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The Four Fabulists: The Literary Genres of the Gospels and the Acts of Apostles

Suresh A. Shenoy
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By comparing the biblical narratives attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John with the contemporaneous historical narratives composed by authors such as Herodotus, Tacitus, and others, *The Four Fabulists* challenges the idea that the gospel stories of the New Testament are divinely inspired writings.

Shenoy states in his introduction that his analysis of the New Testament will lead readers to the "inevitable conclusion" that the divinity of Jesus is more fiction than fact. Shenoy asserts that because the gospel stories nearly replicate the textual standards set by other classical historical narratives, they can certainly be appreciated as works of literature but cannot be trusted as unvarnished truth. Shenoy painstakingly disassembles each of the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles to make his case that, for example, the Gospel of Matthew shares many conceptual and textual similarities to the writings of Tacitus and Dionysius of Halicarnassus; that the Gospel of Luke plays out like the tragedies of Seneca; and that the stories attributed to John are in line with the writings of Herodotus.

What all of these biblical and historical narratives have in common, states Shenoy, is a penchant for mixing a few historically verifiable people and places with non-verifiable facts and outright falsehoods. To Shenoy, these similarities rule out the possibility that the New Testament gospels are the product of divine inspiration. He believes they are nothing more, and nothing less, than classical narratives.

Had Shenoy limited his thesis to an academic comparison of the Gospels to other classical writings, his conclusions may have been able to withstand critical examination on a number of fronts. Unfortunately, Shenoy makes a much grander claim for his literary studies, announcing that they support a belief in "the existence of God on metaphysical and empirical grounds." Unfortunately, readers will struggle to uncover a coherent argument that turns Shenoy's alleged New Testament fictions into a firm faith in God.

In fact, the more one reads of the second half of the book, the less convinced about divinity he or she may become. In asserting that "Jesus Christ is nothing more than a literary construct," and that none of the personal experiences that seemed to foster a close relationship between Jesus and God are "historically verifiable," Shenoy effectively undermines his attempt to persuade readers that studying the life of Jesus—set free from the myth of divinity—will produce a more "authentic Christianity."

With what could be considered a capable literary analysis of the Gospels followed by a highly flawed defense for the existence of God, *The Four Fabulists* may offer unique thoughts about New Testament writings but misses the mark on the latter element of its thesis.

DIANE TAYLOR (August 2, 2012)

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