

BOOK REVIEW

Maurice Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth: An Independent Historian's Account of his Life and Teaching* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2010). xvi + 560 pp. Pbk. US\$39.95.

This volume provides a review of scholarship in the study of the Gospels and the historical Jesus, affirming and challenging both conservative and radical views at various points. Maurice Casey, Professor Emeritus of New Testament Languages and Literature at the University of Nottingham, covers a wide range of topics, and this book, without a doubt, will serve as a handy resource for anyone who wishes to gain a comprehensive overview of the field. However, Casey does not appear to have an explicitly stated thesis in his study. He only expresses that 'The vast majority of scholars have belonged to the Christian faith, and their portrayals of Jesus have consequently not been Jewish enough... This is one reason why a fresh attempt to recreate the Jesus of history is essential' (p. 3).

In terms of the book's overall content, Casey neither provides the structure nor the rationale behind its organization, but one may divide the book into three major sections. The table of contents neatly outlines the sub-topics under each of the twelve chapters; the twelve chapters are, in turn, subsumed under one of these major sections. The first section comprises the first three chapters. Chapter 1 summarizes chronologically selected works within the historical-Jesus quest from the Nazi Period (second quest) to some recent proposals (third quest). Casey, following those scholars who variously emphasize the Jewishness of Jesus, argues that 'Jesus' language has been the missing link which should now help us to reconstruct his whole ministry against its original background' (p. 59). Chapter 2 discusses the various historically reliable sources, which, for Casey, are the Synoptics and the so-called Q material. He argues for an early dating of Mark (c. 40 CE), which he takes to be the oldest and most reliable source, together with Q, and proposes what he calls a 'chaotic model of Q' (p. 80). This proposal rejects Q as being one single Greek document and argues for an Aramaic

component of Q, which is purportedly an amalgamation of several different sources. Chapter 3 presents Casey's historical method in identifying authentic Jesus sayings. He first discusses both the limitations and the utility of the criteria of multiple attestation, dissimilarity, coherence, embarrassment and historical plausibility, and then explains how his Aramaic criterion fits into the criterion of historical plausibility, which he considers to be 'extremely valuable' (p. 101) and 'most important' (p. 141). Based on two features of Jewish literary sources—the rewriting of traditional Jewish sources and the telling of stories based on social memory—Casey claims that the Gospel authors employed these features, updating traditions while writing for the benefit of their communities. Readers may find Casey's conclusions unpersuasive, because they are generally based on assumption and speculation. The most significant assumption is the simple assertion Casey makes that Mark was an unskilled translator who was translating from an Aramaic source. It would have been more helpful to readers if Chapter 3—Casey's method of inquiry—came before Chapter 2.

The second section consists of Chapters 4–10. This section traces the life of Jesus from his birth to his resurrection, with Chapters 6–10 serving as an interlude, where the author discusses in a systematic way some of the critical aspects of Jesus' life and ministry. Chapter 4 highlights Jesus' Jewish cultural background and the Jewish environment of Galilee and the surrounding areas to show that Jesus was thoroughly Jewish. Chapter 5 deals with the prophetic tradition inherited by John and Jesus. Casey argues that Jesus was attracted to John's ministry of baptism and repentance. Consequently, Jesus set out for the wilderness after his baptism and appointed the Twelve, as well as a group of women to support him in his ministry. Chapter 6 argues that 'Jesus' life was centred in God' (p. 199) as demonstrated in his own spiritual experience, in teaching his followers to pray and in his willingness to offer his life in obedience to God. Chapter 7 explains how exorcisms and healings were central to Jesus' ministry. Casey points out that, based on the definition that 'A miracle is a remarkable deed performed by an unusual person believed by their followers to be in close touch with a deity' (p. 239), exorcisms and healings can be considered miracles, thus allowing for eyewitnesses to see Jesus as God. Chapter 8 argues that Jesus' ethical teaching presupposes the Torah, even though traditional Christianity has believed that his teaching was superior to Judaism. The only main difference, the author notes, is that whereas 'the Torah was

interpreted from a prophetic perspective' by Jesus (p. 281), later first-century rabbis interpreted it from a rabbinical perspective. Chapter 9 examines Jesus' conflicts with his opponents. Using the modern term 'orthodox' as an analytical tool to distinguish Jesus from the Jewish leaders of his day, Casey points out that Jesus' accusation against his Jewish opponents of 'replacing the commandments of God with their own traditions' (p. 351) ultimately led to his demise. Chapter 10 addresses the issues surrounding the terms and titles used of Jesus. Casey concludes that the major christological titles—Son of Man, Son of God and Christ—in the Synoptics were used to refer to Jesus himself in order to portray him as a faithful Jew and address him as the Messiah. Chapter 11 reconstructs the events in Jerusalem that led to Jesus' death. Casey claims that, although Jesus did not violate any Jewish law, he died as a bandit, since he became a leader of a religious movement and caused major trouble in the temple. Chapter 12 seeks to answer the question: 'Did Jesus rise from the dead?' Pointing out that the 'earliest belief [in the resurrection] was neither based on the empty tomb, nor on the stories of Resurrection appearances which are now found in the four Gospels' (p. 456), Casey concludes that Jesus did not actually rise from the dead but that his 'body rotted in a normal way' (p. 497). Rather, Jesus predicted a resurrection that did not imply a bodily resurrection. This section closes with a hope that readers will find this volume 'as accurate and illuminating as it is possible for an independent historian to achieve' (p. 508).

The third and final section is a set of appendices that discuss the Gospel of John, *Gospel of Thomas*, *Gospel of Judas*, *Gospel of Mary*, *Gospel of Philip* and the *Secret Gospel of Mark*, all of which the author considers unreliable sources, since they contain very little historically accurate material. Casey dates these sources to a very late date and notes that most of them are Gnostic documents that have nothing relevant to say about the historical Jesus, except for the fact that they can contribute to our understanding of the second- to fourth-century development of early Christianity. Casey's final remarks note that the major fault of the entire Jesus quest has been the finding of a Jesus 'who reflects [the investigators'] own concerns' (p. 544), which his book has attempted to correct.

Casey states in the preface that this book is a product of many years of research into the 'life and teaching of Jesus, his Jewish environment and fruitful methodology, [which began] by reading for a doctorate on

aspects of the “Son of man” problem at Durham University under Professor C.K. Barrett’ (p. xi). He points out that ‘The most striking Aramaic idiom in the whole of the Gospels is the use of two words, *bar (ʿ)nāsh(ā)*, literally “son of man”’ (p. 115). Casey’s interest in the Aramaisms of the Gospels is evident in his proposal of the use of Aramaic as an important component in the application of the criterion of historical plausibility. He strongly contends that Jesus strictly taught in Aramaic, that his cultural background was completely Jewish and that the Gospels, though written in Greek, fundamentally reflect an Aramaic origin. From these assumptions, Casey argues that many of the Gospel texts can be retroverted into their putative original Aramaic words, since their authors, particularly Mark, were bilinguals who translated their Gospels from Aramaic sources in order to address the immediate needs of their communities. Casey’s method, however, is not without some significant problems.

First, Casey points out that the Gospels contain Aramaic words that are attributed to Jesus, as well as various Greek ‘peculiarities’ that are taken to be ‘mistakes’ due to the lack of competence of the Gospel writers as bilingual translators. As such, they presuppose an Aramaic source. Both of these elements, however, need not be understood in this manner. On the one hand, it remains to be shown that this Aramaic source actually existed from which the Gospel writers worked to create their translations. On the other hand, in view of the likelihood that all the New Testament books were completed at the end of the first century (give or take fifty years in either direction), it is not difficult to conclude that they were all originally written in Greek, and, thus, that there is no need for an Aramaic source.

Secondly, it seems more plausible that, as bilingual translators, the Gospel authors would have utilized their ability to switch between two languages in their speech and writing rather than translating from an Aramaic source, especially since their world was predominantly an oral culture. Moreover, the thesis of a putative Aramaic source is anchored in the assumption that the hypothetical document Q actually exists. There is no evidence to show that the Gospel writers were poor and unskilled bilinguals, and it is therefore more sensible to think that they wrote in Greek but had to use some Aramaic words or features to emphasize certain words for the salience of an event.

Thirdly, and most importantly, Casey’s belief that Jesus’ socio-cultural environment was strictly Jewish is so entrenched that it fails to

take into account the multi-cultural and multilingual environment of first-century Palestine. Besides the hellenizing program of Alexander the Great in the third century BCE, such that by the time of Jesus Greek culture and language had spread throughout the Mediterranean world, Jesus' socio-cultural and political world belonged to that of the Roman Empire. While the sign on top of Jesus' cross was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek (Jn 19.20), it is most likely true that the *lingua franca* of first-century Palestine was Greek. Further, there were two Aramaic dialects, Judean and Galilean, that were considered the "native language" of the Jewish residents of Palestine during the time of the New Testament (see Mt. 26.73). There was also a widespread acceptance of the LXX that gradually supplanted the Hebrew Bible for public reading and teaching. For this reason, Casey is hard-pressed to suggest 'whether [Jesus learned] any significant amount of Greek, we do not know' (p. 169), for Jesus as a carpenter and teacher would certainly have needed to socialize with people outside of his own native community in various cities and locations.

Fourthly, the arguments that 'An Aramaic reconstruction is nevertheless valuable to scholars, because it confirms the possibility of an Aramaic source', or that 'One advantage of an Aramaic reconstruction is that it makes it obvious that these words are a natural part of a straightforward Aramaic narrative' (p. 119) are circular. One could always translate one language into another and claim that the receptor language is the original source language.

Whether Casey has achieved his goals is difficult to say. What can be said is that his lack of a clear thesis and the excessively broad range of topics covered in this book have caused Casey to miss the mark.

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