

Historical Jesus Studies and Christian Apologetics

The field of historical Jesus studies is by definition a secular discipline (i.e., a science that assumes no presuppositions of faith). Still, numerous Christians have been and remain involved in the field. Accordingly, the question often arises as to how Christian scholars can contribute productively to a quest that demands respect for tenets at variance with the convictions of their faith (e.g., that the historical reliability of what is reported in biblical writings must be determined through careful analysis rather than affirmed by an appeal to the authoritative status of those writings as divinely inspired scripture).

Different Christians, of course, respond to this challenge in different ways.¹ There are many Christian scholars who have no problem discovering or even proposing that the canonical, biblical portrait of Jesus is a theological construct that may have been inspired by the historical reality but that can also be distinguished from it. Even conservative Christian scholars like John Meier have no problem admitting that the historical Jesus did not actually say or do everything attributed to him in the biblical documents. Scot McKnight, a conservative evangelical who has written extensively on the historical Jesus, allows that certain passages presented as the

words of Jesus in our Bibles are actually interpretative glosses supplied by the Christian evangelists.² Other Christian scholars, like Ben Witherington III, try to maintain a distinction between assessing “what happened” and “what is verifiable.” It is then possible for a devout Christian to believe (as a matter of religious faith) that Jesus did or said what the Bible says he did or said while simultaneously admitting (as a historical scholar) that many things the Bible says about Jesus cannot be verified historically. The Christian historian may regard many things about Jesus as authentic or true on the basis of scriptural authority while maintaining that these things cannot be regarded as authentic or true from the perspective of secular, historical science.³

The field of Christian apologetics takes a different tack. Christian engaged in apologetics often try to establish or prove the legitimacy of what they believe to be true on grounds that do not require blatant acceptance of biblical or ecclesial authority. Frequently, the apologists themselves believe the matters to be true primarily on faith, as a result of accepting authoritative biblical or ecclesial testimony, but they seek to find non-faith-based arguments that also establish, confirm, or otherwise support the veracity of what they believe. The motivation may be simply to support faith claims in a supplementary fashion, or it may be to prompt those who are not willing to accept the matters on faith to nevertheless consider the matters more seriously than they would otherwise. Frequently, as the word “apologetics” implies, the motivation is to defend faith claims

from secular challenges: if some historians are claiming Jesus did not actually do what the Bible says he did, an apologist might attempt to challenge those claims on historical grounds in order to insure the faithful that their beliefs are not actually contradicted by historical evidence. In a sense, then, apologists often try to bridge the gap between faith and science or history, so that “faith” will not be reduced to stubborn insistence on the veracity of beliefs that science or history claim to be demonstrably false.

As might be expected, Christian apologetics has an uneasy relationship with historical Jesus studies. On the one hand, many apologists are brilliant, well-informed scholars who construct sensible and persuasive arguments for why biblical testimony on specific matters (as well as in a more general sense) should be accepted as reliable and historically accurate. Any honest scholar who wants to discover the historical truth about Jesus will want to give those arguments the consideration they merit. On the other hand, the involvement of apologists in historical Jesus studies always seems one-sided. Most historical scholars find it frustrating to listen with an open mind to the arguments an apologist wants to offer in favor of historicity when they know that the apologist is not willing to listen with an open mind to any arguments that can be offered against historicity.

Historical Jesus scholars usually conceive of the task to which they are committed as a quest rather than as a debate. In a quest, one

searches for the truth with an open mind, marked by a willingness to follow the evidence wherever it leads, to revise one's views or even recant one's former positions when a better argument or better evidence is found. Most historical Jesus scholars would say they engage in conversation with people who disagree with them in order to discover if those people might in fact be right—or at least partly right. In a quest, there is always a very real possibility of having one's own thinking supplemented, altered, or even completely changed by the insights of those one initially thought were wrong. In a debate, by contrast, participants try to score points for their position and find ways to discredit the opposing position. A debate is enacted for the benefit of an audience, who will decide which side won and which side lost. No one expects either participant in the debate to be convinced by the arguments offered by their opponent.⁴

Historical Jesus studies is best construed as a quest, not a debate.⁵ Apologists, almost by definition, are committed to convincing people that their position (in favor of historicity) is correct, rather than to determining whether or not their proposal (regarding a possibility of historicity) might be correct—faith convictions typically disqualify any potential for a negative conclusion, or at least render such a conclusion remote, something the apologist would resist for reasons unrelated to the persuasiveness of evidence or argumentation.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with this: apologists can and do pursue their vocation with integrity, and debates between persons who hold intractable views can be both interesting and informative.⁶

But when apologists try to engage in historical Jesus studies—or when they present themselves as historical Jesus scholars—they often discover that they are not completely welcome. The reason is that they come to a quest prepared for a debate; the result is that they are politely tolerated, at best. To be frank, when apologists enter the fray of historical Jesus studies, they tend to be regarded as intruders, or simply as posers—they may have *something* to contribute, but they don't seem to get what everyone else is actually trying to do (or else, many suspect, they just don't care).⁷

The situation is confused when Christian scholars are *suspected of* engaging in apologetics regardless of their actual intent.⁸ Such suspicion may be furthered by the fact that some Christian scholars are willing to engage in both disciplines: apologetics *and* historical Jesus studies. They may approach the latter with a conservative bias but a general willingness to abide by “the rules of the game,” recognizing a distinction between what can be verified and what cannot. Unfortunately, such scholars do not always get the attention they might otherwise deserve simply because their commitment to apologetics is well known. They become stereotyped as intruders or posers when such labels might not actually apply.

We may note two prominent evangelical scholars who exemplify this sort of marginalization: Darrell Bock⁹ and Craig Keener.¹⁰ Both Bock and Keener have published massive works on the historical Jesus and on the field of historical Jesus studies. This is because, while

their work has been enthusiastically received in evangelical circles, it has not had a great impact on the field of historical Jesus studies overall. Some might suppose the guild operates with a bias against evangelical or conservative Christianity in general, but the relative inattention to Bock and Keener's work could also be due to the (possibly unfounded) suspicion that these scholars are more interested in apologetics (establishing historicity) than in embarking on an open-minded quest for historical truth.¹¹

Darrell Bock has sketched a portrait of the historical Jesus analogous to the major biographies of Jesus presented by other scholars.¹² Jesus was baptized by John and, in so doing, identified himself with John's mission of national renewal and repentance. In his own ministry, however, he announced the coming of God's kingdom, a newly dawning age of shalom that was already present in Jesus's own activity but would be consummated in a powerful and all-encompassing way. As he proclaimed this message, Jesus became noted for a number of things that were unique or at least distinctive: reaching out to the unclean and to others on the fringe of society; demanding that his followers exhibit intense commitment and total loyalty to the kingdom and to his own person; performing unusual works that he claimed exhibited divine power and exemplified God's benevolent care; advocating a lifestyle reflective of trust in divine provision; encouraging a radical love for enemies and willingness to forgive others their sin; and promising that, in the new covenant he was inaugurating, God would give people new

hearts so that they could be transformed and sustained through the power of the Spirit. Jesus also claimed in some sense to be the Messiah, though he tried to refine that term away from traditional political expectations. He entered Jerusalem, enacted a symbolic prophetic action against the religious authorities in the very courts of the temple they controlled, and shared a meal with his followers that conveyed a conviction that his own suffering would inaugurate the new covenant of which he had been speaking. When he was arrested and examined by Jewish authorities, he was pressed specifically on the question of his own identity and subsequently charged with blasphemy—that is, with claiming “an equality with God that the leadership would have judged as a slander against God’s unique glory.”¹³ He was then condemned by Pilate, who also believed he had made unwarranted claims regarding his own authority. He was crucified and his dead body placed in a tomb; subsequent claims that he had been raised from the dead gain credibility from the fact that they were framed in ways that the church would not have invented.

Bock lays out this portrait of Jesus with careful attention to typical methods for historical inquiry.¹⁴ He seeks to establish the probable historicity of every assertion he makes through appeals to multiple attestation, dissimilarity, and other accepted criteria, and he strives to interpret Jesus’s actions within a context of Second Temple Judaism informed by knowledge of archaeology, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and other available resources. In all these ways, his work

resembles that of many scholars. What seems distinctive is a tendency only to affirm, but never to deny, the historical reliability of biblical testimony. Thus Luke Timothy Johnson (another conservative Christian scholar) says that Bock's work would gain credibility if "at any point he entertained the possibility of some passage of the Gospels not yielding real historical knowledge."¹⁵ To be fair, Bock does follow convention by relying primarily on texts from Mark and Q, passages considered to have the greatest potential for historical reliability; there are texts (including most of John) that he simply doesn't consider. Still, he manages to avoid deciding that any passage he *does* consider presents material that should not be regarded as historically reliable (or even verifiable). Since Bock is known to be a strong proponent of biblical inerrancy, his historical Jesus work is sometimes suspected of being an exercise in apologetics: an effort to affirm whatever he thinks can be affirmed and to ignore anything that cannot be.¹⁶ Robert Price calls his work "opportunistic";¹⁷ Johnson suggests that he "has not yet grasped what historical analysis requires."¹⁸

In one of the most caustic critiques of Bock's work to date, Robert Miller alleges that Bock (and evangelicals like him) "use traditional historical-Jesus criteria to further their project of authenticating the Gospels" but "do not allow those same criteria to lead to negative historical conclusions."¹⁹ Indeed, Miller says evangelicals like Bock belong to a different "camp" than most historical Jesus scholars and that there can be no real dialogue or productive discussion between

those camps (due to their very different presuppositions and understanding of the task at hand). Other scholars, however—including people as ideologically diverse as John Dominic Crossan and James D. G. Dunn—have engaged Bock's work and reflected appreciatively on portions of it.²⁰

Craig Keener has written extensively on the historical reliability of the New Testament Gospels²¹ and on the credibility of the miracle stories that they report.²² He maintains that the Gospels belong to the genre of ancient historiography and that a comprehensive survey of contemporaneous works in this genre reveals a careful concern for accuracy. Obviously, ancient biographers and historiographers had their biases, and they sometimes got things wrong, but they did not just make things up in the cavalier fashion assumed by some historical Jesus scholars (e.g., Mack, Crossan). Scholars should start with the premise that the author is reporting historical fact unless there is an obvious reason to think otherwise; this, Keener maintains, is how scholars typically use other ancient works of historiography. Furthermore, the Gospel authors relied on early written sources and oral tradition (Luke 1:1–4), both of which provide eyewitness testimony; Jesus's disciples probably took notes and committed large portions of his teaching to memory, as was typical for disciples of other rabbis and for followers of other prominent figures of the day.²³ Even the reports of miracles should be read as accurate, straightforward historical accounts since those who are not encumbered by a scientifically and philosophically indefensible

antisupernaturalism are able to recognize that such occurrences have happened and continue to happen in the world today.

Keener offers his own biographical sketch of Jesus, which is not too dissimilar from that of Bock (or from that of the Synoptic Gospels).²⁴ Jesus was from Nazareth and, after being baptized by John, he called disciples and conducted a ministry among the fishing villages of Galilee. As a teacher and prophet he told and interpreted parables (including, perhaps, all of the ones found in the New Testament), preached about a kingdom of God that was both already present and yet still to come, demanded that his disciples leave their families and relinquish their possessions, mingled and dined with marginalized persons considered to be sinners, quarreled with Pharisees over purity practices and Sabbath laws, and reinterpreted traditional ethics by prioritizing the necessity of love.

Jesus also worked miracles and presented himself as the Messiah, albeit a messiah reinterpreted in terms of Daniel's Son of Man (Dan. 7:13–14). He claimed to be the eschatological Judge of the dawning end times, a figure who fulfilled but expanded all Jewish expectations in light of the unique relationship he had with God, his Father. He realized that he needed to die and taught his disciples that his crucifixion would function as an atonement. His tomb was subsequently found empty and, among the various explanations that can be offered for this, the most probable is that he rose bodily from

the dead in a manner that aroused the otherwise incredible resurrection faith of his disciples.

The depth of Keener's erudition is remarkable and, at some level, most scholars do take his work seriously. His knowledge of ancient literature is particularly impressive, such that almost half of his books are sometimes occupied with endnotes, hundreds of pages that offer thousands of references to parallel or analogous passages in Roman or Jewish writings suggestive of how the Gospel accounts of Jesus should be interpreted. Nevertheless, Keener has not obtained the stature within the guild that his prolific output and undeniable brilliance might suggest he would deserve. The reason is simply that he is regarded as something of an apologist, as one who is only interested in authenticating what can be authenticated rather than in determining what can and cannot be authenticated.

The distinction may seem like a fine one, but scholars have not failed to notice the absence of negative verdicts. Robert Miller says, "If Keener does indeed have doubts about the historical accuracy of any Gospel material, he keeps those doubts to himself."²⁵ The charge goes beyond bias (all scholars have biases) to allegations that Keener engages in special pleading.²⁶ Amy-Jill Levine notes that he insists the accounts of Jesus working miracles be accepted without any bias of antisupernaturalism, but she questions whether he would apply that position consistently when considering accounts

of people working miracles in other instances of religious historiography (the Qu'ran, the Book of Mormon).²⁷

Keener is likewise said to use ancient documents selectively, citing only the ones that help his cause. He cites numerous Roman historical writings that evince a clear attempt to get the story right, but ignores those that do not—indeed, he does not take into account works like the *Protoevangelium of James* and other apocryphal gospels that closely resemble the canonical Gospels in genre but obviously did invent material wholesale.²⁸ He also cites rabbinic documents centuries after the time of Jesus to show how disciples were like scribes who took notes and memorized teachings, but ignores passages in the Gospels that differentiate Jesus's disciples from scribes, presenting them as infants who, unlike the wise and understanding, must rely on divine revelation (Matt. 11:25–27) and the Holy Spirit (John 14:25) to understand or even remember things about Jesus.²⁹

Of course, Keener would have intelligent responses to all of these objections,³⁰ but the point is that the perception that he is engaged in apologetics rather than in an actual quest to determine what can be regarded as historical keeps his work from being engaged in the same way as work by conservative Christians like Meier who seem more open to admitting much of what the Gospels report cannot be historically authenticated. Still—not to overstate the case—Keener's main book on the historical Jesus has been endorsed by such

mainstream scholars as James Charlesworth, Joseph Fitzmyer, and Gerd Theissen, and even those who regard it as an example of apologetics recognize that much of what he has to say is worthy of consideration (that is, if he *is* doing apologetics, he is at least good at it).

Adapted from Mark Allan Powell, "Historical Jesus Studies and Christian Apologetics," in Mark Allan Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2013), 255–60.

1. A survey of how major theologians have addressed the problems history poses for faith can be found in Gregory W. Dawes, *The Historical Jesus Question: The Challenge of History to Religious Authority* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).
2. Examples of such glosses would include Jesus's claim that he came "to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45) or the clause at the Last Supper in which he says the cup is his blood "which is poured out for many" (Mark 14:24). See Scot McKnight, *Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005), 356, 359.
3. Elsewhere, I have put the matter this way: an evangelical Christian historian can say, "I cannot as a *historian* say whether this event happened, though as a Christian who believes in the divine inspiration of scripture, I personally believe it did happen, just as the Bible says." See Mark Allan Powell, "Evangelical Christians and Historical-Jesus Studies: Final Reflections," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9, no. 1 (2011): 124–36, citation on 135. This would accurately describe my own position on numerous matters.
4. Of course, we would not want to press the *vocabulary* employed in this distinction too far—the word *debate* can be used as a synonym for an argument, a discussion, or even a dialogue. Thus the "debate" recounted in Robert J. Miller, ed., *The Apocalyptic Jesus: A Debate* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2001) is very

much an open-minded discussion in which four questing scholars seek to learn from one another.

5. Somewhat to my chagrin, a European edition of the first edition of my *Jesus as a Figure in History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998) was actually published under the title *The Jesus Debate* (Oxford: Lion, 1998). Suffice to say, I was not consulted concerning that title, which I would not have approved (since many of the persons described in the book would insist they are engaged in a quest, *not* a debate).

6. See, e.g., the published debate between a well-known apologist and a founder of the Jesus Seminar: Paul Copan, ed., *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up: A Debate between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001). In this volume, Crossan notes that the debate was fruitful precisely because the goal was understanding not conversion—people with incompatible presuppositions can understand and respect one another's positions while recognizing there is no chance of getting the other to change his or her mind (149).

7. So, Crossan maintains the problem arises when people present themselves as belonging to one group when they are actually members of a different group “in disguise”; then theological arguments are misrepresented as historical ones. See John Dominic Crossan, “Reflections on a Debate,” in Copan, ed., *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up*, 147–55.

8. So, Robert Funk dismissed the entire so-called Third Quest (with specific reference to N. T. Wright, Raymond Brown, and John Meier) as “an apologetic ploy.” See *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 65.

9. See Darrell L. Bock, “The Historical Jesus: An Evangelical View,” in *Historical Jesus: Five Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 249–300; Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002); Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus: A Guide to Methods and Sources* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002).

10. See Craig S. Keener, *Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009); Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).
11. To some extent, such suspicions may also attend the reception of the book, *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus: A Collaborative Exploration of Context and Coherence*, ed. Darrell Bock and Robert Webb (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009). The volume collects essays by biblically orthodox Christian scholars that seek to authenticate the probable historicity of twelve major events in the reported life of Jesus. The book is an undeniably significant work (ten years in the making) and the contributors all appeal to traditional criteria, employed in ways that find wide acceptance within the guild. Still, reviewers do notice that only arguments in favor of historicity are seriously entertained; there is no apparent openness to discovering that anything reported of Jesus is probably nonhistorical (or even unverifiable).
12. See especially Bock, "Historical Jesus: An Evangelical View." His book *Jesus according to Scripture* attempts to show that the Gospels present a coherent and credible portrait of Jesus but it does not overtly attempt to determine what aspects of this portrait might or might not be authenticated historically. Indeed, the book's premise seems to be that a more adequate vision of Jesus is obtained by viewing him as he is presented in Scripture rather than through tenuous historical reconstructions.
13. Bock, "Historical Jesus: An Evangelical View," 275. On the claim that a charge of blasphemy led to Jesus's execution, see Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism and the Final Examination of Jesus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), and, more briefly, Bock, "Blasphemy and the Jewish Examination of Jesus," in *Key Events*, 589–668.
14. On this see especially, Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*.
15. Luke Timothy Johnson, "Response to Darrell L. Bock," in Beilby and Eddy, eds., *Historical Jesus: Five Views*, 293–96.

16. For Bock's own take on this, see Darrell L. Bock, "Faith and the Historical Jesus: Does a Confessional Position and Respect for the Jesus Tradition Preclude Serious Historical Engagement?" in *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9, no. 1 (2011): 3–25.
17. Robert M. Price, "Response to Darrell L. Bock," in Beilby and Eddy, eds., *Historical Jesus: Five Views*, 282–87.
18. Johnson, "Response to Darrell L. Bock," 296.
19. Robert J. Miller, "When It's Futile to Argue about the Historical Jesus," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9, no. 1 (2011): 85–95.
20. John Dominic Crossan, "Response to Darrell L. Bock," in Beilby and Eddy, eds., *Historical Jesus: Five Views*, 288–92; James D. G. Dunn, "Response to Darrell L. Bock," in Beilby and Eddy, eds., *Historical Jesus: Five Views*, 297–300.
21. See especially Keener, *Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, 71–162.
22. Keener, *Miracles*.
23. On this point, see also Werner H. Kelber and Samuel Byrskog, eds., *Jesus in Memory: Traditions in Oral and Scribal Perspectives* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009).
24. Keener, *Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, 163–349.
25. Robert J. Miller, "Review of *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* by Craig Keener," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 41, no. 1 (2001): 50–52, citation on 51.
26. Miller writes, "One gets the impression that the possibility of anything that would buttress the reliability of the Gospels is, for Keener, sufficient grounds for accepting its actuality" ("Review," 52).
27. Levine, "Christian Faith and the Study of the Historical Jesus: A Response to Bock, Keener, and Web," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9, no. 1 (2011): 101. The same point is made independently by Miller, "When It's Futile to Argue," 90–93.

28. Levine, "Christian Faith and the Historical Jesus," 103.

29. Mark Allan Powell, "Evangelical Christians and Historical-Jesus Studies: Final Reflections," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9, no. 1 (2011): 132–33.

Compare Levine, "Christian Faith and the Historical Jesus," 101–2.

30. See, e.g., Craig S. Keener, "A Brief Reply to Robert Miller and Amy-Jill Levine," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9, no. 1 (2011): 112–17. E.g., he notes the *Protoevangelium of James* is a later work than the New Testament Gospels; the propensity for "free composition" is much less when the biographer treats a recent subject.