

M. David Litwa, *How the Gospels Became History*. Yale University Press, 2019. 312 pp. Reviewed by Richard C. Miller.

**The Ancient Christian Gospels as *Historiae*:  
A Secular-Critical Evaluation of M. David Litwa's *How  
the Gospels Became History***

Richard C. Miller

In his signature, rhetorical flair, M. David Litwa's recent myth-critical investigation into the Gospels has proposed a provocative new genre (or sub-genre) for these sacred Christian narratives, a rubric he coins "mythic historiography," a stimulating though untenable hypothesis that we shall critically consider in the following review. A junior lecturer in Catholic higher education, Litwa has positioned his career as a rising and prolific next-generation scholar in the field of New Testament and Early Christian Studies. His skill with the English language and trenchant humanistic approach, namely, that of identifying mythographic qualities inherent in early Christian sacred texts, stakes out a space in the present discursive landscape somewhat in proximity to my own more secular location in early Christian research. In my published work, I rather consistently refer to the Gospels with such terms as "sacred *fabulae*" and "charter legends." Due to the *prima facie* vicinity of such descriptors with Litwa's "mythic historiography," the book drew my keen attention, embarking on matters near and dear to my own academic devotion.

**Litwa's "Mythic Historiography"**

In summary, Litwa suggests that the ancient authors of the Gospels composed "myths" that were packaged and passed off as qualified histories (or as "history-like" texts), that is, by the alleged low Greco-Roman historiographical standards of their day. In his opening, Litwa clarifies this proposal:

The Gospel stories were originally written and received by Christians as *historia*, as stories relating actual events. (p. 4)

Litwa endeavors to set forth and to expound throughout the book the basic premise:

[The Gospel authors] deliberately put the life of Jesus into historiographical form. They did so, I propose, for the same motives that contemporary Greco-Roman historians historicized their mythography: to make their narratives seem as plausible as possible. (p. 19)

Ever-aiming for such standards of plausibility, so the book works to assert, the New Testament Gospels distinguished their narratives from the standing inventive and mythographical literary forms and genres of their day. Litwa further articulates:

Simply by writing in sober, non-poetic forms, the evangelists distinguished their accounts from the dominant *mythoi* found, for instance, in Homer and Euripides. They did not, moreover, need to apologize for describing miraculous events since these events were a regular feature of ancient historiography. The evangelists weighed their sources in the sense that they strongly valued eyewitnesses over hearsay

(Luke 1:2) and were careful selectors of material to include from previous texts. (p. 7)

In this manner, Litwa endeavors for his readers to connect the proverbial dots between a cluster of three common inferences placed upon these canonized ordinary tales of the Christian religion:

1. The Gospels must have been myths, given that they routinely report natural impossibilities.
2. Typical ancient Hellenistic and Roman readers markedly differed from us in modernity in that the ancients were much less capable in cognitive discernment between accounts presented as factual and those presented as legendary or mythical. Many historiographical works from classical antiquity, therefore, failed to honor such a distinction.
3. By sufficient generic cues, the Gospels appealed to their early readers as plausible historiographical accounts of authentic, factual events.

Let us consider these claims, taking each by section:

### **Secular-Criticism and the Gospels**

The first conception orienting Litwa's argument, namely, that the Gospels must have been myths, given that they routinely report natural impossibilities, while certain to provoke reaction from faith-minded readers, appears quite sound from a naturalistic, secular starting point.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Albeit an alternative posture for the modern historian may be in focusing on how the early Christians themselves and broader ancient Mediterranean society would have cognitively perceived and regarded such stories and tales. I tended to apply this approach in my own recent monograph. Richard C.

In truth, one observes a conspicuous and consistent lack of empirical support for the page-by-page accounts of the fantastical and miraculous featured throughout the Gospel narratives, a core literary thread-line witnessed across the biblical narratives generally. A modern rational, scientifically disciplined mind cannot accept such tales as credible accounts of real events in time and space. As Carl Sagan famously aphorized, “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.” Early Christian narratives of the miraculous, as a rule, supplied no such evidence. Litwa correctly underpins the book with this rational foundation.

Yet, such an obvious admission, I observe, remains elusive and non-axiomatic in today’s field. Indeed, the secular-critic finds most all academic work in the field of religion to be well-off-center. Such comes as the inevitable result of the Society of Biblical Literature hosting the primary field discourse as effectively a cultural negotiation between faith-constrained, faith-motivated participants and those less so. Faith-driven book markets, grants, student reviews, academic boards, and almost all participants on long, extraordinary faith-journeys with their careers merely providing chapters in such epic tales, these predominantly define the field. Western culture exists yet under the spell of these sacralized texts, effectively funding the academic legitimation of its own mythosystem. In consequence, biblical studies fails to achieve secular qualification. Even in its most distant participation, we are yet locked into its faith-centered gravitational vortex, like Kuiper Belt objects, even if unwittingly so, ever operating in negotiation with its central mass. Nothing like this is going on at the Society

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Miller, *Resurrection and Reception in Early Christianity* (London: Routledge Books, 2015). Ontological naturalism (and variations), however, provides the only evidentialist, scientific approach to the study of ancient texts. Such commonly applied codes of discursive secularity ground research in a common human objectivity, a construction of the past sensibly driven by understood natural constraints and recognized ancient linguistic modalities.

for Classical Studies (formerly the American Philological Association). As a secular transdisciplinary writer and contributor to both fields, my work is judged positively in the latter field, yet given wildly mixed reviews in the former. I have not failed to notice that my most vocal critics would lose their employment were they to begin agreeing with my myth-critical scholarship on the resurrection. Simply imagine if, at the SCS, most of the participants believed in the ontological reality of Zeus, argued for the encouraging historical veracity of Hesiod, conducted repeated “quests” for the historical Heracles, and attended Artemic cult services most weekends (even from childhood). For many good, valid reasons those in adjacent fields to biblical studies tend to avoid publishing into that maelstrom, often viewing the field as illegitimate, the pseudo-academic protraction of Christian and Judaic scholasticism.

By daring to establish a myth-critical approach to deconstructing the New Testament, Litwa endeavors to join a relatively small, but growing club of esteemed Biblical Studies scholars. This camp ranges from those who approach the Gospels as whole-cloth fictional literary works (i.e., mythographies), also known as Jesus-Myth Theorists (e.g., Bruno Bauer, G. A. Wells, Earl Doherty, Thomas L. Brodie, Robert M. Price, and Richard Carrier), and those who approach the Gospels as heavily mythologized accounts, possessing only the barest kernel of historicity (i.e., the Gospels were myths and legends). According to this latter category, the historical Jesus was not the object of the Gospel portraiture, thus rendering the Gospels nigh irrelevant for any quest for the historical Jesus.<sup>2</sup> This group

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2 Indeed, despite all due respect for Albert Schweitzer and his recurrent legacy in 20<sup>th</sup>-century New Testament research, the “quest for the historical Jesus” often appears more as a personal pilgrimage or power-interest, in history, a later liberalizing phase or continuation of the Protestant Reformation and its strategic power-appeal to the originary kernel of the religion, rather than a genuine humanistic contribution to civic knowledge.

may quietly include a much larger roster than the first (e.g., Rudolf Bultmann, Gerd Lüdemann, Burton Mack, Dennis MacDonald, and many others, including M. David Litwa and Richard C. Miller, the writer of this review). Myth-critics historically stand distinct by their aversion to being lumped in with the Jesus-quest mainstream (those who mine the Gospels for some vestige of a historical core), viewing such an academic pilgrimage as little more than a fool's errand. The designation "myth-critic," therefore, may provide a more salient namespace than such popularized terms as "mythicist" or "Jesus-myth theorist" inasmuch as the former identifies a shared governing methodology and comprehension of earliest Christian textualizations of "Jesus," rather standard among secular New Testament critics. Given the aforesaid humanistic orientation to the Gospels as essentially mythological in character, that is, due to their saturation in unapologetic tales of the miraculous and supernatural and their repletion with cognitive patterns prevalent in ancient myth, legend, and folk-belief—Let us be most clear—the above described myth-critical camp achieves exclusive central qualification in any legitimate secular academic discourse handling these texts.

Today, however, such a discourse does not exist. The biblical studies conference all-too-often presents to outside scholars little more than an unnerving pandemonium, mutinous of the hard-won precepts of secular academia and often in morbid isolation from the secular humanities.<sup>3</sup> In any analogous domain of historical inquiry, one so suffused with myth and legend, be that with Quetzalcoatl, Buddha, Enoch, or King Arthur, the above two myth-critical approaches wholly govern any sensible methodological

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3 For an enlightening history of Western higher education and the offensive anti-secular role that seminaries and divinity schools have played to impede its development and progress, see Jon H. Roberts and James Turner, *The Sacred and the Secular University* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000).

foundation of inquiry. Delivering a paper at the Royal Historical Society on the encouraging historical reliability of early Welsh and Breton poetic songs and folklore (oral tradition) or Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (literary tradition) toward reconstructing the historical King Arthur (Merlin and all) would rightfully get one laughed off the podium.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, appropriate adoption of a myth-critical approach to Jesus studies under SBL's "big tent" discourse to the present day invariably buys one scornful marginality. Myth-critics remain the pariahs of the field, outlaws and desperados driven to the margins, clearly perverse and ignoble creatures supposed to harbor personal psychological vendettas against the holy faith.

Any qualified secular study of myth, legend, and folklore in the New Testament requires extensive transdisciplinary work crossing discursively into the secular disciplines of anthropology, neuropsychology, folkloristics, literary criticism, mimesis criticism, cultural criticism, and classics. Litwa makes little visible attempt at structuring his project within such standing secular discursive conversations. Thus, like the morbid state of biblical studies generally, the book rests in tragic discursive isolation, merely adding to the non-secular feedback loop that has so long impaired and disqualified Gospels scholarship from contribution to the secular sciences of the humanities. In truth, the very proposal of a new (sub)genre in classical composition belongs first proposed (and validated) before classicists and literary theorists, not as a domestic detraction and contention with bible commentators. Litwa instead regrettably spends considerable time drawing up personal and methodological

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4 For perhaps the most serious academic attempt to identify any historical Arthur beneath this textual archeological strata of ancient legend and folklore, see Thomas Green, *Arthuriana: Early Arthurian Tradition and the Origins of the Legend* (Louth, Lincolnshire: Lindes Press, 2009), 1-46. Rather analogous to quests for the historical Jesus, Green concludes the Arthur quest to be a highly dubious fool's errand.

caricatures, thus avoiding and dismissing the necessary secular work properly to ground such a project in the humanities.<sup>5</sup>

Qualified myth-criticism of the Bible, as described, presents a secular horizon of scholarship, one properly aligned, moreover, with the naturalistic semiosphere of common evidence-grounded perception, that is, our mutual human *Umwelt* as a species. Despite its range of at times rather creative hypotheses, one may appreciate the humanistic virtue of myth-criticism in the method's honest endeavor *to explain*, in culturological, sociological, ideological, psychological, and anthropological terms, the proliferation of early Christian literary products and the societies that produced them. As Robert M. Price has shown, Christ-Myth Theory, applied as a *methodology* in subset to secular myth theory (à la Frazier, Propp, Frye, Levi-Strauss, Segal, Bascom, Dundes, and a host of talented successors), provides guard-rails for a vital heuristic exercise that has yielded a number of powerful insights: As sacralized literature, to what extent might one explain the Gospels, when constrained by the supposition that these textual representations did not derive, be that primarily or at all, from any authentic historical figure Jesus?<sup>6</sup> Despite the above call for secularity and discursive maturation, Litwa and all New Testament myth-critical pioneers are to

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5 Concerning this propensity toward genetic fallacy, one notes, all human beings entering the field of New Testament studies come with both interest and fraught past religious exposure, Litwa and Miller included. Anent the above discussion of broken discourse, one notes for example the secular superiority of Richard Carrier's qualification and training in classical history over and against his most boisterous field critics. Rather than continued defamation, he, along with all qualified myth-critics, merits a central voice at the roundtable.

6 Robert M. Price, *The Christ-Myth Theory and Its Problems* (Cranford, New Jersey: American Atheist Press, 2011).



be cheered for undertaking this shockingly fallow academic enterprise.<sup>7</sup>

### **Generic Standards in Classical Historiography**

We learn from modern neurological science and psychological research that our species possesses an innate discernment between ontological reality and modes of non-reality. This cognitive acuity within *Homo sapiens* classes and stores these via two different neuropathways in separate compartments in the brain based upon semiotic signal detection.<sup>8</sup> The Western Enlightenment and rise of scientific method have born a false myth of the ancients as the *savage irrational other*, a myth that appears perpetuated in Litwa's book, claiming that the ancients were more credulous than we modern folk, that is, less prone to psychological discernment between *spatium historicum* and *spatium mythicum*. While recognizing the tremendous progress of scientific method and knowledge in Western thought, we must concede that the flow of myth-

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7 Justin Meggitt appears to share some of the general observations given here regarding the legitimacy of myth-critical approaches to the historicity of Jesus and the questionability of the historiographical qualifications of many of those presently governing the Jesus-quest discourse. Justin J. Meggitt, "More Ingenious than Learned? Examining the Quest for the Non-Historical Jesus," *NTS* (2019), 65, p. 443-60.

8 Whoolley, J. D. and Ghossainy, M. E., "Revisiting the fantasy-reality distinction: Children as naïve skeptics" in *Child Development* 84(5), 1496-1510; see also Anna Abraham and D. Yves von Cramon, "Reality = Relevance? Insights from Spontaneous Modulations of the Brain's Default Network when Telling Apart Reality from Fiction," in *PLoS ONE*, March 2009, Volume 4, Issue 3, e4741.

laden, superstitious thought has yet to ebb in modernity.<sup>9</sup> Prevalent descriptions of extraordinary Christian devotion, moreover, often confuse early Christian ascetical, political, and martyrological zealotry with the certitudes seen in modern literalist fundamentalism, with the former conception not properly grounded in the broader ancient currents of philosophical and political asceticism. Yet, would not even the most hardened Christian fundamentalist in our time, despite his literalism, be astonished to learn that Jesus today had received a stylish new haircut or had requested a new interior decor for his heavenly throne-room? Despite prevalent ancient indulgence in cultic belief, antique cultural mythologies invariably did not occupy a literal doxastic mental space, as Paul Veyne, Mary Beard, Simon Price, and many others have shown us.<sup>10</sup>

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9 For recent anthropological and psychological studies into the quite different “cognitive attitudes” and ways of “thinking” between matters of cultic assertion and the rationalisms otherwise disciplining mental construction of reality, see, for examples, Neil Van Leeuwen, “Does ‘think’ mean the same thing as ‘believe’? Linguistic Insights into Religious Cognition” in *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (2018); and *Imagination, Belief, and Religious Credence* (Harvard University Press, forthcoming); Tanya M. Luhrmann, “Constructing Belief through Narrative Engagement” in *Religion: Narrating Religion* (Farmington Hills, MI.: Macmillan, 2017); “Faith vs Facts” *New York Times*, April 18, 2015; and the numerous published studies grounding the matter in the science of cognition and culture by professor of psychology Cristine H. Legare.

10 Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination* (trans. Paula Wissing; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). W. Mary Beard, John A. North, Simon R.F. Price, *Religions of Rome, vol. 1, A History, vol. 2, A Sourcebook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). While capacities of ancient devotional faith and sincerity have not come under serious question, cultural identification and ritualism (rather than doxastical literalism) have risen to field consensus to explain the general phenomenology of cultic

By contrast, considering historiography in classical antiquity, the second-century grammarian of grammarians Sextus Empiricus instructed fellow grammarians on how to compose grammars (rule-books) for history-writing, describing in broadest terms the general scope and function of ancient historiography as a well-bracketed class of composition, quite separate from the rules governing all other classical literary forms, whether poetic or prosaic composition (*Adversus Math* 1.91-96). His description of the strictures of classical historiography comports well with the extant works recognized under the genre and with all other grammatical descriptions of historiography surviving from classical antiquity.<sup>11</sup> Sextus, peering down

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fidelity in Mediterranean antiquity. As rationally anticipated, careful scholarship finds strong continuity in this regard with the nascent rise of Christianity.

11 Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Math* 2.91-320; Cf. Cicero, *De Inv* 1.27, *Auct.*, *Ad Herennium* 1.8.13, *Quint.*, *Inst. Orat.* 2.4.2, *Servius*, *In Aen* 1.235, and *Asid.*, *Orig.* 1.43.1. The second-century Syrian writer Lucian, in his *How to Write History*, provided an all-the-more-strict set of standards, complaining of panegyric and encomiastic embellishment in renditions of persons of power, Roman rulers typically. He wrote "History cannot include a lie anymore than the windpipe can tolerate anything entering it while swallowing." Lucian, *Quomodo historia conscribenda sit* 7. The ancient history works themselves customarily expressed, and thus *reinscribed*, this same standard for truth, just as John Moles affirmed: "Ancient historiography aims, or should aim, to tell the truth, by which is meant: to relate things that actually happened and establish their causes. Accordingly, if an ancient historiographer does not tell the truth in that sense, there can be only three explanations: error, dishonesty, or misconception of history's true function." J. L. Moles, "Truth and Untruth in Herodotus and Thucydides" in *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993), 89-90. Cf. Polybius 1.14.1-9, 2.56.1-16, 8.8.3-11, 12.1.2-28, 16.14.1-20.9, 29.12.1-12; Cicero, *Fam.* 5.12, *De oratore* 2.51-64; Dionysius, *Pomp*, and *On Thucydides*; Plutarch, *De Herodoti malignitate*.

through the annals of Greco-Roman antiquity, shared the universal understanding of historiography as a kind of record-keeping reference composition which may include chronicles of mundane historical accounting, compendia of prominent geographical and cultural descriptions, and biographical profiles of significant figures.

In his grammatical instruction, Sextus and his predecessors paid emphatic attention to the management of modal lines in qualified works of ancient historiography:

ἱστορίαι – history proper, that is, mundane accounts of remote events, persons, or places as these were understood truly to have existed in space and time.

πλάσματα – mundane fiction, that is, accounts given as fictional, yet as plausible, such as recording content from a scene in a play.

μῦθοι – mythology, legend, and folklore, that is, accounts recognized as neither true nor as resembling plausible events in space and time.

Cicero, two centuries prior and from the Latin side, provided these same modal lines and precise descriptions: *historiae*, *argumenta*, and *fabulae*.<sup>12</sup> Ancient historiographies thus could include the latter two modes insofar as they sufficiently conveyed, and not confused, the above modal lines. In other words, a curated history of myth and legend was permissible, even traditional, whereas myth and legend *qua* history was not, an imperative distinction clearly missed in Litwa's hypothesis.

The contrivance of a hitherto unrecognized subgenre of ancient Greek and Latin history, what the book terms "mythic historiography," that is, works that (Litwa alleges) carelessly and routinely transgressed the above modal lines,

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12 Cicero, *De Inv* 1.27.

thus testing and exploiting the credulity of ancient readers, fails to find any compelling examples in our extant ancient histories. Indeed, to our surprise, the thesis proposes only three: Herodotus, Ctesias, and Hellanicus (p. 11-12). Of these, moreover, only Herodotus do we commonly recognize as having been a historian. Ctesias's work is disputed, and Hellanicus wrote in a prior intermediary mode between the early Greek poets and the later prose historians known as logography, and the works of both are only preserved in a paucity of slim excerpts and fragments. All three of these examples were written 6 full centuries prior to the composition of the New Testament Gospels and, as such, showed varying (and expected) traces of influence from their sixth-century B.C.E. Ionian logographic predecessors. The first two of these three texts, as relevant, now deserve closer inspection.

In an apparent misreading of Strabo,<sup>13</sup> Litwa points

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13 Litwa is correct that Strabo complains that some historians were known to have included the mythical in their accounts in order to make their histories more appetizing. Indeed, this is all but universally true today. Travel and tour guides pepper their descriptions with local myth, legend, and lore to make the experience more enriching. A mundane course on ancient Greece, moreover, would hardly attract students. Contrary to Litwa's implication, the ancient accounts that he proposes were not guilty of mendacity or of exploitation of the reader's credulity. As Strabo states, the mythic in a text is characteristically easy to discern; the author tends to provide proper modal cues and does not support such claims beyond their representation as curious tales of the fantastic (Strabo, *Geography* 1.2.35). One may scarcely overstate this point. For the *locus classicus* on the matter, that is, on the unmistakability of literary cues regarding myth and legend in classical Greek literature, read Erich Auerbach, "Odysseus' Scar," in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1953). Litwa, instead of supporting his category "mythic historiography" with genuine examples of whole, myth-laden works that were received

to Herodotus, the “Father of History,” as exhibiting a routine disregard for the above stated modal lines. Yet, as stated above, the argument confuses the inclusion of myth and legend in *The Histories* with attempts to pass off such valuable content as accounts of reality. Herodotus customarily provided sufficient modal cues throughout his work (such as λέγουσι, “they say...”), signaling that he was passing along a myth, tale, or popular belief, often leaving the reader to intuit the value and mental space within which to comprehend such accounts, whether *spatium historicum* or *spatium mythicum*. In his first book, Herodotus described his historiographical method:

These are the stories of the Persians and the Phoenicians. For my part, I shall not say that this or that story is true, but I shall identify the one who I myself know did the Greeks unjust deeds, and thus proceed with my history, and speak of both small and great cities of people. (1.5.3)

Herodotus and his successors under a Herodotean tradition, consciously composed their histories, exhibiting tales of myth and legend, yet with a faithful use of modal cues, thus in keeping with the strictures described in the classical grammars, such as one reads in Sextus.<sup>14</sup>

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and read as true accounts, analogous to how he conceives the receptions of the Gospels, he only enlists evidence proving the opposite, namely, ancient authors complaining about historical accounts that included *conspicuous* bits of myth or legend. His book’s central argument thus deconstructs itself before his reader’s eyes. Myth read *qua* myth, is NOT the same as myth read as genuine representations of reality.

14 Litwa opens his book (p. 7) with a severe mischaracterization of my own work, namely, that I do not recognize the inclusion of myth in ancient historiography. I devoted a full subchapter in my book to this very matter, analyzing with depth such policies of modal mixture in Herodotus and the larger historiographical tradition. See “Generic Modality” in *Resurrection and Reception*,

As Henry Thackeray did point out a century ago, Herodotean historians characteristically applied their own formulae, signaling for their readers a given modal interlude. In the case of Herodotus, λέγουσι (with cognate variations) occurs upwards to 100 times throughout his history. When presenting a yarn or legend in his *Roman Antiquities*, Dionysius of Halicarnassus frequently applied λέγουσι (with cognate variations) and, particularly in his effort to sift through aetiological sources (book 1), guided his readers through a labyrinth of legend and *fabulae* (including Hellanicus's *Troica*), characteristically providing his own reasoned caution and skepticism, weighing sources, and at times expressly deferring judgment to his reader.

Were time to permit here, one might survey the entirety of extant Herodotean historiography, both Greek (e.g., Diodorus Siculus, Cassius Dio, *et al.*) and Latin (e.g., Livy, Tacitus, Sallust, *et al.*), demonstrating quite similar policies of modal integrity throughout the lineage of Herodotus' successors; Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* provides a conspicuous partial exception, an enlightening matter to be taken up in the latter segment of this article.

The ancients who preferred the more constrained historiographies of the Thucydidean tradition, that is, by their exclusion of πλάσμα and μῦθος, criticized the Herodotean

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76-90. My analysis reveals carefully modal cognizance of ancient authors and readers throughout the historiographical tradition. As to the truth-integrity of Herodotus, the late preeminent classicist John L. Moles assessed: "No ancient historian is more alive to the problem of truth, or (on the whole) more dexterous at protecting his own position." We find none of these traits expressed or evident in the New Testament Gospels or in *any* early Christian narrative composition prior to Eusebius, contra Litwa's hypothesis. See J. L. Moles, "Truth and Untruth in Herodotus and Thucydides" in *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993), 88-121.

tradition for allowing a broader set of modalities.<sup>15</sup> Cicero depicted one such character in his *De Legibus*:

The main object of [history] is truth in all its relations, while that of [poetry] is amusement; although in Herodotus, the Father of Greek History and in Theopompus we find innumerable fables (*innumera fabulae*). (1.5)

Around the time of the composition of the New Testament Gospels, Plutarch (*De Herod*) and Lucian (*Quomodo historia conscribenda sit*) leveled similar criticisms, not appreciating this Herodotean style. While modern historians have repeatedly vindicated Herodotus regarding many previously supposed historical inaccuracies, the New Testament scholar may sympathize with his difficulty in distilling scanty precipitations of historical truth from the much prior mythological poetic works of Hesiod and Homer. Herodotus of necessity drew from what paucity of sources he had, that is, from the prehistoric Greek Dark Ages. Yet, his methods were scrupulous and deeply honoring of the modal lines described by Sextus *et al.*, contra Litwa's assertions (p. 11-12).

Although one may better class Ctesias as a geographer (or a paradoxographer), rather than a historian proper, the charge of mendacity or deception may similarly not apply in his case, despite Lucian's complaints many centuries *post facta* (*Vera Historia* 1.3).<sup>16</sup> His writings, moreover,

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15 Thucydides appears only to mention myth or legend by way of personal narrative gloss, and never as historiographical content itself.

16 As often noticed, *How the Gospels Became History* tendentiously mistranslates primary sources to bolster (false) support to its subtextual hypothesis. This seems especially regretful inasmuch as nearly all such mistranslations effectively conceal or obscure rich nuance and complication capable of delivering a more robust, nourishing, and sophisticated analysis.



survive only in a paucity of unsatisfactory fragments, inadequate to assess modal integrity. Since, however, he is often cited alongside Herodotus by ancient writers as one of the usual suspects in allowing myth and legend into his accounts, we may surmise that he followed forms similar to those of Herodotus, his near predecessor (fifth century B.C.E.). Those modern experts willing to class Ctesias under the rubric “historiography,” do so only in the most oblique sense, that is, as presenting geographic exotic tales of the orient. *Geographia*, as a rule, struggled more frequently to honor the modal lines than did the classic history works. The fifth-century contemporary geographer Hecataeus, for instance, performed his research at the port of Miletus, writing down tales from sailors and wayfarers of distant lands. Here again, however, the modal lines as a rule applied. As with today, ancient readers appreciated far off tales of distant places, particularly from India and

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One of numerous such examples one finds in the mistranslation of Lucian 1.3 (p. 197-98), attempting to portray Lucian as classing Ctesias as a historiographer: “In his *True History*, he exposed the device in the historian Ctesias, ‘who wrote a history of the land of India and its characteristics which [despite his eyewitness claim] he had neither seen himself nor heard from anyone else who was telling the truth.’” Lucian’s original Greek does not describe Ctesias as a historian or his work as a history. The ancient primary source merely states ... Κτησίας ὁ Κτησιόχου ὁ Κνίδιος, ὃς συνέγραψεν περὶ τῆς Ἰνδῶν χώρας καὶ τῶν παρ’ αὐτοῖς ἃ μήτε αὐτὸς εἶδεν μήτε ἄλλου ἀληθεύοντος ἤκουσεν. This translates straight across as “[... such as] Ctesias, son of Ctesiochus, from Cnidus, who wrote down concerning the lands of India and related matters that neither he himself had seen nor that he had heard from others who were being truthful.” Indeed, Lucian’s *Vera Historia* works against Litwa’s hypothesis in that Lucian claims in his proem that he is composing a parody of works such as that of Ctesias. Yet, Lucian does not compose a history in any way (even in parody), but instead sets forth a short novelistic fantasy with no historical context or feignedness of historiographical convention.

the East.<sup>17</sup> In his *Indica*, Ctesias recorded many such descriptions of the orient (including much παραδοξολογία), a place commonly held to be rife with magic, marvels, and the extravagant. Again, the point here was not mendacity or to abuse the credulity of ancient readers, but to compile curious tales and descriptions from the far-off East, both for entertainment and to provide a cultural-geographic knowledgebase for reference.<sup>18</sup> By lack of first-hand access, such accounts invariably accrued myth and legend, which undoubtedly was, at least in part, their popular appeal.<sup>19</sup>

### **Whatever Were the Ancient Christian Gospels?**

**F**or a reasonable reader, a book titled *How the Gospels became History* would plainly imply:

1. The Gospels were not originally written or read as histories.
2. The Gospels at some point became read and interpreted as histories.
3. This book is going to describe how that modal shift in reinterpretation came about.

Thus, I was more than a bit perplexed (and disappointed) when I realized that the book did not present or argue these positions at all, positions that I myself find quite correct. Indeed, with tragic irony, the entire book seems to collapse under the obvious question: When and by what historical

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17 Other tales of India and the East were included in the ancient histories of Deīmachus, Megasthenes, Onesicritus, and Nearchus.

18 For a superb treatment, see James S. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992).

19 Such published mirabilia understandably held many patrons in the classical world. Cf. Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 9.4.

mechanisms did the New Testament Gospels ever come to be called *historiae*? In post-classical Rome? In the recesses of Medieval Byzantine thought? In post-Enlightenment Protestant fundamentalist sermons? I myself do not know the answer to this fascinating question, though I do suspect the answer to be shockingly late in the course of Western history.

In truth, the first Christian historiographical work to be mentioned by anyone in antiquity was Eusebius's fourth-century *Historia Ecclesiastica*. In his altogether awkward introduction, Eusebius grieved that no known Christian histories had been composed prior to his work, lamenting that the Gospels and other early narratives provided mere recollections or hearsay (μνημονεύετα):

[My historiographical] project at once begs the graciousness of the well-minded, for confessedly it is beyond our power to fulfill the project's whole and complete aim, since we are the first to enter on the undertaking, as travelers on some desolate and untrodden way. We pray that our god will give us his guidance, and that we may have the help of the master's ability, because nowhere can we find even the bare footprints of anyone who has preceded us on this path, unless it be those slight indications by which in diverse ways they have left to us trace accounts of the times through which they have passed, raising their voices as one holds up a torch from afar, calling to us from on high as from some distant watch-tower, and telling us how we must walk, and how to guide the course of our work without hazard or straying. We have, therefore, collected from their scattered recollections (μνημονεύετα) all that we suppose may be useful for the present subject. Gathering acceptable utterances from ancient stories, as though plucking flowers from meadows, we shall endeavor to compose from them a textual body by applying historical method, being content still

to salvage church recollections (μνημονεύομεναι), if not of all, at least regarding the successions of the most distinguished of the apostles of our savior. (1.1.3-4)

We may note well that Eusebius, the educated fourth-century Bishop of Caesarea Maritima (*Caesarea Palestinae*) and polemicist for the “orthodox” Christian faith, provided here his most favorably disposed comprehensive evaluation of the inventory of known early Christian literature, yet finding not a single historiographical source for his confessedly dubitable project. Following Litwa, however, one would have expected Eusebius’s assistants to have collected a vast panoply of qualified works of historiography, beginning presumably with the Gospels and extending out with a long pageant of documents following in the historiographical legacy and tradition of these primitive, cherished works. Yet, even now, upon surveying the full compass of the varied literary legacy of early Christian prose narratives, one discovers only iconographic legends, novelistic fictions, tales of mirabilia, didactic sayings collections, apocalyptic fantasies, and hagiographical and martyrological folktales, nothing by any definition meriting the class *historia*. Two centuries prior to Eusebius, around the close of the writing of the documents that found their way into the New Testament anthology, Justin Martyr applied a quite similar (cognate) descriptor to the Gospels as that applied by Eusebius. The Gospels were, for this earliest and most recognized apologist of the Christian faith, not ἱστορίαι but ἀπομνημονεύματα (memorializations or recollections; Lat. *commentarii*), a term associated with panegyric embellishment when related to one bestowed with posthumous veneration or *exaltatio memoriae*.<sup>20</sup>

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20 Justin, *1 Apology* 66.1. As a matter of deeply telling *comparandum* related to panegyric as an inherited pattern of legendary post-mortem embellishment in early Christian martyrdom accounts, a topic on which I myself may soon publish,

To his credit, Litwa equivocates from classing the Gospels as historiography proper, toward labelling them biographies (p. 53). The merit of this template comes in viewing the literary reception of the Gospels, that is, how they, over the course of centuries, forged a new subclass of biography, namely, cultic biography. We find this literary legacy expressed in the late ancient *vitae* of Apollonius and Pythagoras, as well as in the Christian hagiographic tradition (e.g., *Vita Antonii*). Ever-untethered from the modal strictures of classical historiography, the *vitae* eventually enjoyed a rich tradition of romance, legend, miracle, and the fabulous, that is, as licentious cultic iconographies residing variously between novel and early traditional biography.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, when applied to the Gospels at the time of composition, the generic label “biography” creates more problems than solutions. Only Matthew and Luke present anything like a cradle-to-grave story of Jesus. As Thomas Hägg astutely pointed out, Mark and John more closely resemble *martyrologia* with charged, legend-laden run-ups.<sup>22</sup> Though quite inadequate and no less problematic,

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juxtapose the mid-second-century texts *Martyrdom of Polycarp* with Lucian’s *De Morte Peregrini*.

21 Even with such myth-fraught topics as Romulus, legendary, deified founding king of Roman civilization, Plutarch’s *Vita Romuli* attempted to sift through competing accounts to derive some historical kernel through the layer-cake of aetiological myth (even before the gravity of a Roman public readership yet largely holding Romulus in highest exaltation with cultic worship and state veneration; cf. Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*). Such iconic figures as Romulus and Heracles serve as strong reminders of the ancient propensity to historicize whole-cloth mythological content. At the same time, they also serve as strong reminders of ancient acuity and discernment; histories and biographies readily recognized the mythic qualities of such depictions, whereas cult-performant contexts and writings typically did not.

22 Compare the non-thaumalogical discipleship accounts of the death of Socrates in Plato’s *Phaedo* and Xenophon’s

Luke provides a somewhat fuller “life” of Jesus. Yet, Luke also provides a mini-life of John the Baptist. Lacking in any theological “atonement” signification, taken together, Luke-Acts presents a compendium of scandalous martyrological tales, with Jesus merely figuring prominently. As in the problem with historiography, despite close familiarity with the genre, the early Christians avoided applying biographical labels to the Gospels. Such labels now become perhaps most problematic regarding the matter of literary object, since most assume that a history aims to depict ontological reality and biography an ontological person, whereas such presumptions break down as one further critically contemplates the Gospels. Most all referential objectivity in effect became crushed, buried beneath a dense bricolage of cultural literary models governing the narrative construction. If ever an ontological Jesus did exist, that person was lost to us, indeed made irrelevant behind many layers of charged, figmentary early Christian literary creativity.

Litwa’s analysis regrettably appears oblivious to the deep phenomenology of *imitatio Graecorum* and the mimetic policies that governed the domain of ancient Hellenistic literary composition in Roman antiquity (Cf. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *On Mimesis* and Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 10.1-2). He, early in the monograph, dismisses mimesis criticism out of hand, citing “lack of falsifiability” as his rationale. Such a fallacious excuse, however, applies equally to all mimetic cognition in Hellenistic antiquity. Mimetic allusive acuity required then and requires now a deep familiarity with the canonical works of the classical world, apart from which, yes, much is lost on the modern reader. Indeed, contrary to Litwa, mimesis was not (and is

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*Memorabilia*. For a mature, well-nuanced study of biography in the classical world, see Thomas Hägg, *The Art of Biography in Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

not today) “advertised.” Such allusion and interplay with the classical canon deliberately tested the *paideia* of ancient readers. Such is commonly recognized throughout the field of classics but goes unrecognized in the morbid isolation of present New Testament studies discourse.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, ancient readers, due to their frequent *lack* of familiarity with the classical Hebrew texts, required clear citation. Such citation fundamentally functioned in a different manner than mimetic modeling and the applications of common literary strategies of cognitive resemblance. While one may question many of the details of Dennis MacDonald’s syntagmatic parallels, those mocked as “impressive” by Litwa and Mitchell, MacDonald’s cultural and literary thematic arguments remain unscathed by any current published criticism of his contributions. Were Homer, Hesiod, Euripides, and Plato, as the undisputed canonical works of classical antiquity, affixed and bound with the Christian Bible historically, such mimetic observations would be obvious and commonplace in current biblical studies; only the details, depths, and significance would remain matters of litigation. In truth, no successful literary composition during the Roman period operated free of the governance of *imitatio*. The onus thus rests on Litwa and Mitchell to bring forth such an extensive array of literary exceptions that could allow the New Testament narratives to fall under tacit exemption. Until such a time, the questions of mimesis in the New Testament corpus must remain “which models, where, and to what extent,” and not “whether.”<sup>24</sup>

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23 Expressing this observation, see Roman-period classicist Ellen D. Finkelpearl, “Pagan Traditions of Intertextuality in the Roman World,” p. 78-90 in *Mimesis and Intertextuality in Antiquity and Christianity* (Harrisburg, PA.: Trinity Press International, 2001).

24 For a more recent edited volume advancing mimesis critical discourse in the field of New Testament studies, see Mark G. Bilby, ed., *Classical Greek Models of the Gospels and Acts:*

Several of the controlling motifs of Mark, for instance, mimetically drew from Homer's *Odyssey*, the single most canonized work in all of Mediterranean antiquity, paired with and secondary only to the *Iliad*. The primary motifs of the *Odyssey* found their nascent Judeo-Christian adaptation: the returning incognito divine king Odysseus and Mark's messianic secret and epiphanic Transfiguration, Odysseus and his feckless crew out on the raging high seas battling divine elements and a Galilean lake transformed into an epic tempestuous sea on the Markan storyboard, Odysseus' climactic wrath toward Penelope's treacherous suitors upon his return home and Mark's climactic Temple Incident. In present scholarship, the drafts of mimetic models typically drawn from classical Hebrew and early Jewish tradition fail to make adequate sense of these governing Markan features until read in tapestry with the grand Homeric antetext. Yet, in contrast with the familiarity of early Christian converts regarding Homer, one may doubt if one in a thousand New Testament commentators today is capable of composing even a five-paragraph essay accurately sketching the *Odyssey's* principal subtexts, plotlines, or characters. And this is but one literary mimetic layer in one Gospel. Were time to permit, we could similarly describe other governing templates: Mark's Elijah / Elisha mimesis and Romulean mimesis; Matthew's Alexander mimesis and mimetic medley through classical Hebrew sacred history (flood/baptism, Egypt, wilderness, mountain divine law, 12 tribes/disciples, promised land, David, prophets, etc.); John's middle Platonism, (subtle) Pythagorean mimesis, (overt) Dionysian mimesis, and Domitianic mimesis; and Luke's equally complex, inherited, and augmented potpourri of mimetic templatization.<sup>25</sup>

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*Studies in Mimesis Criticism* (Claremont, Ca.: Claremont Press, 2018).

25 Several of these governing mimetic templates afford depth in literary-critical description in the works of myth-critics cited



Instructive regarding the early Christian reception(s) of the Gospels, one surveys in early Christian writing a ubiquitous, near immediate non-historiographical tendency to allegorize and to symbologize the content of the Gospels, part of a much longer trend that found innumerable parallels in contemporaneous scholiastic allegoresis of the canonical mythographic works of Hesiod and Homer, as for instance witnessed in Theagenes, Anaxagoras, Metrodorus, Heraclitus, ps.-Plutarch, Crates, and Cornutus, and so many others. Yet, one finds not a single known attempt to allegorize a work of Greek or Roman historiography, or any other non-mythographical text, for that matter. This bare historical realization proves more than a bit damning for the book's central hypothesis, namely, that the Gospels were held in early Christian society as fundamentally historiographical in character and purpose. Such evidence, therefore, while not of itself conclusive, further directs the careful historian to distinguish between early Christian expressions of pious confessional [belief] and data-driven historiographical certitude reflecting the generic purpose of the Gospels, the latter finding such inadequate support in early Christian writing as openly to fail to describe the core impulses and contentions structuring early Christian thought and devotion.<sup>26</sup>

As we turn attention again to the internal nature and content of these sacred texts, we find still less cause to class the Gospels as historiographies. Contrary to Litwa's claim, from the Hellenistic period through to Roman late

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throughout this article: Bilby (various), Price (Moses, Elijah, Elisha, *et al.*), MacDonald (Odysseus, Hector, Dionysus, Aeneas, *et al.*), Miller (Romulus, Alexander, *et al.*).

26 Indeed, as argued throughout this article, cultic assertion and confession characteristically circumvented the standard rational controls in human reality description, drawing a strong modal line between rational historical claims and pious assertions arising out of sacred legend. As noted above, see the works of Leeuwen, Luhrmann, and Legare.

antiquity, prose narrative became the preferred literary form for inventive, legendary, and fictional composition. Litwa writes on page 7 that “simply by writing in sober, non-poetic forms, the evangelists distinguished their accounts from the dominant *mythoi* found, for instance, in Homer and Euripides.” This odd assertion, however, exposes a rather comprehensive cecity regarding Greek literary trends during the Roman period. Cambridge classicist Tim Whitmarsh rightly observes:

Roman Greek literature marks its innovative flavor in numerous ways, but most conspicuously by the near universal adoption of prose ahead of poetry: unsurprising perhaps for the genres of philosophy, rhetoric, and history, but ostentatious in the case of Aelius Aristides’ prose hymns. Plutarch even claims that the Delphic oracle has begun to prophesy in prose rather than verse.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, we witness the rise of the Greek and Latin novel in the Hellenistic period and its full flowering in Roman antiquity, with its manifold permutations and orientalizing and historicizing tropes. Judaic varieties of the novel, moreover, arose during the same period and shared many of the same generic traits, often characterized by peripatetic narrative flow and prevalent subtextual concerns over religious identity, patterns that find analogues in the Gospels.<sup>28</sup>

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27 Tim Whitmarsh, *Greek Literature and the Roman Empire* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 27.

28 Abundant scholarship in this area over the last 20 years promises better to inform Litwa’s research into relevant intersections between ancient novelistic fiction and the early Christian “gospel” literary genre. See Lawrence M. Wills, *Ancient Jewish Novels: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Marília Futre Pinheiro, Judith Perkins, and Richard I. Pervo, eds., *The Ancient Novel and Early Christian and Jewish*

Litwa's hypothesis that the Gospels were originally composed as historiographies, moreover, runs aground once one begins to apply narratological and narrative-critical methods in the investigation. Quite distinct from common narrative modality in classical Greco-Roman histories, the Gospels shared with the ancient novel a discernable narrative supervision by divine providence, what literary critics term a *Götterapparat*, a palpable monocratic presence driving each Gospel narrative forward to its τέλος. Despite the late accretions in the prologue of Luke (1.1-4)<sup>29</sup> and the epilogue of John (20.30-21.25), the narrative voice in all four Gospels remained anonymous and quite recessive, granting the reader a third-person perspective as seen from and sympathetic to Jesus' disciples, with the focus on the protagonist's teachings, behaviors, judgments, and theurgic signs and wonders. The narrative draws this close portraiture in tension with its own esoteric, at times subversive "hidden transcripts," to follow the parlance

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*Narrative: Fictional Intersections* (Groningen, Barkhuis, 2012); Christine M. Thomas, *The Acts of Peter, Gospel Literature, and the Ancient Novel: Rewriting the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Tim Whitmarsh, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Greek and Roman Novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

29 The second-century "lateness" of Luke's final redaction has emerged as an ever-more common conclusion. One notes the possible implications, moreover, of Marcion's mid-second-century recension of Luke, which begins at Luke 3.1. Two alternative conclusions naturally follow: 1. Luke 1-2 was a later redaction unfamiliar or unaccepted by Marcion; 2. The content in Luke 1-2 was not considered essential in the economy of Marcion's epitomization. Pending computational linguistic analysis (to determine if the Lukan prologue came from a different hand, which seems likely enough), either explanation illegitimizes Litwa's tacit assertion that Luke 1.1-4 provides accurate characterization of the entirety of early Christian "gospel" tradition as essentially historiographical.

of political scientist James C. Scott.<sup>30</sup> All the while, the four authorless Gospel narratives each walk their tragic, indigent hero in suspense toward his scandalous execution, finally to achieve divine royal exaltation and *cultus* through translation. In *The Art of Fiction*, David Lodge observes that “novels are narratives, and narrative, whatever its medium, holds the interest of an audience by raising questions in their minds, and delaying the answers.”<sup>31</sup> These storyline traits in the Gospels, traits better studied under literary formalism and structuralism, found their natural habitat nowhere in ancient history-writing, but rather in ancient storyboard fiction and legend.<sup>32</sup> As asceticizing community yarns, the Gospels aimed at soliciting and indoctrinating cultic converts.<sup>33</sup> The Jesus textualized in the Gospels

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30 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), esp. 183–84.

31 David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1992), 14.

32 Confirming and aligning well with the seminal work of formalist Vladimir Propp, see also the empirical algorithmic literary analysis distinguishing stock fictive story arcs from attempts at genuine, mundane ontological accounts, arising out of recent computer science. Andrew J. Reagan, *et al.* “The emotional arcs of stories are dominated by six basic shapes,” *EPJ Data Science* 5, no. 31 (2016), <https://epjdatascience.springeropen.com/articles/10.1140/epjds/s13688-016-0093-1>. The New Testament Gospels follow the “Cinderella” arc-pattern. For a splendid literary-critical analysis, still quite relevant, see Northrop Frye’s recorded Harvard lectures. Northrop Frye, *Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976). Cf. George W. Bowersock’s chapter “Polytheism and Scripture” p. 121-43 in *Fiction as History: Nero to Julian* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

33 Several partial analogues present themselves in, for instance, the death of Socrates (Plato’s *Phaedo*) and the cult-

served as an iconographic hero in a scandalous tale of martyrdom and triumph, the literary vehicle and charter emblem of these inceptive sacred booklets.<sup>34</sup>

This is not, however, to propose that the Gospels be shoehorned into a novelistic genre; indeed, these texts defied any single phylogenetic classification. The Gospels, rather, drew upon a diverse range of inventive cultural-

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centric legendary biographies of Apollonius and Pythagoras—indeed, a literary germination inspired by Christian mythmaking—no known historiographical work presented these features prior to the rise of Christianity. In truth, the narrative features and mechanics of the Gospels shared as much or more in common with a host of other inventive story-telling traditions, as, for instance, observed in the plays of Euripides, the *Odyssey*, Genesis, 1-2 Kings, Daniel, *1 Enoch*, *4 Maccebees*, *Callirhoe*, and a near endless myriad of others. Were one to marry the Elijah / Elisha sequences of 1-2 Kings with the epic high-seas tale of Homer's *Odyssey*, the offspring might look rather like what we find in the Gospels. The Messianic Secret in Mark only becomes intelligible once read under the templating master-plot of Homer's incognito *Odysseus*. The meaning of Mark's Temple Incident only truly comes into reader focus when read against Homer's climactic scene with *Odysseus's* violent wrath on Penelope's suitors upon his return to his "house" in Ithaca. Indeed, the Markan storyboard manages to turn a rather small Levantine lake into a dire tempestuous high-seas setting, wherein the protagonist calmly battles divinely orchestrated elements before his feckless crew of companions. Such charged literary themes drawn from epic tradition also inform the cognitive reader of inventive mode and genre, perhaps as much as any other aspects in Mark. Much has and will continue to be written on the panorama of cultural-literary mimetic associations baked into the Gospel narratives, defining their spirit, mode, and purpose as inventive works of early Christian prose storytelling.

34 In truth, one may correctly view Luke-Acts, among other ways, as a martyrological compendium, with Jesus figuring most prominently. His scandalous death conveyed the same narrative effect as that of the other martyrdom accounts throughout the 2-volume work. In Luke-Acts, there was no "atonement" doctrine.

literary traditions: epic, drama, lyric, mythography, paradoxography, aretology, philosophy, folk-legend, rhetoric, thaumatology, panegyric, etc., and, not least of which, classical Hebrew and early Jewish inventive narrative composition, not resting on any one them long enough to solidify into any single, clear generic classification.<sup>35</sup>

Respecting the cultic schools and factions that early Christian texts invariably served to congeal, early Jewish literary modes and genres deserve much fuller attention (than Litwa's work affords) in genuine secular attempts to describe the generic qualities of the Gospels, particularly appreciating the Gospels' liminal diachronic locations between early Jewish and broader Mediterranean cultic performance. Early Judaism flourished in the proliferation of historicizing fictional and legendary works that made little apology for their shameless inclusion of the supernatural. Noting the pithy formal economy and paratactic didacticism distinctively structuring the Gospel narratives, one discerns a central *purpose* for these texts: they were meant to inculcate and to instruct religious communities with short memorable tales. Such *fabulae* invariably called for the willful indulgence of belief as a means of entry into the cultic philosophy proffered by the society, and not the examination of conflicting accounts of events or persons in ontological history. No anthropologist or historian of ancient religion will find this at all surprising.<sup>36</sup> Yet, in the myopia of Biblical Studies scholarship, there exists a common misprision

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35 *N.B.* the replete hybridic sophistication characterizing the Gospel portraiture: The Son of Man (of Jewish apocalyptic) becomes a son of a god (of Hellenistic and Roman iconography). The long-awaited Messiah (of Jewish counter-Roman zealotry) becomes an indigent peace-loving sage, scandalously martyred (a Cynical adaptation)... Such complex hybridizations in the Gospel "wine skins" appear innumerable, which in part explains why they continue to be objects of focused academic attention.

36 See particularly, as noted above, the works of Leeuwen, Luhrmann, and Legare.

perpetuated, one quietly underpinning Litwa's hypothesis, namely that ancient cultic lexemes of "belief" occupied the same epistemological, doxastic register in religious devotion as one finds in much modern Christian and philosophical discourse. As a general observation in ancient religion, belief functioned as a conscious indulgence, a means to accrue the benefits and blessings of the tradition, ritual piety, and transcendent enlightenment, and not principally as certitude over a given knowledge-proposition regarding ontological reality.<sup>37</sup>

The central value in contemplating *How the Gospels Became History* arises as a paradoxical realization that Judeo-Christian and other classical cultic modes of religion, in contrast with modal cognition in ancient Greek and Latin historiography, often deliberately traded in the

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37 One notes the replete linguistic preference in earliest Christian writing toward pistic indulgence, rather than ontological historical awareness, as seen for instance in the assertions of Ignatius concerning acceptance of the birth, passion, and resurrection of Jesus "during the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate" (*Ep. Mag.*, 11.1; c. 110 C.E.). Echoing the faith-language of Paul, Ignatius considered certitude regarding early Christian myth as a matter of vested will or belief (as visible in his word-choice πληροφορέω; c.f. Rom. 4.21). As with Eusebius's fourth-century *Historia Ecclesiastica*, lines of historical argumentation typically ended with the literary historical setting of the Gospels. Figures such as Pontius Pilate, Herod, and Tiberius Caesar and their historical acts typically received historical validation, whereas anything beyond the bare contours the existence of Jesus did not. Eusebius, writing as Bishop of Caesarea, for instance, in contrast to his detailed panegyric (heavily embellished and theologically framed) *Vita Constantini*, merely repeated Josephus' *Testimonium Flavianum* (*Ant.* 18.3.3; most certainly containing early Christian scribal interpolation), thus excluding the rich content of the early Christian Gospel tradition from his *quasi*-historiographical coverage of the origins of the religion. He instead spent much his opening books rooting the religion in theological (rather than historiological) foundations.

obscuration of doxastic lines between the mythic worlds they constructed and ontological conceptions of mundane *realia* and the past. One may contrast, for instance, the historiographical integrity with which Josephus handled his *Bellum Iudaicum* with the claim in the *Antiquitates Iudaicae* that his sacred Mosaic source (Torah) excluded aetiological myth and fabrication (*Ant.* 1.15-22), set in language that followed his predecessor Philo's exordium in *De Opificio Mundi*. By providing an often-as-not unapologetic showcase of tall tales of the miraculous woven into the sacred legendary accounts provided throughout classical Hebrew scripture, Josephus' historiographical *apologia* for the Jewish people broke from the modal integrity of his primary mimetic template, Dionysius of Halicarnassus's *Antiquitates Romanae*, and, in part, from all classical historiographical grammar. One notes well, however, that in both cases, these early Jewish thinkers identified exceptions, places in their sacred sources that called for explicit historiographical skepticism or allegorization, quite in contrast with the New Testament Gospels.<sup>38</sup> With the mere recognition that Josephus, as a religionist handling matters of cultic sensitivity, could not always rise to his historiographical duties, a phenomenology with limited parallels in few other historiographical and biographical works in classical antiquity—Here I am especially thinking of the matter of imperial *cultus* and the related license visible in panegyric political propaganda—one gains some window into the variably respected τέμνος of sacred cultic myth and legend.<sup>39</sup>

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38 For a few examples where Josephus guided skepticism over miraculous content in the biblical text, somewhat more in alignment with the modal cues of Dionysus of Halicarnassus, see *Ant.* 1.108, 2.348, 3.81, etc.

39 Relevant to this general observation, Bietenholz, in his survey of the full scope of Western literature, identifies the cross-over from ancient Near Eastern lack of explicit modal discernment to the much more clearly delineated modal lines held in Greco-



In polemic response to continued growing circulation of formal accusations levelled by the second-century Greek philosopher Celsus that Christians embraced tales clearly comprising myth and legend, the third-century premier Christian educator and bishop of Caesarea, Origen, reacted with denial, applying his common apologetic stance, stating that Christians believe their sacred stories in like fashion to Jewish devotion to their sacred stories (*Contra Celsum*, 2.58; 3.27; Cf. 2 Peter 1.16<sup>40</sup>). Though one of the most allegorizing (non-literalist) early Christian interpreters of the Christian Bible, one observes, Origen pointed to cultic *belief* rather than to historical veracity as the principal reason for his embrace of the Gospels as conveying truths. From the beginning, willful indulgence in πίστις (or its sibling γνῶσις, in the case of the early Christian gnosticizing sects) functioned as a central psychological mechanism and cultic conversion rite for embarking on the esoteric Christian *way*, that is, the acceptance of the given Christian mythosystem as [true] in the face of inadequate and contrary evidence. For this reason, one finds near zero

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Roman historiography, that is, a rational evidentialism grounded in the common *Umwelt* of human naturalistic perception. Peter G. Bietenholz, *Historia and Fabula: Myths and Legends in Historical Thought from Antiquity to the Modern Age* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publisher, 2004).

40 As a pseudopigraphon composed for second-century contexts of elevated modal demands being made on gospel mythography, 2 Peter doth protest too much! How can such protestation itself not prove altogether self-incriminating in the eyes of the modern historian? For a parallel to Celsus of such charges, see also Porphyry, *Adversus Christianos*. Indeed, such public peddling of cultic fraudulence and hoax lead Lucian to suggest the sentence that such propagators be fed to ferocious animals for their crimes against society, as with the case of Alexander the Mantis. The early Christians were commonly charged and at times similarly executed for the spread of such *superstitio*.

attention paid to historical argumentation or authentication of early Christian legendary accounts in the Gospels or in early Christian thought generally.<sup>41</sup>

Given the successive removal of the Gospel accounts from direct eyewitness testimony, not to mention their replete character as unsubstantiated sacred legends, *superstitio*, and theologically charged tall tales, one properly regards these as “memories” of nascent cultic storytelling, rather than of authenticated events in ontological history. The Gospels plainly did not possess any of the hallmarks of ancient historiography: a well-disclosed, strong authorial persona expressing reasoned caution and skepticism towards competing accounts. Indeed, unlike any known historiographical work, even the looser prior or contemporary works of embellished biography (e.g., the *vitae* given in Suetonius or Plutarch), one finds in the Gospels no policy of authenticating any aspect of its brimful

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41 I may remind those inclined to oppose this observation that any supposed exceptions one may marshal were just that, exceptions, that is, non-representations of the central structures and attitudes girding and rationalizing early Christian devotion. Note also that many of these alleged moments of historical argumentation, upon further careful observation, work contrary to the establishment or mechanics of historical authentication. Consider within the New Testament itself, for instance, 1 Cor. 15, Matt. 28, and 2 Pet. 3. As I have meticulously revealed in my own tropological-critical analysis on Jesus’ resurrection/translation in the New Testament, the “eye-witness” trope was a well-established cultural-literary device in tales of divine metamorphosis and translation. To overcome this, were one to have endeavored to distinguish an ontologically real event in time and space, extraordinary apology would have been needed, rational acknowledgement and work absent in early Christian texts. As I argue throughout this article, moreover, one must be careful not to confuse confessional certitudes and indulgent faith-assertions witnessed throughout early Christian writings with genuine rational, evidence-compelled argumentation regarding ontological historical events.

penchant for mirabilia and the naturally impossible.<sup>42</sup> Litwa points to the prologue to Luke (1.1-2), where the narrative claims to be based on impeccably credible eyewitness testimony, as proof that the Gospels were read and interpreted as historiographies (p. 7 and 228). Such a mock *prooemium* cannot rise to genuine comparison with the formalized prologues given in any known qualified Greek or Latin works of historiography.<sup>43</sup> Given that secular Lukan scholars discern this text to be late, a likely stratal accretion from the Trajanic-Hadrianic period, and certainly later than Q, Mark, and Matthew, such an act

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42 On matters of historiographical policies of authentication, see Kelly E. Shannon. "Authenticating the Marvellous: Mirabilia in Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, and Suetonius" in *Working Papers on Nerva, Trajanic and Hadrianic Literature* 1.9, 2013. Her work is generally excellent on matters related to paradoxography in antiquity. Even in Hägg's moments of overreaching optimism in boxing the early Christian gospels as biographies, he wisely refrains from confining these works to any contrivance of such a genre. Indeed, Hägg admits that in regard to any defined genre or *Gattung* (Cf. the quality secular work of Albrecht Dihle), the Gospels simply cannot qualify as biographies, at most, a highly oblique subgenre. Yet, as the gospel form evolved, its influence became tributary to a larger Wittgensteinian "family" association of texts over many centuries that Hägg most loosely terms "biographies," which include the cult-performant *vitae* of Pythagoras and Apollonius. Tomas Hägg, *The Art of Biography in Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2-3, 153-6. Indeed, by the time of Plutarch, many held biography as generally distinct and untethered from historiography (Cf. Plutarch's binary distinction; *Alex* 1.2).

43 Luke's pitiful four-verse proem starkly contrasts in size, lack of authorial disclosure, transparency, and formal convention when set alongside the array of formal *prooemia* given in the extant history works of classical antiquity, providing a farcical mimetic literary device bordering on out-and-out (even playful) mockery, a *fabula* including a single item of historiographical child costume jewelry.

of faulty generalization seems farcical. Shall we, moreover, regard all early Christian gospels as qualified ancient philosophical tractates due to the Platonizing prologue to the Gospel of John?<sup>44</sup> The Lukan storyboard belies such

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44 Indeed, the reasonable historian will treat the wildly fanciful claims of both prologues with equal incredulity. On the sliding scale, these were theological mythmaking propositions, not genuine historical propositions. Such late dating for Luke-Acts, moreover, appears to have found consensus in SBL's Acts Seminar based fundamentally on the compelling scholarship of specialists Richard Pervo and Joseph Tyson, now being argued and championed by most secular-leaning Gospels scholars. Considering that prologues and epilogues to ancient documents commonly came as *post factum* scribal accretions, the transparent feigning of historicity foisted in Luke's prologue received no further methodological or modal narrative support in the Gospel of Luke. The linguistic hand in both the first two chapters of Luke and that of Acts appears to have been the same (pending computational analysis); curiously, Marcion's mid-second-century recension of Luke did not apparently include Luke 1-2. The historian detects, in the heightened degree of historicizing tropes in Late Luke and Acts, the rising air of mendacity in this regard (coupled with thematic and mimetic subtexts aimed at reconciling independent Pauline Christ cult communities under a single myth of origins, textualizing Virgilian mimetic associations, framing a Christian foundation myth, reminiscent of Aeneas on his way to Rome as founding patron). Despite these heightened historicizing tropes in Acts, the continued non-authenticating policy of retailing *mirabilia*, *miracula*, and *superstitio*, as well as the centralized iconographic legendary tales of resistance and martyrdom, Acts appears best described as an amalgam of paradoxical thaumatology, martyrological legend, and charter aetiological myth-making, not historiography. While the content of Acts presents, only by modest degree, a better source for potential historical data than do the New Testament Gospels toward reconstructing Christian origins, attempts to class the document as a history appear all-too-strained. Most classicists cannot accept such an oblique, legend-laden, cult-inducing inclusion in the genre, particularly

an initial claim to historicity by having angels flying about as early as Luke 1.11, revealing not the slightest concern over sources, accounts, or the utter implausibility of such a claim. Noting such conspicuous absence throughout the Gospel narratives of any standard paratactic mechanisms of authentication of accounts and sources, such texts did not and could never have satisfied the common interests and civic epistemological needs of ancient consumers of history. They fed their readers indulgent, uncritical meals in folk-belief, cultic legend, and *superstitio*, not certified knowledge or even a showcase of such tales for critically weighed consideration. The Gospel texts presumed, in large measure, a rather unmitigated favorably biased reader buy-in or uncritical embrace of the textualized cultic world of marvels (θαύματα) within which their consumers were to be densely immersed, that is, they were aimed at ripe cultic converts and devout acolytes, not the common archival contexts of classical historians.

In the first centuries of our Common Era, Christianity sprang forth on the grand stage of Hellenistic Roman antiquity as an astonishingly diverse, prolific array of counter-cultural cultic movements, societies, writers, and texts. The charter aetiologies or “foundation” myths of these (predominantly) eastern Mediterranean movements and urban communities provided their newly forged identity scripts, ever-negotiating what came to become an unprecedented cultural-religious revolution spanning,

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one that shares nearly none of the hallmarks of qualified ancient historiography. At most, one may say that Acts of the Apostles presented a trace feigning of ancient works of history (as described in this essay). Such recessive mimetic traits incrusting these Apostolic legends, however, did not come to govern the narrative in any full-generic sense, contra Rothschild, and, as such, did not come to determine the legacy of *acta* as a literary tradition in early Christian writing. Clare K. Rothschild, *Luke-Acts and the Rhetoric of History: An Investigation of Early Christian Historiography* (WUNT 2/175; Tiibingen: Mohr. Siebeck, 2004).

indeed spilling over the entirety of ancient Roman civilization. As the religion gained its place, even if forcibly, as Rome's sole state-sanctioned religion, the agency of a canonized few of these early Christian narratives came to supplant the long-established cultic and mythological order of classical antiquity, six sacralized booklets culled from this literary chaos into a single authorized anthology eventually to be known as the New Testament: Gospel of Matthew, Gospel of Mark, Gospel of Luke, Gospel of John, Acts of the Apostles, and Apocalypse of John.

Given the numerous early Christian Gospel texts produced in the first centuries of the Common Era, the four selected gospels achieved a rather arbitrary distinction, mostly driven by the proto-orthodox political designs of Irenaeus of Lyons, in an effort to reconcile a set of disparate cultic movements by drawing a box around a select set of sacralized texts: Ebionites -> Matthew, certain Docetists -> Mark, Marcionites -> early/redacted Luke, Valentinians -> John (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.11).<sup>45</sup> Through such acts of canonization, Irenaeus's Rome-centered proto-orthodox successors continued to enforce these political objectives of structural reconciliation.

Considering this early history of the Christian Gospels, Litwa's description at points presents a nigh-unreadable naiveté, uncritically accepting myths of orthodoxy by claiming that Irenaeus sought to canonize the four New Testament Gospels due to their distinct historiographical qualifications. Indeed, the canonical privileging implicit in the very title "How the Gospels Became History" belies a myopic project as being theologically contained, rather than historically driven. The myriad of non-canonized early Christian gospels and narratives generally receives nearly no comparative attention in the study, thus perpetuating a myth of orthodoxy, rather than offering a data-driven

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45 The *locus classicus* on this point remains Walter Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1971).

study in the messy world of nascent Christian literary trendlines, phenomenological patterns that steadily pointed toward a legacy of free-spirited, inventive composition, not authenticating historiological accounting.

In truth, the early Christians had coined their own genre, invariably referring to a long array of texts as “gospels” (lit. “glad tidings”), cult-promotional charter booklets aimed at attracting religious converts. These scandalous counter-cultural, pastoral tales furnished the identifying didactic social scripts for diverse early Christian “schools” and urban communities following the “way,” an everywoman’s and everyman’s devotional religious *cultus* providing alternative mythic constructions, achieving an asceticizing alterity obverse to those in established Jewish and Greco-Roman religious society.

All original Greek literary compositions of the Roman period—Indeed, no exception presents itself—were essentially and variously Hellenistic in character, that is, they were all conscious projects in *imitatio Graecorum*, transformational imitations of classical Greek cultural-literary models.<sup>46</sup> Ergo, all six of the New Testament narratives were projects in *imitatio Graecorum*. Paideutic instruction in the exclusive skill of written composition, no matter the caliber, invariably and centrally applied a tradition of *mimesis* (proximal imitation) as the measure of cultural qualification. This quality became all the more Gordian in intricacy with the Hellenistic early Jewish and Christian texts, particularly those more socially esoteric in orientation. Such texts for their readers were tissues referentially and allusively drawn from innumerable centers of various literatures and cultures, often novel more by this polygenetic semiotic complexity, than by genuine literary

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46 The New Testament criticism often fails to recognize the ubiquitous mimetic intentionality and sophistication implicit in ancient Hellenism, instead understating the phenomenology as mere influence, as, by analogy, one may today observe in the cultural influence and hybridization in architectural styles of

originality. Thus, the qualified scholar of earliest Christian prose must invest familiarity in Greek, Hellenistic, Roman, Judaic, Syro-Persian, and, yes, even Indic written cultures (and perhaps in that order of priority), to pick up on the heterogeneous linguistic, thematic, ideological, philosophical, and mimetic currents directing their ancient readers. To be sure, the Gospel texts obtained an impressive polyvalence, testing and provoking their readers from their first circulation to our present day.

### Final Assessment

*How the Gospels Became History* provides a breath-taking panorama covering by chapter a large tour of topics, rather often successfully recognizing patterns in the Gospels of myth and legend taken from ancient Greco-Roman literary culture. The power of the work thus arises in its impressive effort to comprehend in myth-critical scope so broad a project. In the book's non-secular isolationism and brevity, however, much tropological nuance, semiotic interrelation, and diachronic mimetic development falls from the table, thus leaving the work obscurant for purposes of specialized and secular humanities discourse. The reductionist diorama entering such long and transdisciplinary academic discussions, indeed lacking

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border communities between neighboring nations. The cultural agency and traction of the Gospels in classical antiquity, however, was predicated on their Hellenistic (and Romanistic) *savoir faire* and inherent qualities, a flanking sophistication in early Jewish and early Christian literary production perhaps most richly devised by way of mimetic undercurrent and subversion toward established Hellenistic and Roman conventional structures and cultural capital. The *infra-political* agency of such lower-register literary mimicry ever-worked to negotiate modes of counter-cultural alterity in Christian identity during the nascent rise of the religion in Mediterranean civilization, a strategy that succeeded.



in bibliographical depth, leaves the reader rather at a loss regarding “further reading,” which, in my view, may have provided a preferable aim for such a generalist publication. As such, Litwa’s myth-critical venture, while furtively sampling the research of specialists, does not present a useful epitomization. The monograph instead decidedly focusses on driving its central thesis, namely, that the Gospels be classed as “mythic historiography.”

Yet such a comprehensive compass, particularly as cumulative by chapter, *ipso facto* gradually works against the central claim that readers could ever have taken the Gospels as ontologically objective, factual reports; the mythographic linguistic codes and structures surveyed in the book overwhelm such unwary inference. In this regard, regrettably, Litwa’s thesis fails by myopia, that is, by merely recognizing (and thus grossly overstating) the historicizing signals in these texts, and not the structural, symbolic, narratological, cultic, mythic, rhetorical, didactic, mimetic, and formal signals that strongly determine their complex bricolage of mode and genre. Indeed, the book foists a false conflation between historicization, that is, the act of casting a tale *quasi* historical,<sup>47</sup> and ancient historiography, that is, the guided written presentation of civic knowledge of some period or topic of remote acquaintance intended for public archival preservation and rational enrichment, two quite separate, typically contrary compositional endeavors. I, furthermore, may also suggest that greater attention be paid to parallel cultic and generic patterns visible in the sibling literary proliferation seen in early Judaism through the period, particularly given the liminality of the Gospels as exhibiting both Jewish and Greco-Roman roots. In its published state, the presentation thus lacks the methodological sophistication and horsepower, not to

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47 The term “historicization” sits in semantic overlay with literary terms such as realism and verisimilitude, common narrative strategies in ancient inventive composition in classical antiquity.

mention the evidentiary ground, to drive to its intended destination. The fundamental error of the subgenre proposed, namely Litwa's "mythic historiography," for me thwarted the book's potential, something like miss-buttoning a stylish shirt by getting the first button wrong. I remain sympathetic, however, given the enormity of the book's undertaking, namely, to explain in comprehensive terms the mythographical dimensions and strategies of the Gospels.

In truth, all myth-critical explanations of earliest Christian writings exist somewhere on the spectrum of perceptions between early Christian literary sophistication and broadly concerted mendacity. Treatments on the former end of the spectrum theorize that early Christian authors, from diverse schools and communities, produced a panoply of legendary and mythographically-based texts variously ranging into profound sophistication. Under this view, early Christian converts entered these cultic groups more or less cognizant of the legendary and mythic qualities inherent to their religious devotion, even if indulging such *fabulae* with a kind of pious [belief]. Treatments on the latter end of that spectrum, by contrast, tacitly hypothesize a broadly orchestrated fraudulent conspiracy to pass off a series of tall tales as ontological historical truths that gained remarkable mass-acceptance, something like a wide variety of UFO abduction reports that then become embraced by an entire civilization and without any of the perpetrators of these accounts ever leaking their coordinated master-hoax. While Litwa's book moves rather decidedly toward the latter end of the spectrum, I find scholarship that recognizes early Christian cultural-literary sophistication often to be better aligned with the ancient data and more appreciative of the cultural allurements and moral dignity of the rise of what arguably became the most dramatic cultural-religious revolution in the compass of human history.

Notwithstanding the above rather critical review, I nevertheless regard this book to be both stimulating and

commendable, if not merely by raising several of the most pertinent questions often ignored in the field and for getting the one fundamental question right where so many others in the field have failed: Were the Gospels predominantly myth and legend? Litwa's answer to this is "Yes. They indeed were." In my eyes and in the eyes of many, Litwa shows tremendous potential to become a formidable leading senior contributor in Gospels scholarship, which remains my genuine expectation regarding his future work in the field. Litwa perhaps shows this best in his philosophically trenchant handling of mythmaking in his closing chapter, at times achieving sublime moments of brilliance worth the price of the monograph.