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Book Review: Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism

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According to the Gospel of Mark, the trial of all the centuries culminated in the high priest tearing his robe and charging Jesus with blasphemy. Is the condemnation of Jesus on a charge of blasphemy historically plausible? Those who doubt the historicity of Mark’s account point to the description of the crime of blasphemy in the Mishnah, where it necessarily involves the pronunciation of the divine name: “The blasphemer is not culpable unless he pronounces the Name itself” (m. Sanh. 7.5). Perhaps Mark’s portrayal of Jesus’ trial should be regarded as a piece of early Church rhetoric and propaganda, since a charge of blasphemy without Jesus’ use of the divine name does not fit the cultural setting of the first century. In this book, Bock takes on the challenges of defending the credibility of the trial scene and the charge of blasphemy as recorded in Mark’s Gospel. Bock is careful not to oversimplify the problem by identifying a single reason for the charge of blasphemy against Jesus. A complex interplay of several factors helps to explain why the text sets out the story as it does. However, as the title of the book suggests, Bock concentrates on two crucial factors, the nature of blasphemy and the uniqueness of exaltation into the presence of God.

In order to understand the religious and cultural context for the charge against Jesus, Bock offers a comprehensive survey on the subject of blasphemy in Jewish literature, proceeding from the Hebrew Scriptures through the talmudic texts. Blasphemy was speech or action that revealed disrespect for God, by insulting his power, uniqueness, or goodness. It certainly included using the divine name in an inappropriate way. Yet Bock also demonstrates a wider viewpoint concerning blasphemy, one that goes beyond narrow blasphemous utterances. Acts of idolatry and of arrogant disrespect for God or toward his chosen leaders were likewise blasphemous. For Bock, the decisive catalyst that led to the charge against Jesus was his claim that as the Son of Man he would be exalted to a position at God’s side to serve as a heavenly judge. Bock’s review of Jewish literature shows the distinctive character of such a self-made claim to exaltation. Within Judaism, being seated at the side of God was possible, but only for a few highly significant figures under very limited circumstances and then only at the invitation of God. Bock argues that Jesus’ claim to an authoritative position at the right hand of God was for the religious leaders an affront to the presence of God. It was also an attack on them since it included an implicit claim to be their future judge.

Through his survey of Jewish literature, Bock convincingly establishes that a broader understanding of blasphemy and the surprising character of Jesus’ claim to future exaltation are important pieces in the puzzle. However, there is another puzzle piece that is sometimes overlooked, even by Bock, namely, injustice. Bock does discuss the unjust suffering of Jesus, but as part of Mark’s pastoral perspective rather than as a factor in the historical event of Jesus’ trial. My purpose for raising the issue is simply to bring to the surface an underlying assumption often left unexpressed in discussions on the historicity of Jesus’ trial. Some studies proceed as though Mark’s account is more likely to be authentic if the charge of blasphemy against Jesus could have been regarded as a just condemnation by the authorities and by others living at that time. Yet which is more historically plausible: an apparently just sentence or an obvious injustice? In addition, would present-day interpreters and Mark’s target audience, a religious minority living under an oppressive Roman government, necessarily answer this question in the same way? According to 1 Kgs 21:13, Naboth was charged with blasphemy and executed. It would be unusual to reject the historicity of this account solely on the basis that Naboth said nothing that could reasonably be regarded as blaspheme-
mous. It was a trumped-up charge used by Jezebel to dispose of a political nuisance and to steal a vineyard. The point of this example is to argue that false accusation, unjust condemnation, and abuse of power are potential factors in any trial, including that of Jesus and those in our own country. In other words, the standard of what constituted blasphemy might have been lower if a fair trial was not an overriding concern. By raising an additional factor for understanding the trial of Jesus, I do not want to detract from the success of Bock’s study. The book is well researched and thought-provoking. Bock serves as an able guide through an extensive journey in Jewish backgrounds to Mark’s Gospel, and he demonstrates that the journey is worth the effort.

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The present monograph is a revision of the author’s Ph.D. dissertation, which was supervised by Dr. Rikki Watts and submitted to Deakin University in 1996. Forbes sets out to fill in a gap in NT scholarship with this study of the Lukan parables (i.e. the nine parables unique to Luke’s Gospel: 10:25–37; 11:5–8; 12:13–21; 13:6–9; 14:15–24 [but note Matt 22:1–14]; 15:1–32; 16:1–13; 16:19–31; 18:1–8; 18:9–14). “Stated simply, the goal of the study is to discover the attraction that these particular parables had for Luke as he planned his story of Jesus” (p. 23).

In a survey of the history of parables research and an overview of key factors in historical study, Forbes shows a strong knowledge of widely varying views and approaches, and situates his work against the backdrop of scholarship quite well. His inclination is to use methods of Gospels criticism that focus on the historical-grammatical meaning of a text, while he is quite skeptical when it comes to reader-response criticism.

Forbes maintains that the Lukan parables reveal a strong interest in the nature of God, and God appears as a character in each one (i.e. figures in each story refer directly or indirectly to God) While admitting that this is not surprising (the same could be said for virtually all of the Synoptic parables), Forbes focuses on three major OT aspects of God’s nature that are highlighted in the Lukan parables: God’s love and care, God’s mercy and grace, and God as sovereign Judge. In fact, it is the character of God that forms the unifying motif of the parables at hand.

Forbes contends that this vision of God aligns with the OT God of the exodus. Accordingly, Jesus is portrayed especially in Luke’s “travel narrative” as one greater than Moses who brings about a new exodus for God’s people (so, too, D. Moessner). What is more, each Lukan parable serves to confront and correct distorted ideas of God that were current in contemporary Judaism (Forbes has taken E. P. Sanders’s cautions to heart).

In agreement with J. Nolland, Forbes argues that Luke’s readers were not Christians but Gentile God-fearers and that Luke’s aim was to show them how the God of old was at work among them through his Son to bring about their great deliverance. Luke’s readers stood at a crossroads: Would they fully convert to Judaism, or would they see how Jesus presented a true and compelling picture of God in saving action in a New Exodus? The Lukan hand is said to be evident in the selection of these parables to try to woo readers to embrace Christianity as the fulfillment of the promises of God.