Books on the Historical Jesus


Scot McKnight and Joseph Modica have collected seven essays on accusations made against Jesus in the gospels, viz. Jesus as Lawbreaker, Demon-Possessed, Glutton and Drunkard, Blasphemer, False Prophet, King of the Jews, and Mamzer. In a two-page introduction, the editors explain their intention to build upon the 1988 study by Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey, Calling Jesus Names, in which Malina and Neyrey apply labeling theory from the field of cultural anthropology to gospel accusations, presenting them as, inter alia, group boundary markers. The editors present accusatory ‘labels’ as credible evidence of historical views of Jesus, understood as authentic contemporary christologies ‘from the side’. The criterion of embarrassment is cited in several essays to support the historical value of ‘Christologies of opposition’.

Michael Bird situates accusations against Jesus as law-breaker within Second Temple ‘intra-Jewish polemics’ about Torah observance, Jewish identity and ‘prerequisites for membership’ that depend disproportionately upon ‘deviant labeling’. Bird notes the ubiquity of charges of ἀνομία between rival groups both within Second Temple Jewish and Christian texts. He argues for the authenticity of Jesus’ disputes with the Pharisees and then narrows his focus to passages on the food laws. He considers the influence of eschatological expectations (Jesus’ and others’) on questions of Torah observance and concludes that 1) Jesus prioritized the ‘mission of the kingdom’ over Torah and 2) the accusation of law-breaker was ultimately aimed at Jesus’ eschatology and (high) christology.

Dwight Sheets focuses on the Beelzebul controversy in the Synoptics to consider accusations that Jesus was demon-possessed. He wishes to attend to ‘surface level issues in the text’ to move beyond ‘context’ to ‘the underlying reasons that motivated Jesus’ opponents’ (p. 28). He relates the Beelzebul accusation to eschatological texts featuring 1) ‘Endtime antagonists’ and ‘Endtyrants’ and 2) false prophets and argues, for example, that Jesus’ ‘threats to the Temple’ caused him to be viewed, in light of Antiochus IV, as an Endtyrant figure.

He concludes with thoughts on the importance of Deuteronomy to the Evangelists and reveals the familial and societal implications of this accusation.

Darrell Bock looks at Jesus-as-blasphemer against the historical Jewish backdrop of Second Temple views on blasphemy and inappropriate exaltation (texts that depict human beings and angels going directly into God’s presence and Messianic seating). Bock begins by reviewing Jesus’ claims to forgive sins and of divine authority (Mark 2:10), whether by proxy or *per se*. He discusses analogous Old Testament and non-canonical texts. The ensuing section on Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin argues for the historicity of the trial narrative, weaving together contemporary evidence that associates the destruction of the Temple, Messianic expectations, and Jesus’ self-understanding as returning Son of Man and future judge. The accusation that Jesus claimed to be the Messiah provided the needed socio-political charge of sedition against Rome, but the primary religious offense was the blasphemy of claiming the unique authority of God for himself.

James McGrath’s essay on Jesus as False Prophet works backward from Jesus’ explicit claims to prophesy to deduce ‘hypothetical’ implicit reactions to them, since there are no explicit accusations of false prophecy against Jesus in the gospels. He notes that Jesus’ status as prophet was deemphasized within developing Christian traditions in favor of titles such as Messiah and Son of God. Jesus’ lament that prophets are dishonored at home, his prediction about the Temple, the recurring requests for a sign and Jesus’ predictions of the Kingdom coming within the lifetime of his hearers are considered. McGrath also links pericopes that describe Jesus as ‘out of his mind’ or possessed by a demon to false-prophet traditions.

Lynn Cohick makes admirable use of Josephus, Roman and Jewish history and research done on colonial experiences (not post-colonial theory) to reconstruct a dynamic picture of 1st century Roman Palestine and the meaning of the *titulus* ‘King of the Jews’ in that setting. She reviews Second Temple depictions of the figure ‘King of the Jews’ as warrior-king, of royal blood, insurrectionist, Messiah, rebuilder of the Temple in the tradition of Judas Maccabeus, and restorer of Israel. Cohick also develops a detailed and nuanced description of the codependent collaboration of Pilate and Caiaphas. Her portrait of a malicious Pilate placing the *titulus* upon the cross in order to ‘torment the priests’ by reminding them of the hopes of their people and ‘parading an “anointed” Jew to the cross’ emerges out of her careful study of ‘the Roman and Jewish ruling classes’ (pp. 131-2).

McKnight’s essay on Jesus as *mamzer* begins by linking the accusation to related details in Jesus’ biography, such as the ‘supernatural’ virgin birth and the much-discussed *υἱὸς τῆς Μαρίας* of Mark 6:3 and its redactions in Matthew and John. McKnight then considers ‘the assumptions behind the label’ by considering how *mamzer* is defined in Bruce Chilton’s *Rabbi Jesus* and by looking at Deut 23, Zech 9, Lev 18, the DSS and several rabbinic and targumic texts. McKnight ends by considering the textual evidence, arbitrating several of Chilton’s points and summarizing the significance of the accusation to Jesus’ role as teacher, prophet and more-than-human.

The collection is well-written and conveys a wealth of current scholarly perspectives on the gospel accusations, even as it limits itself, for the most part, to one scholarly method. A few concerns are worth mentioning. Using polemic as a reliable gauge of