

Book Reviews

Guide Lines for Contributors of Book Reviews

- 1) Please do not submit a review that you have already submitted or published elsewhere, including on websites of book sellers or distributors.
- 2) Please use the following heading:

Title: Subtitle. Author. Series. City: Publisher, Year. ISBN-13: XXX-X-XXX-XXXXX-X (Hardback); XXX-X-XXX-XXXXX-X (Paperback). xxx+xxx pages. Index. Bibliography. Illustrations. Hardback: \$XX.XX. Paperback: \$XX.XX.

- 3) Ignore any of the above categories if they do not apply. The ISBN number is very important, however.
- 4) Italicize only the title/subtitle; format nothing else.
- 5) If possible, the price should be the original list price, not a discounted price, such as one offered by an internet publisher.
- 6) Please assume that the reading audience is unfamiliar with the work.
- 7) Briefly identify the author, but stay away from *ad hominem* argumentation. Particularly, avoid writing anything abusive toward the author. However, discussing an author's qualifications for his or her book may be helpful.
- 8) A knowledgeable summary that conveys the content of the book (if possible with occasional page numbers in parentheses) is essential. Remember that that the reader is probably more interested in what the book is about than what book you have written or would have written on the topic.
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- 10) Let the subject matter determine the length. A range of anywhere from 500 to 2,000 words can be appropriate.
- 11) At the end of the review, please simply write your name, followed by your affiliation on the next line.
First Name Last Name, Degree if you like
Seminary University College Organization

Jesus of Nazareth: An Independent Historian's Account of his Life and Teaching

Maurice Casey. New York: T & T Clark. ISBN-13: 978-0-567-10408-3 (Hardback); 978-0-567-64517-3 (Paperback). 560 pages. Hardback: \$130.00. Paperback: 39.95.

Maurice Casey has had a distinguished career as a NT professor and linguist. This book is very accessible, extremely entertaining, and also marked by sober scholarship (a very rare combination indeed). It is the only work of serious biblical scholarship I have ever seen featured in *Macleans Magazine*, the most popular news magazine in Canada.

Casey spiritedly argues that the historical Jesus has been abused by both radical scholarship and conservative, evangelical scholarship. He believes that an unbiased handling of arguments and historical evidence can prove not only that Jesus existed, but that many of his sayings, healings, and exorcisms really happened. Casey is also convinced that the disciples had visions of Jesus after his death (which he refuses to call hallucinations because of the pejorative implications). This admission does not entail a belief in supernaturalism. In fact, Casey appeals to cross-cultural sociological data about psychosomatic healers and the widespread phenomenon of postmortem visions, to argue that, as an independent historian, he can accept many of the accounts in the Gospels, but not their explanation or interpretation.

Throughout the book, Casey is irreverent towards what he regards as incompetent scholarship, but he remains far more respectful about Jesus. Nevertheless, he believes that Jesus was mistaken in his prediction of the imminent kingdom, that Jesus believed he was sinful, and that Jesus was buried in a common grave, the whereabouts of which were never known by his followers.

Besides trying to chart a middle course through historical Jesus scholarship, Casey contributes one main thesis, which he develops more fully than some other historians on Jesus. Casey's method places the criterion of historical plausibility at the center of his investigation; viz., to ask the question: 'Does what Jesus allegedly said and did fit into the cultural milieu of his day?'. Most importantly, however, is the role of the Aramaic language in Casey's reconstructions. He insists that Jesus spoke Aramaic, and that any alleged sayings of Jesus that

cannot be translated back into Aramaic are not historically plausible, and, therefore, unoriginal. It is this linguistic aspect that marks out Casey's work more than anything else.

Casey uses this criterion of historical plausibility to reject the Gospel of John. He argues that Jesus would never have thought of himself as God, because a Jewish monotheist would simply never have thought that way. This judgment obviously presupposes that Jesus could not have been God incarnate and would have been just a regular person within his given ethnic or religious heritage. After all, it would, in fact, be entirely plausible from a historical vantage point that if God had indeed become incarnate, he would be self-aware of being uniquely God. But Casey's rigid use of historical plausibility makes it *a priori* impossible for a Jewish man to be God incarnate. Thus, he forecloses certain options on the basis of his own conceptual predispositions. I could cite further similar examples. Apologists and anyone interested in the historical Jesus should read and interact with this book, particularly because it has become quite popular.

In addition to specific issues we could raise concerning various details, there are three broad areas where Casey's methodology appears to be insufficient to justify his case.

1. His *a priori* commitments do not allow him to see Jesus as anything other than a normal Jewish man, a piece of circular reasoning that results in any evidence for the incarnation being ruled out as failing the test of historical plausibility (i.e. what Casey subjectively is willing to allow to be plausible).
2. Although his work in Aramaic is quite helpful, the thesis is overdrawn. Jesus' milieu was much more multi-linguistic than Casey acknowledges.
3. Even if portions of the Greek Gospels cannot be retranslated into Aramaic, it does not follow from such a barrier that all sayings suffering from this limitation encountered by modern scholars, must *ipso facto* be inauthentic. As a logical possibility, we cannot rule out that there were times when Jesus spoke in Greek. Much more to the point, however, is our recognition that the Gospels can record the message of Jesus without always recording the exact words Jesus spoke verbatim. In fact, to the extent that the gospels record in Greek whatever Jesus said in Aramaic (or perhaps some other language), we are left with no choice but to recognize that, insofar as we have his *ipsissima verba*, we have them in translation. Thus the meanings conveyed by Jesus, as recorded in Greek, do not need to be reconstructed into Aramaic to prove their originality. The conceptual depth can be quite faithfully communicated, even if the original declarations

might necessitate a verbal and grammatical distance that could be wide indeed. Thus, Casey's reconstruction of the life of Christ, by adducing a rather mechanical criterion for authenticity, focuses far too narrowly on a hypothetical verbal slant on reconstructing the life of Christ, at the neglect of the conceptual content of his message.

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If God, Why Evil? A New Way to Think About the Questions.

Norman L. Geisler. Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House, 2011. 978-0-7642-0812-6 (Paperback). 167 pages. Bibliography. Paperback: \$14.99.

The problem of evil continues to be one of the toughest objections to Christianity. After all, no matter how good our arguments will be, the majority of people will not have read them; however, all human beings experience evil and try to make sense of it in their lives. Thus, when Christians need to confront the problem, a good resource on the issue would be a helpful part of their apologetic equipment. Norman Geisler's recent book, "If God, Why Evil?" provides Christians with such a tool for responding to tough criticisms from unbelievers on the problem of evil. Geisler handles the difficult issues as one would expect from a distinguished author (with eighty published works) and a stellar teaching career (at the seminary or graduate school level for over forty years). Geisler intended this book to be clear, concise and comprehensive (10), and I believed that he achieved his aim.

The table of contents instantly reveals the comprehensiveness of this book's approach. It is not merely a single argument finding a way of reconciling the existence of the God of theism with the reality of evil and declaring the topic to be exhausted. Chapter titles include, "Three Views on Evil," "The Nature of Evil," "The Origin of Evil," "The Persistence of Evil," "The Purpose of Evil," "The Avoidability of Evil," "The Problem of Physical Evil," "Miracles and Evil," "The Problem of Eternal Evil (Hell)," and "What About Those Who Have Never Heard?". Three appendices serve as helpful supplements, and they are far from extraneous to the usefulness of the book in the context of today's discussions.

“Animal Death Before Adam,” “Evidence for the Existence of God,” and “A Critique of the Shack.”

The book begins with a discussion on three views of evil: those arising out of pantheism, atheism and theism. This starting point provides Geisler with the opportunity to show that Christian theism provides the best opportunity to contend with the problems posed by the reality of evil. How so? Pantheism asserts the existence of God, but denies the reality of evil. Atheism asserts the reality of evil, but not the existence of God. Theism asserts both the existence of God and the reality of evil. Geisler dismisses the pantheist and atheist views; strictly speaking they do not even have a genuine problem of evil since they dismiss one horn of the dilemma or the other (the God of theism or evil). He concludes that Christian theism, though undoubtedly beset by this issue, also provides the only alternative to find an explanation for the reality of evil in our lives.

There are too many positive aspects to this book to discuss all of them here, but I would like to highlight two of them. First, I am glad Geisler addressed the issue of physical (“natural”) evil. It is comparatively easier to grapple with evil found in human beings given the realization that people are responsible for their own actions. Yet, a Tsunami may hit a country and kill thousands upon thousands of human beings for seemingly no discernible reason, by which we mean that the disaster does not seem in any way to be a response due to human error. Then answers are a lot harder to come by. Geisler notes ten reasons for the problem of physical evil, which include observations such as that some physical evil results indirectly from free choice, and that some physical evil should be viewed in the context of an ongoing good process. These statements should whet the reader’s appetite to pursue this discussion in greater depth.

Another positive contribution worth highlighting is Geisler’s chapter on hell. In the past, Geisler addressed this issue in article form, but now this book makes the information available for a wider audience. How often does one see an argument that reasons for the legitimate existence of hell? Geisler does not shy away from tough questions like “why punish people at all?”, “why punish people forever?”, and “why must there be a hell at all?” Geisler explains that “the evidence for hell is biblical, rational and moral” (96). Indeed, Jesus affirmed hell’s existence and spoke more on the issue than heaven. Geisler also explains how God’s justice; love and sovereignty demand a hell. Christians need to know how to address this very sensitive issue, and Geisler has provided us with some valuable insights to aid in that endeavor.

I find no outright faults with this book. However, I have a few suggestions on topics that could be addressed or developed further, should there be a second edition. First, a brief theological discussion on the imputation of sin due to the fall would be helpful. Unbelievers get caught up in the notion that sin should not be imputed to them since they were not around when Adam sinned. In other words, “Adam sinned, not me!” This point can become a roadblock to faith. One of our duties as apologists is to take down barriers to faith (2 Corinthians 10:5), and Christian apologists would profit from greater help with this matter.

Second, it would contribute to the overall value of the book if it placed a little more emphasis on the nature of grace. If evil is real, and it is, then we would certainly defeat our purpose to minimize the reality of evil because then we would also minimize the importance of grace. If there is no evil then what need is there for grace? As Geisler notes, humans have free choice. And, given such a freedom of choice, we often commit sin. Yet, God cannot bestow grace upon a soul who cannot or will not acknowledge sin (1 John 1:5-9). Yet, since a person sins, there is grace.

My two minor suggestions may seem trivial, but are only meant as possible supplements to such a fantastic book. How wonderful to have this tool at our disposal for an objection to Christianity, such as the problem of evil! The Christian community is indebted once again to the apologetic efforts of Dr. Geisler. If you have ever witnessed to others, then you know that this dragon called “the problem of evil” will raise its head sooner or later. Dr. Geisler has provided Christians with a sharp sword to engage the dragon in battle.

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Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality.

David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls. Cambridge, Mass.: Oxford University Press, 2011. ISBN-13: 978-0-19-975181-5. 283 pages. Paperback, \$24.95.

In their recent work *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality*, David Baggett and Jerry Walls aim at developing and defending a moral argument for the existence of God. Their argument, simply stated, takes the form of an inference to the best explanation: The existence of a maximally perfect God provides the best explanation of the existence of objective moral truths,

specifically truths of moral obligation. In order to defend this conclusion, it is necessary for the authors to explicate the connection between God and ethics. Accordingly, they devote the bulk of the book to two fundamental tasks: First, they develop their account of theistic ethics, which grounds moral goodness in God's goodness as well as moral obligation in God's commands. Then, second, they attempt to show that their account does not succumb to the standard objections to theistic ethics. Along the way, Baggett and Walls grapple with questions of moral epistemology, address the problem of evil, and flesh out the implications of their theistic ethics along distinctly Christian lines.

In chapter 1 Baggett and Walls present their moral argument for God's existence. The argument can be summarized in two propositions: First, there are objective moral facts that are binding on our actions; second, these facts can be better explained by a theistic understanding of reality than by non-theistic accounts. Specifically, they argue that Naturalist, Platonist, and Existentialist accounts of morality fail to explain adequately the key aspects of what they consider to be the fundamental truths of the moral life. In developing their argument, Baggett and Walls draw on the work of a variety of thinkers (both theistic and atheistic), such as C. S. Lewis, Cardinal John Henry Newman, Immanuel Kant, Henry Sidgwick, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, J. L. Mackie and George Mavrodes.

The moral argument defended in chapter 1 entails that there is some ontological dependence of morality on God. So, to defend their moral argument, Baggett and Walls must be able to explain how ethical truths depend on God, and to defend their theistic account of ethics against objections. Accordingly, in chapter 2, which I take to be the key chapter in the book, they turn their attention to the major objection to theistic accounts of morality – the Euthyphro dilemma, a moral puzzle that goes back to Plato's dialog by the same name. The Euthyphro dilemma, as usually adapted, can be stated as follows: Do morally good actions have this status because God favors them, or does God favor them because they are morally good?

To take the first horn of the dilemma is to embrace voluntarism, or the "pure will" theory of moral goodness. That position claims that God's will (which is expressed via divine commands) determines the content of morality. Baggett and Walls reject the "pure will" account of voluntarism because this view entails that moral truths are established by God's will apart from any reasons and are, hence, arbitrary.

To take the second horn is to embrace a nonvoluntarist or "guided will" theory of the good; moral goodness has ontological status independent of God. The

authors reject the nonvoluntarist account because (as they argued in chapter 1) all non-theistic ontological accounts of moral truths are inadequate. Further, they want to affirm that there is nothing, including morality, entirely independent of God.

Ultimately Baggett and Walls attempt to avoid the Euthyphro problem by defending a theistic understanding of ethics that splits the horns of the dilemma, and at the end of chapter 2 they give an overview of their account. They proffer a *modified* voluntaristic theory of theistic ethics: All moral truths depend on God, but not all moral truths depend on his *will*. The key to their account is the distinction between the moral good and the moral right.

Not everything that is good is also obligatory. For example, it may be good for me to sell all of my books and give the money to an orphanage, but it is unlikely that doing so is a moral obligation for me. Building on this distinction, Baggett and Walls contend that *moral goodness* is grounded in God's nature, and *moral obligation* is grounded in God's commands. The remainder of the book is an explication and defense of this theistic account of morality, showing its plausibility and its ability to avoid objections that are raised against standard voluntarist accounts.

Before developing the specifics of their account of the dependence of morality on God, in chapters 3 and 4 Baggett and Walls address the concept of God to which the moral argument points, and which they employ in their account of theistic ethics. Chapter 3 argues that the being who best explains morality must be maximally perfect in every way; hence the authors embrace an Anselmian understanding of God as "the greatest possible being who exemplifies all the great-making properties.... to the greatest extent to which they're mutually consistent with one another" (52). On this view God is not just good but necessarily good, and this means that God not only does not do evil, but *cannot* do evil. Chapter 4 further clarifies Baggett and Walls's view of God; here they argue that "in order for the moral argument to provide a rational reason to believe in God, God's goodness must be recognizable" (65). The bulk of this chapter is devoted to arguing that Calvinistic theology – which the authors take to be (minimally) a commitment to unconditional election – implies that God is *not* recognizably good, and that if one wants to defend moral arguments for God's existence and develop a satisfying account of theistic ethics, one should not affirm Calvinism.

In chapters 5 and 6 Baggett and Walls develop their theistic metaethical account. Chapter 5 addresses the relationship of moral goodness and God. The authors acknowledge that truths concerning moral goodness are necessary, and,

thus, are not under God’s volitional control (contra radical voluntarism). Making an important and helpful distinction between dependence and control, Baggett and Walls argue for *theistic activism*, the position that all necessary truths – including truths of moral goodness – depend on the divine intellect. Their account of the moral good, therefore, is nonvoluntarist, but still theistic. The good, they say, is rooted in the divine nature. They further contend concerning goodness more generally that “... in some important sense... God *just is* the ultimate good” (92). To defend this position, the authors provide clear and succinct summaries of two recent defenses of the “God-is-the-good” position: Kretzmann and Stump’s Thomistic account, and Robert Adams’ Christian Platonist account, both of which they commend.

In chapter 6 Baggett and Walls develop a voluntarist account of moral obligation. They maintain, following the work of Robert Adams, that moral obligations are ontologically grounded in the commands of a perfectly good God, and in the process of making this case, they give a lucid summary of Adams’ intricate and subtle view.

With the major tenets of their position in place, in chapter 7 Baggett and Walls argue that their modified voluntarism is not susceptible to those common objections to theistic ethics that are based on a perception of arbitrariness. Here I shall mention their response to two frequent criticisms.

(1) The “no reasons” objection: God’s commands are not rooted in anything but divine caprice, and our obedience is nothing but deference to a powerful authority.

Baggett and Walls avoid the “no reasons” objection because, on their account, God *does* have good reasons for the commands that he issues – he wills them in accord with his nature, which is the ground of moral goodness. Further, God created us in his image for the purpose of communion with him and with one another, so a divine command “qualifies as the kind of reason sufficient to generate an obligation” (127).

(2) The problem of abhorrent commands: If God commands something awful (e.g., torturing babies for fun), then it would be a morally good action.

The problem of abhorrent commands, Baggett and Walls point out, assumes that it is possible that God could issue commands that violate our best understanding of morality. They respond with a reaffirmation that we should trust our foundational moral convictions (remember, this is the basis of their moral argument for God’s existence). If these fundamental moral convictions are true

(and Baggett and Walls are confident they are), then their truth is rooted in God's very nature. And, since God is necessarily perfectly good (recall chapter 3), not only will God never command something abhorrent, he *cannot* issue such a command. In light of this response, Baggett and Walls end chapter 7 by considering the objection that the Christian God has, in fact, issued abhorrent commands (e.g., God's command to the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites). In response they claim (in a move reminiscent of Plantinga's response to the logical problem of evil) that there are plausible true propositions which would make these commands consistent with God's perfect goodness.

In chapter 8 Baggett and Walls consider the problem of evil, which, they say, "goes head to head with the moral argument in such a fashion that both cannot survive the showdown" (144). The literature on the problem of evil is immense, so the authors focus on responding to the probabilistic argument for God's nonexistence as presented in the recent publications by Bruce Russell. Their response to Russell is thorough, winsome, and, in my estimation, adequate to support their conclusion that "the moral argument can withstand the best shots the problem of evil can deliver" (158).

Chapter 9 addresses the important question of moral epistemology – given that God's nature is the source of moral goodness, and that God's will determines moral obligation, how do we come to know what is morally good and morally right? Baggett and Walls give an important place to natural law theory, arguing that "the epistemic power of natural law makes sense of conscience and moral intuitions, while providing a better alternative to saying that these are the main or only way in which we acquire moral knowledge" (165). Ultimately their account of how we come to know moral truths incorporates a variety of sources of knowledge – natural law, conscience, moral intuitions, general revelation, special revelation, and societal and familial moral training.

In chapter 10 Baggett and Walls fill out their theistic account of ethics, drawing on their Christian commitments. Here the authors provide a rich discussion of virtue, the importance of interpersonal relationships in ethics, the role of grace in moral transformation, and the hope of eternal union with God in Christ.

Good God is a welcome addition to the literature on natural theology and theistic ethics. One particular strength of the book is its accessibility. Baggett and Walls state in the preface that they "were intentional from the start of this project to write something accessible to a broader readership than professional philosophers and theologians" (6). Overall, they achieved the goal admirably. While this book would not be an *easy* read for someone without some

philosophical training, it is an *achievable* read for the educated non-specialist. Another strength of the book is the way that it summarizes and synthesizes vast amounts of work in moral apologetics and contemporary ethics. Over the last generation, there has been a resurgence of philosophical work done in the development of theistic metaethical accounts (the writings of Philip Quinn, John Hare, and Robert Adams immediately come to mind). Yet these efforts have for the most part been confined to various journal articles and scholarly monographs. Baggett and Walls do the Christian community an important service by summarizing and organizing the fruits of this significant trend.

My overview here has only scratched the surface of the depths of this book. I have not been able to present the details of Baggett and Walls's arguments, and I have been unable even to address many other interesting parts of the book. For instance, there is an insightful discussion at several points throughout the book of how moral arguments for God's existence should best be presented, with reasons given for why Baggett and Walls's inference to the best explanation presentation is to be preferred over deductive presentations (such as that defended by William Lane Craig). There is also an important appendix (Appendix A, "Answering the Extended Arbitrariness Objection to Divine Command Theory") that contains erudite and effective rebuttals to the most recent scholarly objection to their theistic theory of moral obligation. I highly recommend *Good God* as an important resource for the moral argument for God and for theistic ethics. Both newcomers to the field of philosophy and seasoned veterans will find much to profit from in this book.

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