



Here is a book that is beautifully presented, written in an easy, readable style and on a topic of interest. But unfortunately, the overall effect was disappointing.

Taylor is strong on the politics of the day: the delicate strategic balances and ferocious suppression that characterised the times. The authorities seemed to have a real anxiety about those with a more authentic claim to power through an ancestral line as 'Sons of David' and there was much brutal slaughtering of rivals. It was a febrile and hostile period especially with those having a connection to the Davidic town of Bethlehem. So far, so good.

However, she comes across as far too trusting of the Gospel texts. The last 50+ years of New Testament scholarship is characterised by what was called a "hermeneutic of suspicion". This means that you take as your assumption that the writers of the Gospels are trying to persuade rather than present a simple biography of Jesus. So, things in the Gospel accounts are exaggerated or modified to fit in with contemporary ideas. If, for example, an event in Jesus' life 'proves' a prophecy has come true, the modern reader ought to be at least slightly suspicious. An example of this is the escape to Egypt soon after the birth of Jesus. This is considered, by most scholars, to be a deliberate invention, designed to make the artificial connection to Moses, with Jesus also 'coming out of Egypt'.

Taylor, on the other hand, wants to challenge this scepticism and assumes that the nativity stories are fundamentally trustworthy. And from this position she builds a psychological narrative around the young Jesus, with an acute awareness of himself as Son of David and therefore having a sense of himself as 'royal', a view she believes was shared by his contemporaries. But one has to wonder how unique is Jesus' sense of his Davidic line. A cursory genetic glance at Matthew's (artificial?) 28 generations between David and Jesus suggests there would be many thousands of people with such a claim which rather undermines this as a distinguishing feature.

Taylor is not alone among modern scholars to push back against the hermeneutic of suspicion, Bauckham, for example is most convincing on John's Gospel (see Book Review 9). Somehow Taylor is less so. Her arguments are based either internally on the biblical record (which has its own agenda) or on random stray apocryphal texts which in places are quite obviously fanciful.

It may be too far to dismiss the infancy narratives as pure invention but there are good and compelling reasons why they might have been embellished. And though there is likely to have been some element of remembered history in their accounts, Matthew and Luke certainly differ hugely in what they record.

Boy Jesus could be an accurate appraisal of the early years. There is no evidence to say it can't be and it presents a compelling picture. But a great deal is built on questionable foundations and as such may appear more an appeal to piety than history.