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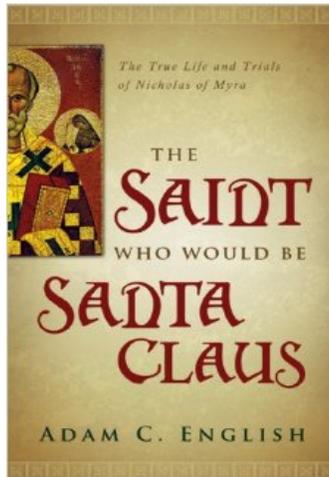
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Adam C. English

The Saint Who Would Be Santa Claus: The True Life and Trials of Nicholas of Myra

Waco, TX: Baylor, 2012

Pp. xi + 230. ISBN: 978-1-60258-634-5. \$29.95
[Hardback]. Purchase

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In *The Saint Who Would Be Santa Claus*, Adam English argues that Nicholas of Myra embodies the tension between historical figure and mythical symbol. English insists that substantial evidence for Nicholas exists despite a century of doubt among scholars and the influence of the mythical Santa Claus that overshadows any discussion about the historic figure for the broader public. Additionally, English argues that the legendary stories that circulated throughout the medieval period that influenced the modern American Santa Claus, generally hold some kernel of truth, grounded in the historic person.

English does not set out to define the development of the Santa Claus myth. Rather, his work is a quest for the historic Nicholas. English argues that most people “know that the beloved patron of Christmastime wish-granting has his origins in a vaguely historical personage,” and he aims to bring the historical Nicholas to light (p.2).

However, the myth and the man are so closely intertwined that his task is daunting. More importantly, English admits that there is “no early documentation of the man—no writings, disciples, or major acts” (p.3). Thus, in order to discover the historical Nicholas, English combs through the earliest extant documents and key later sources. Additionally, he makes inductive arguments based on extensive background analysis to give greater form to the authentic Nicholas. The historic Nicholas was a man of generosity, conviction, boldness, and was a social, civil, and religious servant.

English notes his dissatisfaction with recent works on his topic. Authors have contributed little “substance” in terms of historical research, and instead have been content with repeating folklore (p.9). English surpasses mere legendary storytelling, but this work is not an example of critical scholarship either. What he offers is a picture of the man Nicholas of Myra, based in the historical record. He emphasizes telling the story over critically analyzing sources. He includes legendary accounts of Nicholas sometimes without asking the questions that historians must ask, regarding whether sources are credible, biased, contradictory, and so forth. However, since he primarily aims to present Nicholas holistically, and to overcome the mythical symbol known today, this work might suit his purposes. To his credit, the scarce historical record might require a work like English’s. The earliest primary document that refers to Nicholas dates approximately two centuries after his death, and the oldest biography dates to the early eighth century. Additionally, Nicholas became such a mythical figure in the Middle Ages that the historic person became almost unimportant in light of the hagiographic use of early saints.

English fails to substantiate a number of his claims with either a primary or secondary source. For instance, when he discusses Nicholas’s baptism, he fails to offer a source to substantiate claims

about early Christian baptism (p.32). At another point, he notes that a scholarly dialog exists about Nicholas's legacy in Western Europe, but fails to give a citation (p.49). When relating modern ethical issues to an ancient Christian understanding of marriage, he offers no substantial historical foundation (p.68). Later, when he claims that the Apostle Paul founded the church in Myra, he neglects to provide any further evidence (p.90). At other times, he relies on secondary sources, when a primary source seems warranted. For example, when arguing that Puritans in Massachusetts outlawed certain Christmas celebrations and when referencing the Second Council of Nicaea of 787, he relies on secondary sources (p.37-38). At times when one expects critical analysis of a primary source, he does not offer any, for instance when he describes supernatural details in the account of Nicholas's giving of the three money bags (p.67). One expects him to ask whether these events actually occurred or does such a record influence how one views this historic document? When primary sources are especially scarce, English relies on extensive background material, based in both primary and secondary sources. This is helpful for understanding Nicholas's context, and contributes to English's work of recreating the authentic Nicholas in his historical context.

English's work seems poised to have broad appeal. Scholars of ancient Christianity will find it helpful because he engages in a dialog with both primary and secondary sources, even if his approach is somewhat basic. English's work should prompt further scholarly investigation into an intriguing historical figure and appeal to a popular audience, as English would want. He does hope to interest scholars, presumably, but he seems to have the broader American public in mind, for whom he hopes to correct the long tradition of a fat, jolly, secular figure almost entirely unrelated to the ancient bishop of Myra. I recommend this book to both scholars and laymen. English is

a superb storyteller. The work is well organized and expressed, and the fascinating relationship between the historical person and the mythical symbol of Christmas is enough to compel one to engage the book.

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