

Book Reviews

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The Passion: The True Story of an Event That Changed Human History by Geza Vermes (Penguin Books)

Geza Vermes, professor emeritus of Jewish studies at Oxford University, was reared as a Roman Catholic who, as an adult, discovered and embraced his Jewish heritage and faith. He is a prolific researcher and writer about Jesus studies, and the publication of his monograph *Jesus the Jew* was a watershed event in the renewal of our understanding of the Jewishness of Jesus' environment.

In *The Passion*, Vermes takes a more popular approach to analyzing the last days of Jesus' life. Starting with his understanding of the legendary aspects of Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion*, Vermes proposes to tell "the true story of an event that changed human history."

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To that end, Vermes compares and contrasts the gospel accounts with Jewish and secular documents that were written both at the same time and later than the gospels. Using study methods familiar to most seminary students, he concludes the gospels are not trustworthy historical documents because the gospel writers are primarily interested in telling the events from particular theological perspectives. These “biases” prevent us from getting at “the true story,” he argues. Rather, “the true story” can only be told by paying close attention to the scant information about those days that are recorded in the Jewish and secular documents of the time and recently thereafter.

It will not take the reader long to realize Vermes does not apply the same critical criteria to these documents as he does to the gospels. He is much more willing to take these documents at face value.

His conclusion regarding the true events of those last days will startle most (I would say all, but these days, who knows?) Christian readers. For Vermes, Jesus was a Galilean charismatic preacher/healer whose life ended in tragedy and death because he failed to realize God never intended to rescue him from the predicament of his trial and execution. Nevertheless, in Vermes’ thinking, Jesus has value even today because of his inspiring and persistent faith in the face of suffering.

This is, for Vermes, “the true story of an event that changed human history.”

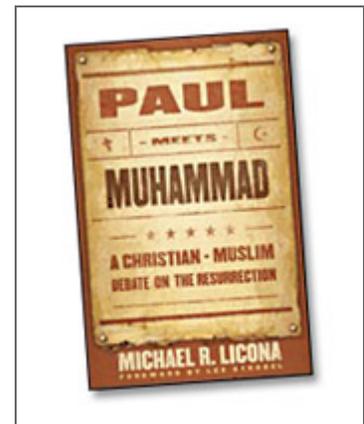
These serious problems aside, the book does offer value for the Christian reader. First, Vermes represents a perspective on the life of Jesus that has wide currency in certain circles. It never hurts to know what others are thinking. Second, the book has a wealth of information about Jewish traditions that shed great light on the events surrounding Jesus’ death. His descriptions of the actions of Pilate, the Sanhedrin, Annas and Caiaphas are well worth reading.

In the end, though, the book falls under the weight of expectations. The events he describes are not events that would change human history. They wouldn't even change one person's life. In order for that to happen, it would take something like what the gospels describe—an event that changed human history.

Sam Underwood, Pastor

First Baptist Church

Farmers Branch



Paul Meets Muhammad: A Christian/ Muslim Debate on the Resurrection by Michael R. Licona (Baker Books)

What if, through the latest in artificial intelligence and hologram technology, the modern-day world could witness a debate between the Apostle Paul and the prophet of Islam, Muhammad? And what if the topic was the case for Jesus' resurrection?

That's the setup for an interesting and creative fictional debate written by Michael Licona, director of apologetics evangelism at the North American Mission Board and an experienced debater in his own right.

Using interactive dialogue throughout most of the volume, the book

contrasts claims of the Qur'an with those of Paul's epistles and adds some modern scholarship to develop an easy-to-read apologetic for the resurrection.

Licona is careful to be faithful to actual Islamic arguments against the resurrection, while he uses his own extensive research on the historical and biblical evidence for the risen Christ.

The setting may be fictional, but the arguments are real and helpful for anyone—Christian, Muslim, apologist or interested truth-seeker—who seriously wants to study the claims for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Some may even want to take Lee Strobel's advice from the foreword of the book and give a copy to a Muslim friend to begin a healthy and respectful dialogue on this most central topic of Christianity.

Greg Bowman, minister to students

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