

David A. Croteau. *Urban Legends of the New Testament: 40 Common Misconceptions*. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2015. 272 pages. \$14.

Challenging common assumptions or of-told legends is not an easy task. It is made even more difficult within conservative traditions, but this is what David A. Croteau has done in this book. His use of original language study, place history, and other biblical materials is impressive within his context. For conservative pastors, this book is a helpful tool in challenging some traditional understandings in order to get to larger meaning, or closer to the original meanings of the bible. His chapter structure is helpful in setting out the “urban legend” as commonly understood and then offering a challenge to it using knowledge of the original Greek, archeology, background and historical context. He concludes each chapter with what he interprets the main point of the passage to be. Few pastors should get lost in the challenge sections and find themselves with their faith in tatters at the end.

He is most convincing when he uses language analysis and historical context as his critical tools. However, coming at the “urban legends” from a literal view of the Bible, David is limited in both the materials and approaches he can use. His arguments sometimes suffer from his necessity to show agreement among the gospels, or explain the differences between them. For pastors who do not take the bible as literally as David, his efforts in making the accounts agree are superfluous. His biblical scholarship suffers from this limitation. For example, in Chapter 8, as he discusses John 3:16, he glosses over the accuracy of the “red letters” and says that he is only going to address whether or not Jesus said the words of John 3:16. He concludes that he did not, and that this matters because if Jesus said the words of John 3:16, then perhaps his suffering and death was not necessary. The meaning of the word “gave” changes depending on who speaks it. David argues that since it was, in his opinion, necessary for Jesus to die on the cross to save us, the words of John 3:16 were not spoken by Jesus. This is an example of the dilemma faced by the literal perspective of the author in his critical efforts on biblical texts.

Readers are presented throughout this book with arguments that challenge some of the assumptions of what we have been taught. For example, in Chapter 3 he challenges the assumptions that the shepherds who heard the news of Jesus birth on the hills outside Bethlehem were social outcasts. In Chapter 4 he discusses the words used to describe Jesus as carpenter/master craftsman and other available words used elsewhere in the Bible. His argument and evidence are compelling and his contribution to our understanding of Jesus is worth the read through much of the book.

After examining the forty urban legends in the book, David concludes that many of the legends are a result of lack of knowledge about the context in which the scriptures are set. He does suggest that the challenges of the original language and knowing the background of each story are additional factors, but these factors are of much less importance than the lack of knowledge about the context.

David distinguishes between mistaken legends, which are simply incorrect, and misleading legends, in which only partial information is given. An example of the second: Jesus was a builder, not simply a carpenter. His purpose in providing more precise information about the bible stories is so we better understand God’s word and can better apply it to our lives: “In the end our goal should be to interpret Scripture as accurately as possible, to apply that interpretation to our own lives, and to be transformed by God’s Word so that our lives may bring glory to the One who rescued us from an eternal destiny in Hell” (241).

It is disappointing that David neglected to challenge one of the dominant urban legends of the New Testament: that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. Fortunately, other biblical scholars have done so, but it would have been helpful for a conservative scholar to have done the same.

As a book for conservative Christians who want to learn more about the Bible, this book achieves its goal. Most readers will learn new things about the times in which Jesus and the early disciples lived. They may gain more understanding of the context of the stories of the bible and better understand the background of those stories.

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