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Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium by Bart D. Ehrman

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Bart D. Ehrman. *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*

Reviewed by David M. Staheli

Bart D. Ehrman’s *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* is a work intended to explain to a broad, non-scholar audience one interpretation of Jesus in light of his eschatological teachings. It is a solid work of scholarship designed for non-specialists that is a very enjoyable read but also a profound and thought provoking work that inspires reflection on an oft-neglected facet of Jesus’ teachings.

First, a word to this review’s predominantly believing audience. Dr. Ehrman is an historian, and as such abstains from assessing any supernatural or metaphysical aspects of Jesus’ life, ministry, miracles, or atonement. He studiously refrains from any faith-based judgments. He approaches Jesus as a historical figure known to us through texts written decades after Christ’s life by disciples who have a vested interest in portraying Jesus as the Son of God. To those of us who accept the divinity of Jesus Christ there is some dissonance between common scholarly discourse, which makes no evaluation of faith judgments, and the language of faith, for which such judgments are central. Those who wish to have their faith lend power to their scholarship must be bilingual in the languages of faith and scholarship but speak scholarship only as a second language and with a thick faith-founded accent.

All that being said, this book is a fine work, and I highly recommend it to any who have an interest in the field of New Testament studies. Dr. Ehrman’s wry sense of humor throughout is a breath of fresh air in the often stodgy atmosphere of such works. His premise in the book is that Jesus, the man, is best understood to be one

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in a long line of Jewish prophets who understood that God was soon going to intervene in this world, overthrow the forces of evil that ran it, and bring in a new kingdom in which there would be no more war, disease, catastrophe, despair, hatred, sin, or death. And Jesus maintained that this new kingdom was coming soon, that in fact his own generation would see it. To that extent, at least, he was not so different from the predictors of the end who have numbered themselves among his followers ever since.¹

In laying out his argument, he briefly explains some very important ideas in NT scholarship. He explains the problem of historicity in works that have history serving a theological purpose than theology slavishly following history. He briefly explains the documentary hypothesis of the composition of the gospels and some tools of textual criticism, and uses M, L, and Q throughout. And he also speaks of the question of authorship of the gospels affecting the way individuals should read and understand them.

He uses a number of criteria to show that the historical Jesus best fits the mold of a Jewish apocalypticist, including: the adoption of many themes of apocalypticism (e.g. cosmic dualism, historical pessimism, and ultimate vindication), Jesus’ belief in the imminence of the coming of the Son of Man, and his teachings about the kingdom of heaven.

Ultimately, Dr. Ehrman’s conclusions cannot be entirely accepted by those who believe that Jesus is himself the Son of Man, and that Jesus was anticipating his own second coming and not the coming of an apocalyptic figure that would change the course of history in such a dramatic fashion, but the issues he raises, the foundation he sets, and the reflection he inspires makes this book a valuable and worthwhile read.