Bock, Darrell L.

*Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism: The Charge Against Jesus in Mark 14:53-65*

Biblical Studies Library


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This book is a reprint of *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism and the Final Examination of Jesus: A Philological-Historical Study of the Key Jewish Themes Impacting Mark 14:61-64* (WUNT 2/106; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998). At about one-third of the cost of the European edition, Bock’s important work is now affordable and accessible to greater numbers of North American scholars and students.

Bock has assembled a massive amount of documentation in the effort to understand exactly in what sense Jesus was accused of blasphemy and on what grounds. Some readers will no doubt dispute an interpretation here or there—and some will have little sympathy for the overall approach—but all will profit from Bock’s labors and, in the opinion of this reviewer, will do well to be guided by the approach and the conclusions.

In the first chapter Bock reviews one dozen scholarly attempts to interpret Mark 14:53-65, ranging from Hans Lietzmann in 1931 to J. C. O’Neil and this reviewer in 1995. Bock sides with those studies that focus on the juxtaposition of Ps 110:1 and Dan 7:13, fragments of which make up almost the whole of Jesus’ reply to the high priest in Mark 14:62. There are two sides to Bock’s study. The one concerns blasphemy; the other concerns exaltation. How one understands the second will condition the perception of blasphemy.

The second chapter treats readers to a masterful survey of the first side of the question: the terminology and concept of blasphemy in Judaism, from Scripture itself to later
rabbinic literature. Between these two termini Bock reviews the evidence of Qumran, the Septuagint, the Pseudepigrapha, Josephus, Philo, early rabbinic literature, and the Targumim. This chapter is rich with relevant material. Bock finds discussion of capital cases of blasphemy focused on Lev 24:10-16 and Num 15:30-31, in which the Divine Name was uttered. He also finds numerous examples of texts that speak of blasphemy in connection to idolatry or violations of a fundamental of Jewish faith. He concludes that ideas of blasphemy in Jesus’ time were not limited to cases involving the utterance of the Divine Name.

The third chapter examines the other side of the question: that of exalted figures. Bock treats exalted humans from Adam to the patriarchs, prophets, and various celebrated figures such as David and his messianic descendant. He also treats exalted angelic figures from Gabriel to the mysterious Metatron. Bock finds in these various literary traditions how limited access to God’s presence was. Certain selected humans, among them the Messiah, are said to sit in God’s presence. Perhaps the most important tradition is that of the exalted Son of Man in the Similitudes of 1 Enoch. Bock concludes that at least some in Jewish tradition envisioned a few special persons seated in God’s presence, but he also notes resistance to this idea.

The fourth chapter attempts an interpretation of Mark 14:53-65 in the light of what has been learned in chapters 2 and 3. Bock concludes that the Markan trial scene not only comports with history and custom but in all probability presents an accurate account of Jesus’ hearing before the ruling priests who condemned the Galilean for what was perceived as blasphemy and the assumption of authority over Israel’s rulers themselves. Accordingly, they referred him to the Roman governor with the recommendation of a capital sentence.

Bock’s conclusions are plausible and, on the whole, convincing. His clarification of the semantic range of blasphemy and its significance for understanding its function in the context of Jesus’ hearing before the ruling priest is persuasive. His conclusion that the Markan account is historical is reasonable, though some may still raise objections to it on other grounds.

Scholarly reaction to the first printing of Blasphemy and Exaltation has been diverse and offers in itself points of interest. As others have, Frank Matera (CBQ 62 [2000]: 137-39) finds most of Bock’s thesis compelling, though he hesitates somewhat with respect to the issue of the historicity of the Markan account of the hearing. Notwithstanding, Matera concedes that Bock “makes a more plausible case than has been presented heretofore” (139). This reviewer agrees.

However, Maurice Casey (JTS 52 [2001]: 245-47) reacts quite negatively, finding much with which to disagree. “This book is deeply flawed from beginning to end, both in
main points and in details” (246). But Casey’s counterarguments are not convincing, reflecting very selective consideration of the evidence, and seem to be based on misunderstanding the whole point that Bock is trying to make. Casey then focuses on aspects of the verbal exchange between the high priest and Jesus that he thinks reflect a lack of verisimilitude, if not a lack of historicity, such as the epithet “Son of the Blessed,” which, we are told, “is notoriously unattested in Jewish sources” (247). However, there may very well be appropriate antecedents, which Casey sweeps aside all too quickly.

Casey finally stoops to *ad hominem*, condescendingly referring to Bock as “a ‘professor’ at ‘Dallas Theological Seminary’” whose book “appears to be dominated by a hidden agenda,” which, we are told, is Bock’s “desire to have conservative results presented” (247). This kind of polemic is prejudicial, unprofessional, and unfair. Bock, who is a recipient of the prestigious Humboldt fellowship, holds the rank of full professor and in fact was some years ago appointed research professor on a faculty, many of whose members earned their doctorates in England, where Casey is located. As for the results of Bock’s study, they flow from his very full documentation of the relevant evidence and justify his reasonable conclusions.

Casey’s tendency to overreact to conclusions he finds too conservative or supportive of Christian orthodoxy is also seen in his reviews of N. T. Wright’s *Jesus and the Victory of God* (cf. *JSNT* 69 [1998]: 95-103) and Stanley E. Porter’s suggestion (in *TynBul* 44 [1993]: 199-235) that Jesus may have known and spoken some Greek (cf. *ExpTim* 108 [1997]: 326-28), a view held by others who are not usually thought of as conservative or bound by orthodox views (e.g., H. D. Betz, in *ST* 45 [1991]: 83-110; for a hard-hitting rebuttal of Casey’s review, which in places simply misrepresents Porter’s arguments, see Porter in *BBR* 10 [2000]: 71-87).