg) is the senior pastor of a local church; the other (Paul) is a professor of theology at a Christian university. Nonetheless, *intellectually speaking*, faith has not always come easily for us. In fact, at different times in our lives, we have each found ourselves seriously questioning aspects of our Christian worldview. In these times, the question forces itself: Why did I ever find this belief to be credible?

Let those who are entirely without doubt cast the first stone! It strikes us that if what Christians believe about Jesus is rooted in reality and not wishful imagination, allowing one's faith to squarely face the difficult questions can't be a bad thing. Why should truth ever fear critical examination? In fact, critical examination of one's belief system is the only recipe we know to prevent self-delusion or unthinking, cultic fanaticism. Nor should anyone find it surprising that a Christian pastor and a Christian professor occasionally find themselves facing troubling questions about their Christian beliefs. Think about it! We are asked to believe that the Creator of the universe became a human by being born to a virgin,

complete with an angelic chorus announcing his arrival. We're asked to believe that this man healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, made the lame walk, cured lepers, walked on water, turned water into wine, and multiplied food to feed thousands. Most shockingly, we're asked to believe both that this man was the long-awaited Jewish Messiah—the very embodiment of God—and that he died on a first-century Roman cross and then rose from the dead! One might ask, "How can any thinking person find it easy to accept such claims?"

The Jesus Dilemma: Factual History or Fictional Legend? Several decades ago, C. S. Lewis posed his now-famous "Jesus trilemma": "You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God."¹ Some have pointed out, however, that this trilemma works only if Jesus actually made the sort of claims about himself recorded in the New Testament Gospels. In other words, before one can legitimately consider Lewis's *trilemma*, one must first wrestle with a prior *dilemma*: Is the basic portrait of Jesus offered in the Gospels a faithful reflection of the Jesus of history? Or is it largely a legendary fabrication spun out of the imaginations of the early Christians?

For many people in our contemporary, Western culture, it is a lot easier to accept that the portrait(s) of Jesus found in the Gospels is *legendary* than it is to accept that it is *historical*.² After all, when most people read similar stories—stories that include reports of the supernatural—about other religious figures (Krishna, Buddha, etc.), they generally assume the story is largely, if not entirely, a fictitious legend. The question then is naturally raised: Why should anyone think things are different with the story of Jesus?

But here is the interesting thing—and this is really what this book is about. As we have seriously asked ourselves this question again and again over the years, the authors of this book have found ourselves coming back to the conclusion that *the Jesus story is different!* While it is possible to explain many of the miraculous exploits of other religious figures as mere legends, we have found it very difficult to explain the Jesus story this way. Yes, we confess the story itself can initially seem implausible. But we have found that, if you honestly examine all the evidence, trying to explain the story as merely legendary is *even more* implausible.

In all honesty, a main reason the authors of this book continue to profess faith in Jesus is because we cannot with integrity account for the evidence without concluding that the Gospel presentation of Jesus is deeply rooted in history. Of course, our faith is not *entirely* based on historical evidence. As we shall explain in chapter 12, our faith, like everyone else's faith (whatever its object), is also rooted in personal experience and deep intuitions of the heart. Still, if the Jesus story wasn't as solidly rooted in history as we've found it to be, we would, in all likelihood, still believe the Jesus story is the most *beautiful* legend ever told—but we wouldn't base our lives on the conviction that the story *actually happened*. This book was written to share with lay readers why its authors have repeatedly come to this conclusion. But before we begin to set forth our case, we need to make five preliminary comments that will set the stage for our project.

1. *Our thesis.* As the title of this book suggests, we are interested in whether the historical evidence supports the conclusion that the portrayal of the earthly Jesus found in the New Testament Gospels is historically accurate or whether it supports viewing this portrayal mostly as a fictional legend. *Our thesis is that, if considered with an open mind, the evidence strongly supports the conclusion that the portrayal of Jesus within the Gospels is historically accurate.*

To be more specific, our thesis is that, if one remains genuinely open to the historical *possibility* that the Gospels' portrait of Jesus is generally reliable—that is, if one doesn't assume at the start that the story can't be reliable—one will find many compelling reasons for concluding that this portrait of Jesus is the *most historically probable* understanding available. In addition, we believe that the historical evidence is such that it can serve as a central part of the intellectual basis that warrants a person going on to accept the Gospels' claim that Jesus is the saving Son of God and to commit his or her life to him as Lord.

2. *What we are not doing.* Second, and closely related to our first point, it is important for readers to notice that we are only claiming the evidence demonstrates that it is *more probable than not* that the Gospels' portrait of Jesus is rooted in history, and thus that it is not merely legendary. We are *not* claiming the historical evidence *proves with absolute certainty* that *every aspect* of the Gospels' portrait of Jesus is historically accurate. And we certainly are not claiming the historical evidence can *prove* that Jesus is the divine and sovereign Lord of all. This might leave some readers

disappointed. They might have hoped that we were going to prove the Gospels are 100 percent historically accurate, that Jesus is Lord, and, perhaps, that the Gospels are divinely inspired.

But you see, no one can *prove* these sorts of things on strictly historical grounds. By its very nature, historical research can only offer conclusions of *probability*—never *certainty*. This is the case because, however strong a historical argument is, no one can travel back into the past to verify with *certainty* its historical claim. For example, although virtually everyone agrees that Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon, Hannibal crossed the Alps, and George Washington crossed the Delaware, each of these historical claims is a matter of probability—not absolute certainty. Thus, because of the existence of historically possible alternative scenarios and the impossibility of time-travel, historians can only make claims at the level of probabilities. To be frank, anyone who claims to be able to “prove with absolute certainty” a historical claim has forgotten the inherent limitations of the historical enterprise and the finite and always fallible nature of human knowledge.

Additionally, historical research alone cannot *prove* articles of faith (e.g., “Jesus is Lord,” or “the Gospels are divinely inspired”). This is why they are called articles of *faith*. The most that historical research can do is to demonstrate that having faith in these matters is—or is not—*reasonable*. To put the matter simply: Although we are both Christian theologians by training, in this book we are involved in *an exercise in historical inquiry, not Christian theology*. Thus, in this book we will not directly be considering theological articles of faith such as the claims that the Gospels are divinely inspired or the claim that Jesus is the divine Lord of all. However, we are convinced that the conclusions of our historical project in this book do have a direct bearing upon such theological questions. Specifically, we believe that the historical evidence plays an important role in demonstrating that placing one’s faith in Jesus as Lord—that is, Jesus as he is presented in the Gospels—is an appropriately *reasonable* response.

3. *The “Legendary-Jesus Theory.”* Throughout this work we shall be engaging a certain scholarly perspective we label the “legendary-Jesus theory.” With this label we are not only, or even primarily, referring to the small minority of radical scholars who believe the Jesus story is *entirely* a legend (or myth), though the label certainly includes them.³ Rather, we are primarily referring to scholars who hold that the portrait of Jesus in the Gospels is *substantially* legendary—hence *not* substantially rooted in

history. More precisely, we include in this group all who conclude that the substance of the Gospels' witness to Jesus making divine claims, doing supernatural deeds, and rising from the dead is *legendary*. Our goal is to demonstrate that historical evidence does not support this view. It rather supports the view that it is more likely than not that these and other aspects of the Gospel story are rooted in history.

4. *Our intended audience.* We have written this book for critically minded laypeople. We believe the material we will be reviewing is much too important to be kept within the walls of academic scholarship. For some, we hope this book will provide a solid intellectual foundation to the faith they already embrace. For others, we hope this book will compel them seriously to consider accepting that the Jesus story is rooted in history and thus to consider accepting the Gospels' theological interpretation that Jesus is Lord and, subsequently, to commit themselves to following him.

In any case, we have written this book for the interested layperson and have thus attempted to keep it as brief and as readable as possible without overly compromising the quality of the scholarship. If some readers desire to explore certain issues raised here in a more thorough manner, we encourage them to consult our more academic (and much longer!) coauthored book, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition*.⁴

5. *The outline of this book.* Finally, it may help for readers to have a general sense of how our argument will unfold. We divide our work into two parts. In part 1, "Jesus, History, and Legend-Making," we evaluate an assortment of arguments legendary-Jesus theorists put forth to make their case that the Jesus story found in the Gospels is not solidly rooted in history. Some of the questions we'll be addressing in this section are

- Must a historian using the historical-critical method assume that all reports of supernatural occurrences are legendary? That is, is a critical historian ever warranted in drawing the conclusion that it's more probable than not that a report of supernatural occurrences is rooted in history?
- Was first-century Palestine an environment that was conducive to the evolution of a legend about a miracle-working God-man?
- Is the Jesus story unique, or is it significantly similar to various myths and legends we find in history?

- What do we make of the (alleged) silence about the earthly Jesus in Paul's letters, which were written before the Gospels?
- The Jesus story circulated primarily in oral form for decades before the Gospels were written. But how well are oral traditions able to preserve historical material over such a time period?

In part 2, “The Gospels and Ten Tests of Historical Reliability,” we sharpen our focus on the Gospels themselves. Treating the Gospels the same as we would any other ancient writing, we apply ten criteria historians customarily use to evaluate the historical reliability of ancient documents. One distinctive aspect of our assessment is the conviction that recent findings by scholars who study orally oriented cultures have a significant bearing on our estimation of how the Gospels stand up to critical scrutiny. Hence, we shall weave findings from “orality studies” into our application of the ten questions historians typically ask of ancient documents. These questions are

1. Do we possess copies of the ancient work that are reasonably close to the original?
2. Did the work intend to communicate reliable history, or was it intended to be read as fiction?
3. Was the author of the work in a position to record the history he or she claims to report?
4. How much did the biases of the author affect his or her historical reporting?
5. Do the works include the kind of detail that tends to accompany reports that are rooted in eyewitness testimony?
6. Does the work incorporate material that is “self-damaging”—that is, material that works counter to any bias the author seems to have, and thus material one might have expected the writer to leave out?
7. Is the work self-consistent or consistent with other works that report on the same events?
8. Are the events recorded intrinsically believable or unbelievable?
9. Is there any other literary evidence that impacts our assessment of the document under examination?
10. Are there any archaeological findings that either confirm or undermine the claims made by the document under examination?

Following this, we will conclude our book by exploring the relationship the Jesus story has to legend and myth in general. Paradoxically, though we'll spend the entire book arguing that the Jesus story cannot plausibly be regarded as a legend or myth, in chapter 12 we'll argue that there is an important sense in which this story constitutes the very essence of myth. Indeed, we'll argue that discovering the "mythic" quality of the Jesus story serves to further confirm its historicity.

Our hope is that this book informs readers about the current state of scholarship on issues surrounding the historicity of the Gospels' Jesus story while demonstrating the case for accepting this story as substantially historical, not legendary. In this way we hope to persuade some readers of the reasonableness of placing their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.

Jesus, History, and Legend-Making

In part 1 we critically assess several major arguments legendary-Jesus theorists put forth in support of their claim that the Gospels' portrait of Jesus is substantially legendary. Perhaps the most fundamental reason many scholars conclude that the Gospels' portrait of Jesus is mostly, if not entirely, legendary is that it depicts Jesus as performing supernatural feats. Legendary-Jesus theorists generally assume that supernatural events do not occur and thus assume that any writings that contain accounts of supernatural occurrences must be, by definition, either myth or legend. In chapter 1 we consider the widespread assumption within Western academic circles that supernatural events do not—in fact, cannot—occur.

Myths and legends typically are created to express certain cultural convictions and meet certain social needs. This is why the process of legend-making can almost always be explained sociologically. The question is, Can the Gospels' portrait of Jesus as a miracle-working divine man most plausibly be explained in this way?

Some legendary-Jesus theorists argue that first-century Judaism had come under the influence of the surrounding Hellenistic (Greek-influenced) pagan culture to such a degree that it would be natural for a legend of this sort to arise. Thus, they assert that this story can be explained

purely sociologically—that is, without supposing that Jesus *actually* made the divine claims or did the supernatural deeds the Gospels attribute to him. We will consider this claim in chapter 2.

Another major line of argumentation put forth by some legendary-Jesus theorists—particularly by those who hold that the story has no foundation in history whatsoever—is that little if any historical information about Jesus can be found in the letters of Paul (which were written prior to the Gospels). In fact, some scholars maintain that Paul didn't even think of Jesus as a recent, historical figure. Rather, he viewed Jesus as a cosmic figure who redeemed the world in the celestial realms or in the distant past. In chapter 3 we will examine the case these scholars make for a mythic or legendary Christ on this basis.

Another common reason given for viewing the Jesus of the Gospels as substantially legendary is that the story about Jesus parallels other myths and legendary tales. Myths about dying and rising gods were common in the ancient world, it is claimed. Legends about heroes who were born of a virgin, were almost killed in early childhood, and so on, have been common throughout history. And history affords us other examples of charismatic individuals who purportedly performed miracles and gained a following of worshippers. In chapter 4, therefore, we will examine the argument that these parallels provide evidence that the Jesus story is not unique and thus should be considered mostly, if not entirely, legendary.

Finally, virtually all scholars agree that material about Jesus primarily circulated by word of mouth among the early Christian communities prior to the writing of the Gospels. Those who hold that the Gospels' portrait of Jesus is substantially legendary uniformly hold that these oral traditions were very unreliable. Hence, it is claimed, the Jesus story was progressively distorted as the early Christians added fictional elements while telling and retelling it. Drawing on a wealth of findings from various disciplines concerned with orality studies over the last several decades, we shall assess this perspective on oral traditions in chapter 5.

1

Miraculous Claims and the Critical Mind

*Can Intelligent People
Still Believe in the Supernatural?*

The Gospels present Jesus as making divine claims, performing incredible miracles, and rising from the dead.¹ According to the New Testament, this is what convinced the earliest Jewish disciples that he was the Son of God. But this is also the most fundamental reason many contemporary New Testament scholars, as well as others, find it hard to accept that the Gospels are historically reliable. We in the Western world have all been influenced by the naturalistic worldview that arose out of the scientific revolution and the intellectual Enlightenment that followed. The naturalistic worldview holds that everything that happens can in principle be explained by appealing to laws of nature. Miracles, therefore, are ruled out of court. To the extent that we've been influenced by this worldview, we intuitively find it difficult to accept as factual reports that contain miracles. We're inclined to dismiss them as legends.

A good percentage of New Testament scholars today accept this naturalistic worldview, which is why so much of contemporary New Testament