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Book reviews

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J. R. Daniel Kirk, *A Man Attested by God: The Human Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016). ISBN 978-0-8028-6795-7. £42.99/$60.

The present book is the latest in a spate of publications over the past thirty years on the origins of christology. For much of the twentieth century it could be taken for granted that Jesus' self-perception was something like that of an eschatological prophet. This line of thinking, according to which Jesus' earliest disciples (and Jesus himself) conceived of him in clearly human terms, influenced much theological discussion as well, most notoriously in the United Kingdom the 'myth of God incarnate' debate. In the wake of this settled view of Jesus as primarily a human figure, a number of scholars reluctant to accede to the majority position attempted in the latter part of the twentieth century to unseat it. The names most frequently associated with this approach in English-language scholarship are Richard Bauckham and Larry Hurtado, who in the late 1970s began to argue for an 'early high christology', as it has become known, and formed the nucleus of what Martin Hengel dubbed 'the new History of Religion school'. It is a tribute to the success of this approach, which in some circles is viewed as having won the day, that now various scholars discontented with the new orthodoxy are in turn reacting against it. Kirk's monograph, then, expresses a desire to 'stem the tide of conversation about divine christology', or, to change from an aquatic to a military image, resist the 'onslaught of "early high Christology" studies'.

This book is a fresh engagement with the vast range of primary source material, both Christian and non- or pre-Christian, that has been part of this debate. Kirk's target is the position of those scholars who in recent times have picked out a number of Jesus' words and deeds in the Synoptic Gospels, and have read them as laying claim to uniquely divine prerogatives. Kirk argues that this approach is mistaken because it does not do justice to the ways in which early Jewish texts frequently assign such divine prerogatives to 'idealised human figures' – figures such as Adam, Moses or Elijah – who can represent God and act in remarkable ways on his behalf without infringing upon his divine uniqueness. An idealised human figure, on Kirk's account, is a non-pre-existent, non-divine figure who plays a unique role as a representative of God: the book's line is thus a *via media* between a high, divine christology and a low, 'merely human' one. After laying out his approach

in the introduction, a massive first chapter (around 130 pages) sets out the Jewish evidence, and the subsequent chapters explore the implications of that evidence for the interpretation of the most important aspects of the christology of the Synoptic Gospels: the Son of God as human king across the Synoptics; then two chapters on Mark and Matthew respectively (Matthew is actually regarded as going a little beyond the 'idealised human' category); and finally two chapters covering Jesus' lordship and the christological use of scripture in the Synoptics.

Kirk's monograph is clearly an important contribution to scholarship and will need to be taken into account in all future discussions of the christology of the Synoptics and claims to 'high' christology. The array of evidence in the first chapter is extremely impressive and takes into consideration a wide range of contemporary scholarship on the relevant places in Jewish literature, shedding light on passages which are frequently difficult to understand. The coverage of both primary sources and secondary literature is admirable. One could quibble over the interpretation of particular passages, but for the purposes of this review I will merely raise two questions.

First, one might query the category of the 'ideal human'. Clearly this is a modern scholarly construct being used to classify the material, and none the worse for that. A difficulty, however, lies in the disparate nature of the sources employed to compile the CV or job description of the ideal human. As Kirk states, there are 'innumerable people' who fit into this category, which might strain the earlier definition that the ideal human figure plays some sort of unique role. The category can also be corporate, embracing all Israel and even humanity as such. These figures are 'a widespread and wide-ranging reality in the literature of early Judaism'. Hence the 'sheer capacity' of the category places, for Kirk, a very high bar to seeing anything that Jesus does or says as laying claim to divine identity. But it is capacious precisely because so much evidence has been brought in, and the parameters of why certain material is included are not always clear. The result is that a huge congeries of offices, roles and actions are collected together under this rubric of the ideal human. In consequence, although there is nothing wrong in principle with using etic categories to interpret ancient texts, it is hard to imagine – at least for the present reviewer – any first-century author or reader being able to conceive of these features as part of a package.

Secondly, there do seem to be some problems in ascribing some of the more dramatic episodes to the idealised human. Two examples, raising the dead and forgiveness, can be mentioned. Rejecting the idea that raising the dead is a strictly and exclusively divine prerogative, Kirk maintains that certain ideal human beings could do this, arguing on the basis of Elijah's and Elisha's raisings of the sons of the women of Zarephath and Shunem

(1 Kings 17; 2 Kings 4). These, it is argued, constitute ample precedent for the activity of Jesus. It is notable, though, that raising the dead is emphatically what is not done by Elijah and Elisha: in 1 Kings 17, Elijah prays and 'the Lord heard Elijah's cry'; in the latter passage, Elisha also 'prayed to the Lord'. Neither says simply, as Jesus says to Jairus' daughter and to the son of the Nain widow, 'get up' (Mark 5:41; Luke 7:14). There seems a difference in the self-perceptions of the OT prophets and Jesus in these actions which makes them hard to bundle together as a group.

Or to take another dramatic episode, the ministry of John the Baptist is offered as a parallel to Jesus' forgiveness of sins in Mark 2:1–12 and parallels. Kirk comments that 'Jesus is not the only human in Mark who removes sins', referring to John as well. Giving the Baptist the role of 'removing sins' because he preaches a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins is clearly a stretch, however. This is a case where a point becomes highly generalised in order to create a parallel, as is also seen in the comparison of Jesus' walking on the water with Xerxes' construction of a bridge of boats and Caligula's pontoon.

Overall, despite being one of the targets in this book (so the reader of this review should beware!), I enjoyed it more than I expected, because it affirms much that is essential both to the exegesis of the Synoptics and to Christian theology. It would be impossible to read Kirk's monograph without learning a great deal, even if the book is rather one-sided in depicting Jesus as 'man attested by God', to the detriment, as the following chapter of Acts puts it, of Jesus as 'author of life'.

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Bruce Gordon, *John Calvin's* Institutes of the Christian Religion: *A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. xix + 277. $19.95.

As part of Princeton University Press's series 'Lives of the Great Religious Books', Bruce Gordon has offered an attractive portrait of the composition and reception of Calvin's religious classic. Despite possible scepticism toward the oxymoronic biography of a 'book', in the hands of a scholar of Gordon's calibre, the reader is soon convinced of the value of this bookish perspective. Gordon ponders early on, for example, why there were so few constructive best-sellers during the Reformation, proposing that 'the poisonous polemic of the age demanded cut and thrust rather than contemplative classics'.