

Hector Avalos. *The Bad Jesus: The Ethics of New Testament Ethics*. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015. 461 pages. \$35.

In *The Bad Jesus: The Ethics of New Testament Ethics*, Hector Avalos contends that historical and contemporary New Testament scholarship presents Jesus as a benign, paradigmatic ethical figure, a view that obscures the “bad Jesus.” By attributing ethical authority to the single figure of Jesus, Avalos argues, New Testament ethicists, and those who write about New Testament ethics, maintain a Christian imperialist practice that reproduces a benevolent human Jesus who is exempt from unethical behavior. At the core of Avalos’ argument is an interrogation of how biblical scholars interpret the full humanity of Jesus. Is the human Jesus really flawless? A self-identified agnostic on the historical Jesus, Avalos examines case studies of the ethics of Jesus, as recorded in the New Testament, and asserts that scholars of the “ecclesial-academic-complex,” who interpret evidence of the unethical behaviors exhibited by Jesus as morally superior, reinforce a Christian empire agenda under the guise of religious scholarship (page 7)

New Testament scholars discount the unethical behavior of bad Jesus, Avalos asserts, because the point of departure for New Testament ethics is the goodness of Jesus. The presupposition of goodness, implying ethical, reveals the ways in which Christocentrism influences contemporary ethical assessments of the practices of Jesus. The tendency of biblical scholars to extract ethical norms for the contemporary world, from the world of Jesus, Avalos argues, is a practice unique to Christian religion studies. He believes New Testament ethics is vapid as a scholarly discipline because it is void of scientifically verifiable phenomena; it is based on the historically unverifiable life and practices of one person.

The Bad Jesus is loosely organized according to three “Jesus-centric” themes: the context of human relations, such as love, hate, and violence; Jesus’ attitudes toward people groups, such as women and the disabled; and Jesus’ relationship to broader phenomena such as science and ecology (27). Using source criticism, redaction criticism, textual criticism, rhetorical criticism, and other historical-critical tools, Avalos shows how writers of New Testament ethics fail to reflect critically on the unethical practices of Jesus. Thus, he holds that New Testament scholars participate in the broader Christian agenda of preserving biblical ideals. Secular ethicists, and religious scholars alike, privilege the Christian Bible over other ancient literature causing skewed views of Jesus as the acme of ethics, according to Avalos.

The monograph critiques interpretations of the human Jesus as always and ultimately good, and consequently, never unethical. According to Avalos, scholars who interpret biblical texts without confessional commitment or theological judgment discover a Jesus consumed with empire building and domination, as opposed to the Jesus traditionally characterized by solidarity with the poor and marginalized. Through thirteen chapters, Avalos exposes the unethical practices of Jesus that are interpreted as acceptable. Alternatively, he argues that the ethical principles of Jesus cannot stand the scrutiny of contemporary ethical analysis. As such, “there is no reason to regard anything Jesus taught or did as authoritative for modern ethics” (13).

The New Testament is replete with questionable ethical standards of Jesus. In the calling of the twelve disciples, the imperialist Jesus unapologetically requires that his followers abandon family responsibilities and follow him exclusively. This Jesus does not consider the economic implications and risks of leaving a family without male protection in a patriarchal society. The hateful Jesus commanded hate between family members. The violent Jesus promised eternal violence imputed to those who reject the kingdom of God. The misogynistic Jesus deferred to his

male apostles, despite the loyalty of his female disciples. Despite the reinterpreted efforts of feminist biblical scholars, Avalos contends that Jesus reinforced the patriarchal practices of his day. Similarly, by contemporary ethical standards, Jesus de-legitimized people who were disabled by connecting disabilities to sin. The case studies portray the bad Jesus that New Testament ethics is loath to admit exists.

Avalos challenges readers to critically analyze interpretations of Jesus as the moral exemplar, around whom much of New Testament ethics revolves. He leverages religious skepticism as a tool to disrupt normative interpretations of the ethics of Jesus, and thereby, to disclose the imperialist nature of New Testament ethics. *The Bad Jesus* contributes to the meta-criticism of biblical scholarship by critically evaluating the underlying suppositions of New Testament ethics from a non-religious perspective.

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