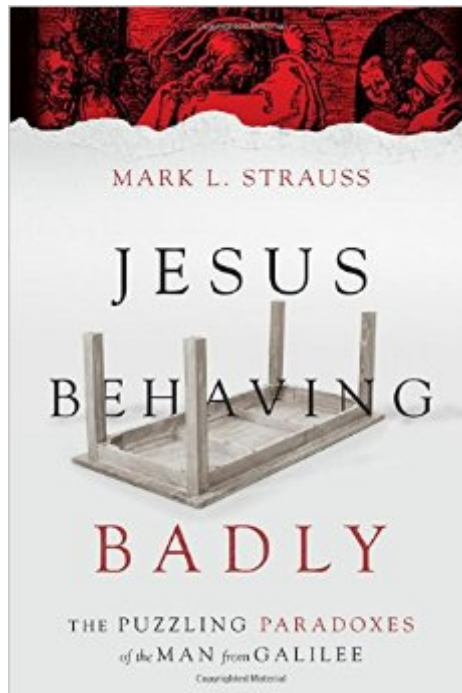


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Jesus Behaving Badly: The Puzzling Paradoxes Of The Man From Galilee



Synopsis

Everybody likes Jesus. Don't they? We overlook that Jesus was Judgmental • preaching hellfire far more than the apostle Paul Uncompromising • telling people to hate their families Chauvinistic • excluding women from leadership Racist • insulting people from other ethnic groups Anti-environmental • cursing a fig tree and affirming animal sacrifice Angry • overturning tables and chasing moneychangers in the temple He demanded moral perfection, told people to cut off body parts, made prophecies that haven't come true, and defied religious and political authorities. While we tend to ignore this troubling behavior, the people around Jesus didn't. Some believed him so dangerous that they found a way to have him killed. The Jesus everybody likes, says Mark Strauss, is not the Jesus found in the Gospels. He's a figure we've created in our own minds. Strauss believes that when we unpack the puzzling paradoxes of the man from Galilee, we find greater insight into his countercultural message and mission than we could ever have imagined.

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Customer Reviews

Nearly everyone likes Jesus. Two billion people around the world proclaim Him to be Lord and God and Messiah. Muslims will say that He was born of a virgin, avoided death, lived a sinless life, and did miracles. Many atheists would even say that while they don't believe miraculous stories told about Jesus, that they can like many of His ethics. Indeed many people do like Jesus, but He is not without His critics. After all, Jesus got Himself crucified and you don't get crucified by being the warm and fuzzy Mr. Rogers figure. Some people thought Jesus was enough of a problem in the first

century that He should be nailed to a cross. Today, Jesus still has His critics. After all, did you hear about the time that Jesus drowned a whole herd of innocent pigs? What about cursing that fig tree, and it wasn't even the season for figs? Don't you know that Jesus said that if you are to follow Him you must hate your family? How extreme is that? Jesus also called a Gentile woman a dog one time. How can it be that Jesus could do something like that? Jesus could have also been a revolutionary plotting the overthrow of Rome. He said He came not to bring peace but a sword and He came to bring fire to the Earth and how He wished it was already kindled! Maybe that Sunday School image of Jesus is even more off the mark than we realize... Mark Strauss has written a wonderful and very readable book to help answer the questions that will come up about Jesus and as a frequent denizen of online discussions, they will indeed come up. The questions brought up in this book are the ones that are asked in the world of the internet and this will be a helpful addition to someone's life and it is in fact quite humorous at times. There were a couple of passages that I came across that I even read to my wife because I delighted in them so much. Let's get the positives here first. Strauss has done a lot of homework and I think most of the major objections have been covered about the character of Jesus. I was pleased with some of his insights such as that when Jesus was challenged on His authority that the point of the challenge was to show that if the leaders could not identify a true prophet, by what grounds could they say that Jesus was not a true prophet? I also liked that in the story of the Prodigal it was pointed out that the older brother said "This son of yours." He couldn't even bring himself to say "my brother." (I make the same point about how the lawyer could not bring himself to say "The Samaritan" in the story of the Good Samaritan but had to say "The one who showed mercy." I am stunned I never noticed the same in the story of the Prodigal.) For some areas of improvement, I wish more had been said about the honor-shame motif found in the ancient near eastern world and much of the world still today. For instance, on page 45 Jesus is said to be put to death for sheep stealing, but it is much more than that. Jesus was challenging the honor of the Pharisees and winning every time. We have in fact then another story of Saul and David. Saul wanted to kill David to protect his own honor. The Pharisees wanted to have Jesus put to death because they were losing their honor to him. What better way to reclaim it than to give a shameful death to Jesus? Another area I disagreed with was on page 85 where the rich young man talks to Jesus and calls Him good. Strauss argues that Jesus is saying by comparison, no human being is good. By that kind of argument, we would be having to say that Jesus is not good which is problematic. I think a better answer would be that Jesus deflected a compliment like He always does because to accept a compliment puts one in a relationship where they are obligated to be in debt to the person. Jesus instead deflects the compliment to God and in

fact tests the young man saying "You say I am good. You know what? God is the one who is good. What kind of level are you putting me on? Are you ready for that kind of commitment?"In Christ,Nick PetersDeeper Waters Christian Ministriesaddendum: I wish to state that I did receive this copy free from IVP for the purposes of review.

Many Christians struggle with what is in the Old Testament, with its laws, wars, and portrayal of God's wrath. That is understandable, but, speaking for myself personally, I also struggle with the picture of Jesus that is in the New Testament. A number of Christians believe that Jesus was a nice, accepting guy, and so they maintain that Jesus should be the focus of religion and spirituality, and that we should look primarily to Jesus to see what God is like. And what we are supposed to see is love! When I read about Jesus in the Gospels, however, I am often troubled by what I see. Sure, there are elements of Jesus that fit in with the positive view of him, but Jesus also comes across as an uncompromising fanatic, one who preached about hell, said that it is difficult to enter the Kingdom of God, sounded a bit cultish and absolutist, and could be impatient with people, places, and things. There is also the possibility that Jesus may have mistakenly predicted an imminent end of the world, which calls into question whether Christianity is even true.

Mark L. Strauss is a New Testament scholar, and his book, *Jesus Behaving Badly*, was written for people with questions like mine. Some of Strauss's answers, I found satisfactory, or at least interesting. Others, not so much. Either way, I had to respect Strauss for honestly and seriously wrestling with issues. Strauss did not sugarcoat what is in the Gospels, and, in his discussion of various viewpoints (i.e., about hell, about scholarly views on Jesus's resurrection), I found him to be fair in summarizing them and presenting their better arguments. There were also cases in which Strauss did not simply settle for an answer but wrestled some more because the answer was not perfect in accounting for details in the text; Strauss did not always do this, but he did it quite a bit. For all of this, I give the book four stars.

I would like to offer some criticisms, however. First of all, Strauss did well to quote Second Temple Jewish sources, and that showed his scholarly background. At the same time, I thought that he was quoting them rather one-sidedly, to make Judaism a foil for Jesus. Second, Strauss was not particularly critical in his treatment of the Gospels. He referred to the Parable of the Prodigal Son to argue that the historical Jesus saw God as a God of grace, and elements of Luke's Gospel to argue that Jesus envisioned an outreach to the Gentiles to bring them to God. There are scholars, however, who would say that these things are Lukan and do not go back to the historical Jesus. In my opinion, Strauss would have done better to have used scholarly criteria of authenticity (which he does in arguing that Jesus's

resurrection is historical) to support his portrayal of Jesus. Granted, the book is probably for a popular audience, so Strauss did not intend it to be a work of dense scholarship, but Strauss could have used the criteria while not going too far over readers' heads. Could Strauss argue, using the criteria of authenticity to evaluate what is historical in the Gospels, that the historical Jesus supported grace? Hans Kung did so, so it is not impossible! Third, in his chapter arguing that Jesus rose from the dead, Strauss refers to some of what he says as "practically indisputable facts." I think that is overreaching, even though Strauss does present arguments that deserve consideration. Bart Ehrman, after all, would argue differently from Strauss on the question of whether we can trust the story about Joseph of Arimathea's burial of Jesus, and (contrary to the impression one may get from Strauss' book) Ehrman's arguments go beyond a naturalistic assumption that resurrection from the dead is impossible. Fourth, in arguing for hell, Strauss says that God must be just. Strauss appeals to evildoers to make his point: murderers, for example. Strauss states that God upholds the rights of the poor. That does not make the problem of hell go away, however, for, if a poor person does not accept Christ before her death, she goes to hell, according to many evangelicals. Fifth, I am conflicted about Strauss' discussion of whether Jesus envisioned an imminent end of the world. Strauss does well to argue that early Christianity believed that, on some level, Jesus at his first coming fulfilled Old Testament eschatological expectations about the Kingdom of God, such as the Gentiles coming to God. In that sense, from a Christian perspective, the Kingdom of God was near, as Jesus proclaimed. At the same time, I question whether we should appeal to Paul or Hebrews in trying to understand what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God. Strauss also interprets Jesus' soon coming, in places, as referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., which, according to Strauss, vindicated Jesus and ushered in a new spiritual era, with the end of the Jewish sacrificial system. But Strauss acknowledges that there are places in the Gospels in which Jesus' coming refers to his second coming, what many Christians understand as the second coming of Christ. Can we really pick and choose when Jesus' coming means that in the synoptic Gospels, and when it does not? In talking about Jesus' discouragement of the potential disciple from burying his father, and the potential disciple from saying goodbye to his parents, Strauss says that Jesus' calling was urgent, since what was predicted by the prophets was being fulfilled. Why was there urgency, though? Urgency would make sense to me if Jesus were expecting an imminent end of the world (though I am open to other explanations). If Jesus expected for thousands of years to pass before he returned a second time to set up the Kingdom more fully, then why was there urgency during his first coming? In discussing Mark 13, Strauss, like others, argues that Jesus was

alternating between talking about the destruction of Jerusalem and talking about the second coming of Christ. That, Strauss says, would account for the contradictions within Mark 13: Jesus saying that this generation will not pass away before all these things take place, and Jesus saying that no one, even he, knows the day or the hour. For Strauss, the first refers to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., and the second refers to the second coming. This is an intriguing proposal, though I am not sure if I find it convincing. I did learn things from this book, such as the fact that there usually were tiny figs on fig trees when Jesus cursed the barren fig tree. The book also included endearing stories and anecdotes, which made the book more enjoyable and relatable. I received a complimentary review copy of this book from the publisher, in exchange for an honest review.

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