

BOOK REVIEW

George Wesley Buchanan, *Jesus without Fabrication* (Lexington, KY: Emeth, 2009). 211 pp. Pbk. US\$23.67.

George W. Buchanan, a former pastor in the United Methodist Church and Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Wesley Theological Seminary, is well known in academic circles as a pioneer into various ‘No Trespassing’ zones in historical-Jesus research, especially in the fields of ancient commentaries and literature, archaeology and legal studies. These ‘No Trespassing’ zones come in the form and follow the consensus of nineteenth-century scholarly hypotheses. Buchanan calls himself a ‘hound dog researcher’ who spends ‘a lot of time sniffing out trails that others do not realize exist’ (p. 16). As such, this book deserves a place in historical-Jesus studies, if only because of its unique way of depicting the historical Jesus based upon Buchanan’s interpretation of the biblical data through new lenses.

The book gives a provocative portrait of ‘Jesus the Nazorean’ (p. 35), who, as a formerly rich, well-educated and powerful businessman, surrendered all he had to become a celibate monk, a politically skilled statesman and an influential national leader aspiring to establish an underground movement to topple the Roman government. Based upon the ‘27 chreias’ (or ‘25 chreias’?; cf. pp. 30, 86) in the Gospels, which he defines as literary forms of ‘something that was remembered so that it could be told’ (p. 24), he argues that many of Jesus’ teachings in the Gospels can be distinguished from the additions of the later church. Chreias, he explains, are mostly one-sentence units introduced by a genitive absolute. When translated into English, they can take the form of ‘after this took place, then the following happened’ (p. 26). He further explains that chreias are historical reports written by Jesus’ disciples. Their historical veracity can be established by their coherence with associated parables, other types of sayings and the first-century socio-cultural situation of the Gospel accounts. Thus, Buchanan structures the eight major chapters of the book around the chreias in the Gospels—mostly in Matthew and Luke—and around their coherence

with associated parables and sayings of Jesus. Because these chreias mostly depict a political Jesus, Buchanan simultaneously posits his analogy of the church as a corporation; the prophets, apostles and Jesus as legal agents of God; and Jesus as a legally born king, which he draws from modern legal terms and concepts. The major chapters begin with Jesus on a campaign inaugurated by John's baptism and end with his entry into Jerusalem as a king, with an interlude in Chapter 7 that discusses the authority of Jesus as the Son of God and Messiah. These chapters, although providing much information, are not evenly divided; Chapter 2 is significantly longer than the others. Moreover, some chapters are clear and easy to follow, while others are incoherent and contain arguments that are difficult to follow. At times the chapter summaries seem disconnected from the chapters' main content, and many of the arguments are repetitious. However, most importantly, those arguments that claim Jesus as an active politician need more clarification and explanation.

In the preface and introduction, Buchanan narrates how his 'fifty years of serious study about the historical Jesus' (p. 11) as a pastor and academic scholar have enabled him to offer this updated volume (from his previously published *Jesus: The King and his Kingdom*) not only to devoted Christians but also to those who 'should be interested in the historical Jesus' (p. 17). He says that his independent style of research has allowed him to have access to good teachers and libraries, as well as archaeological opportunities in various places, which, according to him, have made his findings different from all other books in the field. Buchanan also provides a glossary of terms for the legal concepts he uses, and elaborates on these concepts in the concluding section of the book. He states that 'Jesus was well trained in the field of law' (p. 15), which is a point he uses to sustain his argument throughout the book that Jesus was heavily involved in the political matters of his time.

Chapter 1 defines the different kinds of chreias found in the works of Diogenes Laertius and, based upon them, argues for similarity between the teaching techniques of Jesus and Diogenes. Buchanan, however, does not demonstrate whether these chreias were used predominantly during Jesus' time; he only shows that Diogenes used them. And even if this 'chreia' form is found in the Gospel accounts, it remains to be seen whether Jesus in fact was familiar with it. This chapter leads to the argument in the following chapter that Jesus was a statesman.

Chapter 2 argues that Jesus and John the Baptist constitute a political team prepared to rule the Kingdom of Israel. But after John was executed, Jesus was left alone to carry this campaign as evidenced in the recruitment of his kingdom followers. Buchanan highlights the various chreias in the Gospels (e.g. Mt. 4.18-19; 9.36-37; Lk. 10.1-20; etc.), as well as a number of associated parables that point to Jesus' kingdom campaign. He shows in this chapter that Jesus, as a statesman, needed capable and well-trained people, as well as a large sum of money to support his campaign. He points out that Lk. 12.16-21 and 16.19-31, among other passages, support this claim. From these chreias and parables, Buchanan concludes that 'it is obvious that we have a solid basis for learning more about the historical Jesus' (p. 79). However, it should be noted that virtually all the chreias he presents do not contain a genitive absolute construction. It is unclear whether the chreia form is identified based on the Greek text or an English translation.

Chapter 3 discusses Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees in his defense of tax collectors and businessmen who broke Jewish laws. On this, Buchanan argues that Jesus aimed to change the status quo, that is, his goal was the removal of the Roman government in order to establish God's kingdom in Palestine. But the Gospel accounts also explicitly tell us that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world, that he was not leading a rebellion and that his followers are to believe, repent and store their treasures in heaven. Furthermore, what would Jesus gain from overthrowing the Roman government? These points make it difficult to follow Buchanan's proposal.

Chapter 4 tackles Jesus' undercover evangelism under the watchful eye of Rome. Buchanan posits that 'Jesus evidently gave his agents lists of chreias and parables that were stories with slight distortions as clues to allow Jews to listen for the hidden meanings' (p. 112). For instance, he points out that 'The secret hopes expressed in these [Matthean and Lukan birth] stories told Jews who Jesus was and what he was expected to do, and the Romans missed their political implication... It is a mistake for Christians to argue about whether or not Mary was really a physical virgin and miss the important point of the drama... that Jesus was the greatest of all statesmen that ever lived' (p. 122). But if this is the case, why do these narratives assert that Mary was impregnated by the Holy Spirit, that Joseph did not know Mary prior to the conception and that Jesus had to be born in a stable?

Chapter 5 explains how Jesus recruited wealthy businessmen for his campaign. Buchanan claims that Jesus knew how to invest, and to finance and to spend his money for his campaign, since Jesus planned to rule the Kingdom of Heaven in Palestine. According to Buchanan, Jesus also taught his citizens about right behavior in order to live in such a kingdom. Thus, various conditions, such as innocence, repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation are required for admission into this kingdom. Buchanan notes that in this chapter all of the chreias cited so far coherently depict a Jesus who is an ‘intelligent, religious, and patriotic statesman, moving quietly and organizing carefully, while planning the establishment of a new government that would rule this same land without the imposition of Rome’ (p. 136).

Chapter 6 shifts the portrayal of Jesus from a competent statesman to a man who devoted his entire life and possessions to God. The chreias portray Jesus as the Lord of the Harvest, who prayed, showed compassion and cared for his sheep. Buchanan concludes that many of Jesus’ teachings are recorded neither in chreias nor in parables and therefore must be evaluated based on their coherence with this ‘core group of valid sayings’ (p. 148). This is an instance where the chapter summary is disconnected from its main content. Readers are left wondering whether this is a summary of Chapter 6 or a conclusion to the first six chapters of the book.

Chapter 7 identifies the foundation of Jesus’ authority as the Son of God. Buchanan claims that Jesus’ authority was based upon his being anointed with the Holy Spirit by John. He supports this claim by listing eight evidences from Scripture, such as the precedents in Scripture for the secret anointing of kings, the authority that anointed kings received through the Spirit, the royal names of Jesus and Jesus’ political environment, which necessitated concealed political movements. Buchanan concludes that the Gospel of John provides forty references to Jesus acting and speaking as someone in authority, but also as one whose authority is dependent upon God. However, readers may wonder why Jesus needs to be ‘Son of God’ in order to rule an earthly, political kingdom.

Chapter 8 commences with the entry into Jerusalem. Buchanan points out that there are some practical problems with Matthew’s account of Jesus’ temple clearing (Mt. 21.12-13). Because the temple was the best fortress in the land and thus well guarded by soldiers, the commotion Jesus would have created by overturning the temple tables,

etc. makes this incident historically implausible. Buchanan suggests two alternatives. One is that the incident never happened. The other is that the event was a much bigger deal than it is reported. If the latter is the case, Jesus would have brought troops of soldiers with him into the temple. But this, however, did not happen, since Jesus is reported to have simply walked away from the event. Jesus, therefore, was a different type of king and messiah of his time.

In the concluding chapter, where Buchanan gives an extended summary of the key arguments of the book, he says that, even though Jesus was a national leader deeply involved in the politics of his time, as the anointed king he voluntarily chose to give up all his possessions and dedicate his life to chastity and obedience, since he felt the pain of his people. For this reason, Jesus was a well-known and impressively unique person in his day. Schweitzer, therefore, was mistaken; the Gospels are reliable sources for learning about Jesus. However, it is hard to understand Buchanan's point here. His demonstration that Jesus was a political leader based upon the so-called chreias does not necessarily imply that the Gospels are reliable sources. It seems that solid external evidence is necessary to prove Buchanan's case. The arguments become circular when they are supported solely by internal biblical evidence. It would have been most helpful if Buchanan had presented his evidence from archaeology and compared it with the Gospel accounts to sustain his arguments. In sum, it is difficult to know who Buchanan's intended audience is and the book's contribution to historical Jesus studies.

Hughson T. Ong
McMaster Divinity College