

Skeptical of the Skeptics

You don't have to be a historian or a textual critic to assert with confidence that the Gospels are reliable.

by Peter Van Inwagen

The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History

By C. Stephen Evans

Oxford University Press

386 pp.; \$70, hardcover; \$17.95, paper

The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith is a sustained argument for the conclusion that it is possible for the ordinary Christian, the Christian with no training in historical scholarship, to accept, without any compromise of intellectual integrity, what the author calls "the incarnational narrative": the New Testament story of the birth, earthly ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ *as the church has traditionally understood that story*. The incarnational narrative is "an account of how the divine Word took on human flesh, was born as a baby, lived a life characterized by miraculous healing, died a cruel and voluntary death for the sake of redeeming sinful humans, was raised by God to life, and now abides with God, awaiting the time of his glorious return and ultimate triumph." Evans attempts to show, moreover, that it is possible that some or all ordinary Christians know that the incarnational narrative is true.

The author, a professor of philosophy at Calvin College, defends a large number of preliminary conclusions in the course of his book-length argument. Two of these preliminary conclusions are that it matters to Christian faith whether the incarnational narrative is historically true, and that there are no scientific or philosophical considerations that demonstrate the impossibility of miracles. But the most important of his arguments have to do with the nature of knowledge and the authority of critical New Testament scholarship, and it is these arguments I shall discuss.

A large part of the book is an examination of the nature of knowledge. Evans undertakes this examination in order to refute the following thesis (which has been explicitly endorsed by the theologian Van Harvey, whose influential book *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* has just been reissued by the University of Illinois Press): only a trained historical scholar could possibly be in a position to claim to know whether the Gospels are historically reliable. This thesis, according to Evans, depends on an untenable conception of knowledge, on what might be called the Enlightenment picture of knowledge: one can know that something is the case only if one can demonstrate its truth on the basis of evidence that is in principle available to everyone. If this conception of knowledge were correct, it would indeed be plausible to maintain that only a trained scholar could claim to know anything about the historical reliability of the Gospels.

But (Evans maintains) it is absurd to suppose that one can know only what one can demonstrate from publicly available evidence, and it is even more absurd to insist that there is per se something wrong with believing things one cannot demonstrate from publicly available evidence.

Evans's reasoning, like most good philosophical reasoning, cannot be usefully summarized in a few sentences, but an example or two will show why his conclusion is plausible. I may know that my old friend Jane is seriously depressed, even if all Jane's other friends don't "see" this and I am unable to convince them of her depression. Or, again, I may know that Tom has lied simply because Sally has told me that he has, even though I am unable to demonstrate that her testimony is true or demonstrate that she is generally reliable.

In an analogous way, Evans argues, there is nothing about the concept of knowledge that renders the following thesis impossible: Many ordinary Christians know, owing to the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, that the New Testament gives a reasonably accurate account of the words and actions of Jesus--despite the fact that they are unable to demonstrate on the basis of public evidence that the Holy Spirit exists or that they have received his testimony. (But Evans does not contend that the testimony of the Spirit is the only possible ground of an ordinary Christian's knowledge of matters like the historical reliability of the New Testament.)

It is important to realize that Evans does not claim to have *demonstrated* that any nonscholar does know anything to speak of about Jesus. To understand his conclusion, let us consider the following case. Suppose you are an ordinary Christian (that is, a Christian who is not trained in the methods of historical scholarship), and suppose you are convinced that you know that Jesus was raised from the dead. You are convinced you know this, let us suppose, because you are convinced that last Easter, while you were hearing the twenty-fourth chapter of Luke read in church, you were filled with the Holy Spirit and the Spirit testified that what you were hearing was true. Evans's conclusion is that these convictions of yours, whether right or wrong, are entirely consistent with a correct philosophical picture of what knowledge is and how people acquire it. Of course, the existence of these convictions does not prove that they are right; it is beyond dispute that many, many people have mistaken the devices and desires of their own hearts for the testimony of the Spirit.

After all, suppose Jesus *did* appear to various people after his death and that Luke *does* give a reasonably accurate account of some of these appearances and that you *have* received the testimony of the Spirit that Luke's account of the appearances is true. Wouldn't these things be sufficient for your knowing that Jesus was raised, despite the fact that many people have been deluded in thinking that they had received the testimony of the Spirit?

"No," whispers the Enlightenment, "not unless you can demonstrate that you have received the testimony of the Spirit. And you can't." But this kind of demand, if consistently applied, leads to general skepticism: "You think that

there is a tree before you because you have certain visual experiences. But that isn't good enough for knowing that there is a tree before you unless you can demonstrate that your visual apparatus is reliable. Descartes tried to demonstrate that and failed. And if he couldn't do it, you certainly can't."

Much of *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith* is devoted to general epistemological considerations of this sort. I recommend these parts of the book, both as a general introduction to current philosophical thinking about the nature of human knowledge and as an application of this thinking to the questions about what it is possible for nonscholars to know about Jesus. I believe, however, that the principal value and interest of the book lies in Evans's discussions of some much less abstract questions, questions concerning the authority of biblical scholars.

Suppose a skeptical historical scholar were to listen politely to Evans's general, epistemological arguments, and then say, "All this is beside the point. The most that arguments like those could show is that there are conceivable circumstances in which a nonscholar knew that some imaginable documents concerning the life of Jesus were historically reliable. You may be right, but those imaginable documents are not the documents we have in the real world. In the real world, objectively valid historical scholarship, which bases its conclusions on the features the Gospels and other New Testament documents actually have, has demonstrated that a very high proportion of their content is simply historically false. And, therefore, any internal, subjective conviction of the truth of the narratives contained in these documents must be delusive."

It is very likely that this imaginary quotation accurately represents the views of many scholars. Must we ordinary Christians defer to their authority? Evans maintains, and his arguments for this thesis are simple and compelling, that we need not defer to their authority. One may cite any number of considerations in defense of this conclusion. Here are six:

First, there is very little agreement among skeptical New Testament scholars. One will confidently assert that Jesus was a sort of wandering cynic philosopher, and another will assert with equal confidence that he was a political revolutionary, and they will make these confident assertions on the basis of the same textual and historical data. It is not hard to believe that these people are finding the Jesus they want to find; their conclusions are not determined by the (very meager) historical data, but by their own values and desires.

Second, not all New Testament scholars arrive at unorthodox conclusions about the life and ministry of Jesus; many scholars with impeccable scholarly credentials are orthodox Christians.

Third, a really substantial proportion of the arguments the skeptics employ are very *bad* arguments. (For example: if one of the Gospels says that Jesus said thus-and-so, and if his having said thus-and-so was useful to the early church, then he probably didn't say thus-and-so.)

Fourth, the arguments of many of the skeptics have premises that are

philosophical rather than historical--that miracles are impossible, for example, or that it is methodologically essential to objective historical writing that it regard any miraculous narrative as unhistorical. These philosophical premises may be defensible, but they are rarely defended. And when they are--well, as a philosopher, I can testify that I have never seen a defense of them by a historical scholar that I would regard as philosophically competent.

Fifth, as C. S. Lewis once said, "Whatever these men may be as Biblical critics, I distrust them as critics. They seem to me to lack literary judgement, to be imperceptive about the very quality of the texts they are reading." (Lewis mentions a scholar who regards John's gospel as a spiritual romance, like *Pilgrim's Progress*--which is, as Lewis says, "a story which professes to be a dream and flaunts its allegorical nature by every single proper name it uses.")

Finally, the community of skeptical critics is entirely naïve and unself-critical as regards its own claims to objectivity. Its members regard the New Testament authors and the students of the Bible who lived before the advent of modern scholarship as simply creatures of their time and culture; the idea that skeptical twentieth-century scholars might be creatures of their time and culture is an idea that they seem not to have considered.

Evans makes out his case for the conclusion that skeptical New Testament scholars have not demonstrated the falsity of the incarnational narrative with care and with very detailed attention to what goes on in the field. It does not, of course, follow from this that their skeptical conclusions are wrong. It does, however, follow that no scholar is in a position to offer an argument like the one I have imagined above.

This is a very good book, a book to be read by any Christians who want to have an informed opinion about the implications of historical scholarship for their faith.

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