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Resources on the Historical Study of Jesus – Ten Years Later



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ABSTRACT:

Roughly ten years ago, during the heyday of the “Third Quest for the Historical Jesus,” *The Christian Librarian* (48:2, 2005) published an article entitled, “Resources on the Historical Study of Jesus.” Since that time some of the scholars prominent in that quest have moved on to Pauline studies, but others have taken their place and the flood of books being written on the historical study of Jesus continues unabated. This article will cover some of the more significant historical Jesus books that have been written during the past ten years, on both scholarly and popular levels.

Introduction

Roughly ten years ago, during the heyday of the “Third Quest for the Historical Jesus,” *The Christian Librarian* (48:2, 2005) published an article entitled, “Resources on the Historical Study of Jesus.” Since that time some of the scholars prominent in that quest have moved on to Pauline studies, but others have taken their place and the flood of books being written on the historical study of Jesus continues unabated. This article will cover some of the more significant historical Jesus books that have been written during the past ten years, on both scholarly and popular levels.

Reference

Surveys of Jesus and the Gospels

The difference between a Christology and the historical study of Jesus is, generally speaking, that the former is a theological analysis of the biblical teaching about Jesus while the latter attempts to determine what can be known about the human Jesus of Nazareth purely by standard historical methods. The historical study of Jesus approaches the Gospels like any other ancient sources rather than assuming they are the inspired word of God. Some historical Jesus scholars do not believe the Gospels are inspired by God in any sense of the word. Others believe in the inspiration and even inerrancy of the Gospels, but are willing to temporarily set aside or “bracket off” those assumptions for the sake of historical research.

For those who are unfamiliar with the general issues involved with the historical study of Jesus, a good place to start is one of the introductory surveys. For example,

one standard survey which appeared in the previous article is entitled *Jesus and the Gospels* by Craig Blomberg. The second edition came out in 2009, claiming to be about 15% longer than the previous edition. Blomberg's *Jesus and the Gospels* is now a standard textbook in many evangelical colleges and seminaries.

Another similar work is entitled *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels* (2007) by Mark Strauss. Unlike Blomberg's *Jesus and the Gospels*, Strauss' book has color photos and charts, but Blomberg's book is much more extensively documented. Strauss' book may be more suitable for college students while Blomberg's book would also work well for seminary students.

The Story of Jesus in Faith and History (2013) by Lee Martin McDonald also provides an excellent introduction to historical Jesus studies but without as much of the textbook feel as Blomberg or Strauss. Part one covers issues of historiography, criteria of authenticity, and the relationship between historical research and faith. Part two covers ancient historical and archaeological sources. Part three focuses on historical verification of specific major events in Jesus' ministry. The book contains no pictures and few illustrations but is extensively documented. It would be suitable for both college and seminary.

In contrast to the longer surveys above, *The Historical Jesus: An Essential Guide* (2008) by James Charlesworth provides a brief introduction (131 pages) to historical Jesus studies. Charlesworth provides a non-evangelical perspective on the issues, though he attempts to be fair and balanced.

Finally, *The Historical Jesus: Five Views* (2009), edited by James Beilby and Paul Rhodes, is not a survey of historical Jesus studies like those above, but it does give the reader a better understanding of the controversial issues involved. Five scholars advocating five different perspectives each present their view and the other four scholars respond.

Dictionaries and Encyclopedias

Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels (2013) edited by Joel Green, Jeannine Brown and Nicholas Perrin is an expanded and thorough update to a 1992 classic. The first edition was 933 pages long while the second contains 1,087 pages. According to the preface, roughly 90% of the material has been updated. *Encyclopedia of the Historical Jesus* (2008), a one-volume work edited by Craig Evans, contains 728 pages with 227 articles by 110 international scholars.

Both the *Encyclopedia* and the *Dictionary* have signed articles, subject indexes, and bibliographies. The *Dictionary* is now more current and, with smaller print and more pages, is much more comprehensive. The *Encyclopedia* may be written for a more

scholarly audience however, since, for example, it does not always translate or even transliterate Hebrew and Greek words.

Sources and Methods

Jesus in Context (2005), edited by Darrell Bock and Gregory Herrick, provides source readings relevant to historical Jesus studies from ancient primary Jewish and Greco-Roman sources. The book provides a chart linking these readings to Bock's *Jesus According to Scripture* (2002) which is a historically informed commentary on a harmony of Jesus' ministry as found in the Gospels.

The Historical Jesus in Context (2006), edited by Amy-Jill Levine, Dale Allison and John Dominic Crossan, is a collection of essays by scholars who focus on analysis of primary sources which shed light on various settings in which Jesus conducted his ministry. For archaeological sources, *Jesus and Archaeology* (2006), edited by James Charlesworth, is a 749-page collection of essays by prominent scholars on topics related to Jesus and archaeology. A much shorter work covering archaeology (187 pages) is entitled *Jesus and His World* (2012) by Craig Evans.

Virtually everyone agrees that the canonical Gospels are primary sources for the historical study of Jesus, though most critics doubt that they contain much, if any, eyewitness testimony. In *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (2006), Richard Bauckham provides a critique of that skepticism and argues persuasively – sometimes using evidence never before considered – that the Gospels, while not necessarily written by eyewitnesses, are nevertheless solidly based on eyewitness testimony.

In *Constructing Jesus* (2010), Dale Allison provides a devastating critique of the form-critical method of using isolated pieces of data to reconstruct the historical Jesus. Instead, Allison argues persuasively for using major themes which repeatedly appear in a variety of sources and forms. Allison then demonstrates how this applies to the historical study of Jesus. *Beyond the Passion* (2004) by Stephen Patterson provides a good example of the kind of outdated form-critical methodology so thoroughly refuted by Allison (and by Eddy and Boyd in *The Jesus Legend*, below). Beginning with a thoroughgoing mistrust of the Gospels, Patterson selects verses which he nevertheless judges to be historical. He then removes them from their original context and interprets them in a thoroughly Hellenistic environment. The Jesus he reconstructs is a countercultural “nobody” who preached a fictive empire for outcasts and died a martyr.

Some books have examined the very nature of the quest itself. In *Who is Jesus?* (2011), Carl Braaten argues that the search for the Jesus of history has been a failure and that the only real Jesus is the one first remembered by eyewitnesses who passed on their knowledge through biblical documents inspired by the Spirit of God.

Who Do The Historians Say That He Was?

General Historical Jesus Studies

One of the most significant works in historical Jesus studies to appear in the last ten years is volume four of John Meier's magisterial series *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (2009). This volume covers Jesus' relation with the Law, focusing on his prohibition of divorce and oaths, his teaching on the Sabbath and purity laws, and his commands to love.

Another significant work is a book entitled *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus* (2009), edited by Darrell Bock and Robert Webb. This book is the result of the work of an international group of historical Jesus scholars who met each summer over a ten-year period (1998–2008) to discuss twelve key events in the life of Jesus. The book provides a historically credible picture of Jesus and should be considered essential reading in the field of historical Jesus studies. For those who don't have time to read all 931 pages, the book *Who is Jesus?* (2012) by Darrell Bock is a shortened (238 pages) and popularized summary of this work.

Yet another significant work is *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (2009) by Craig Keener. In this book Keener seeks to demonstrate that the Gospels' presentation of Jesus was based on eyewitness testimony and is more plausible than alternative critical theories. Keener discusses Jesus in relation to Judaism and non-canonical sources, the nature and reliability of the Gospels, and the use of oral sources. The book is extensively documented – over half of its 831 pages contain endnotes, bibliography and indices.

Of course, many other shorter studies of the historical Jesus have also been published in the last ten years. For example, in 2005, James Dunn published *A New Perspective on Jesus*. This short book (136 pages) is a collection of his lectures which led up to the publication of his instant classic, *Jesus Remembered* (2003). For those who do not have time to read the 1,019 pages of *Jesus Remembered*, this may be a helpful introduction. In 2010 Robert Steward and Gary Habermas edited *Memories of Jesus* which is a collection of essays written by prominent evangelical Jesus scholars who show appreciation for and critique of Dunn's impressive work. Together, *Jesus Remembered* and *Memories of Jesus* would provide an outstanding graduate-level understanding of issues surrounding the historical study of Jesus.

In *Finding the Historical Christ* (2009), Paul Barnett argues, contrary to many modern critics, that Jesus thought of himself as the Messiah and was believed by his followers to be the Messiah during his lifetime. Barnett argues that after Jesus' resurrection, his disciples created a body of apostolic teaching about Jesus which became the basis for Peter's preaching. This was later incorporated into the Gospel of Mark.

German biblical scholar Jens Schroter provides a more critical perspective with his book *Jesus of Nazareth* (2014). Schroter downplays the supernatural stories in the Gospels but argues that even during Jesus' lifetime, there were people who believed that he was the Christ and that he acted with divine authority.

In *Jesus the Temple* (2010), Nicholas Perrin, a one-time research assistant to N.T. Wright, proposes that Jesus saw himself as the very embodiment of the Temple itself. This focus on Jesus' relation to the Temple is also found in a collection of scholarly essays entitled *Jesus and Temple* (2014), edited by James Charlesworth.

Numerous books on Jesus have also been written by Jewish scholars. In *Why the Jews Rejected Jesus* (2005), David Klinghoffer, a politically conservative Jew, writes to explain why Jews of Jesus' time rejected him. David Flusser is an influential Jewish Jesus scholar whose book *The Sage from Galilee* (2007) is a rewriting of an earlier 1968 edition in which he emphasizes that Jesus was thoroughly Jewish and wanted to remain within the Jewish faith. Amy-Jill Levine is a prominent Jewish scholar who teaches at Vanderbilt University. Evangelical Jesus scholar Ben Witherington characterizes her book, *The Misunderstood Jew* (2006) as "the best book ever written about the Jewishness of Jesus" (flyleaf).

In *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (2013), Reza Aslan provides a Muslim perspective, arguing that Jesus' preaching of the kingdom was a call to revolution. According to Aslan, the Gospel writers revised the story of Jesus to remove the fact that he was actually a zealot. This is a little like arguing that Martin Luther King, Jr. or Mother Teresa were terrorists but their biographers rewrote their stories to cover up that fact.

Jesus' Relationships

Volume two of John Meier's *A Marginal Jew* (2001) focused on Jesus' relationships with the crowds, his disciples, Pharisees, etc. Others have now followed Meier's lead in this study. In *Jesus Among Friends and Enemies* (2011), Chris Keith and Larry Hurtado provide a collection of essays by a theologically diverse group of scholars, which examine Jesus from the perspective of those who knew him. From a more critical perspective, David Catchpole's book, *Jesus People* (2006), is a study of Jesus' relationships with his family, disciples, Samaritans and others. Catchpole concludes that Jesus was in complete agreement with the essentials of contemporary Jewish teaching and that he understood himself to be the ultimate, end-time prophet who would rule over the nations.

Jesus' Death

In *Jesus Against the Scribal Elite* (2014), Chris Keith argues that it was not just the content of Jesus' teaching that brought him into conflict with the scribal elite, i.e. the religious authorities, but with the way he taught and his authority to be teaching in the first place. Keith relies on controversy narratives like Matthew 23, which many critical scholars have dismissed as unhistorical. While Keith acknowledges that these narratives have been molded by the Gospel writers, he disagrees with the assumption that they therefore have no historical value.

In a short but excellent book entitled *Jesus the Final Days* (2009), Craig Evans and N.T. Wright, two of the world's most prominent historical Jesus scholars, discuss the historical reliability of the passion stories and respond to the critics.

In *Jesus and His Death* (2005), Scot McKnight provides an extensive (451 pages) scholarly study of Jesus' view of his own death. McKnight argues that Jesus not only anticipated his own death, but that he also believed that it would be an atoning sacrifice. This understanding, says McKnight, was at the heart of Jesus' mission. This is certainly nothing new in theology but it is ground-breaking in historical Jesus studies – at least in the depth of its historical defense.

Jesus' Resurrection

Next to N.T. Wright's monumental *Resurrection of the Son of God* (2003) which appeared in the previous article, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (2010) by Michael Licona is one of the most extensive discussions of the resurrection ever written (718 pages). It covers historical theory and methodology, evaluates historical sources, and weighs and evaluates various hypotheses. The book has been praised by some of the most prominent scholars in the field of historical Jesus studies.

The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus (2004) by Gary Habermas and Michael Licona is a much shorter but excellent apologetic defense of the resurrection of Jesus. The authors not only defend the resurrection in a logical and systematic way, but they also provide suggestions on how to use this information in evangelism.

From a more critical perspective, *The Resurrection: History & Myth* (2008) by Geza Vermes discusses Jewish beliefs in the afterlife before Jesus' time, and then critically examines New Testament teachings on the resurrection. Vermes evaluates six theories proposed to explain the resurrection, concluding that all of them are flawed. He argues that it was belief in the "spiritual presence" of Jesus after the resurrection that accounts for the continuation of the Jesus movement.

Finally, *Did the Resurrection Happen?* (2009), edited by David Baggett, is the transcript of a debate about Jesus between philosophers Gary Habermas and Antony Flew. At the time of the debate, Flew was a world-renowned atheist philosopher. He has since renounced atheism as being scientifically impossible, but has not embraced Christianity.

Jesus as Messiah and Divine Son of God

Michael Bird's *Jesus is the Christ* (2012) is a follow-up to Bird's 2009 book, *Are You the One Who Is to Come?*, in which Bird argued, contrary to much of modern scholarship, that Jesus did in fact think of himself as Israel's Messiah.

Many scholars would concede that Jesus thought of himself as the Messiah, but being Messiah did not automatically equate to being God. In the book *How Jesus Became God* (2014), Bart Ehrman argued that belief in Jesus' deity developed gradually until Christians living decades after his death eventually concluded that he had been exalted to divine status either at his baptism or resurrection. Five notable Jesus scholars responded to this claim with a book entitled *How God Became Jesus* (2014), edited by Michael Bird and Craig Evans. Both books are serious historical discussions about what the earliest Christians believed about Jesus. The latter convincingly refutes Ehrman's arguments.

In *How on Earth did Jesus Become a God?* (2005), Larry Hurtado discusses the devotion and worship expressed to Jesus in earliest Christianity. This is a shortened version (234 pages) of his book, *Lord Jesus Christ* (2003), which is much longer (746 pages) and more scholarly. In *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus?* (2010), James Dunn interacts with Hurtado's arguments but concludes that early Christians did not worship Jesus for the most part, though he admits that worship language in reference to Jesus does at times appear in the New Testament. Richard Bauckham would apparently side with Hurtado. In *Jesus and the God of Israel* (2008) Bauckham provides the full-text of his earlier short book *God Crucified* (1998) as well as numerous essays expanding on his thesis that the earliest Christians believed in the deity of Jesus. There are, of course, numerous other books on the deity of Jesus but they are not included in this article because most of them approach the topic from a theological rather than a historical perspective.

Jesus and Apologetics

Over the past twenty years, challenges to the traditional view of Jesus have multiplied considerably. These challenges come not only from the sensationalist fringe but also from serious scholars. Numerous evangelical scholars have responded with defenses of the traditional view of Jesus. For example, *Reinventing Jesus* by Komoszewski, Sawyer and Wallace (2006) focuses on issues like oral tradition, the supposed corruption of

the New Testament text, the deity of Jesus and the question of whether Christianity borrowed from pagan religions.

Similarly, in *Dethroning Jesus* (2007), Darrell Bock and Daniel Wallace address recent attacks on Jesus, i.e. that the New Testament text has been corrupted, that the Gnostic gospels attest to alternative Christianities, that Paul corrupted the original message of Jesus, and that Jesus' resurrection was not physical and that his tomb has been found, etc.

In *What Have They Done with Jesus?* (2006), Ben Witherington discusses Jesus through the lens of those who were closest to him. Witherington demonstrates that the biblical evidence for their witness to Jesus is much stronger than the unhistorical portrayals in gospels written one hundred or more years later. *Fabricating Jesus* (2006) by Craig Evans evaluates overly critical methodology and unreliable sources like the so-called lost gospels. The book discusses the issue of miracles and healings as well as numerous attacks against Jesus.

It seems very unusual to include a book by Bart Ehrman in the apologetics list since Ehrman has been one of conservative Christianity's strongest critics. Nevertheless, in his book *Did Jesus Exist?* (2013), Ehrman analyzes historical evidence for Jesus' existence as well as the claims by those who argue that Jesus was a myth. Concluding that Jesus did exist, Ehrman then discusses historical methods for establishing authentic Jesus traditions and gives his view of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet. *The Jesus Legend* (2007), by Paul Eddy and Gregory Boyd, was also written to refute those who insist that Jesus did not exist. More extensive and thorough than Ehrman's book, Eddy and Boyd provide a devastating critique of form-critical methodology and answer challenges to the historical reliability of the Gospels. *Lord or Legend* (2007) by the same authors is a much shorter and easier-to-understand version of *The Jesus Legend*.

On the popular level, Josh McDowell wrote *Evidence for the Historical Jesus* (2011). This is an apologetic work focusing on the ancient non-biblical sources for Jesus, the historical reliability of the New Testament, and includes arguments for Jesus' resurrection and deity. A similar work is *The Case for the Real Jesus* (2007) by Lee Strobel. In this book, Strobel, a journalist, interviews evangelical Jesus scholars on issues related to attacks on the traditional view of Jesus, for example the so-called lost gospels, or charges that Christianity borrowed from pagan religions, or the idea that the church changed the text of the New Testament. This book is entirely different, and not just an updated edition, of his earlier book, *The Case for Christ* (1998).

Finally, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (2011) by Craig Keener is not a work on the historical study of Jesus, but this massive two volume set (1,172

pages) is relevant to historical Jesus studies because it provides what is probably one of the most thorough defenses of miracles ever written – and disbelief in Jesus’ miracles was historically at the core of skepticism regarding the Gospels’ story of Jesus.

Jesus and the Gospel

According to Mark 1:14b-15, “Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.’” This, however, begs the question, “What is the gospel?” In *How God Became King* (2012) N.T. Wright points out that the Apostolic and Nicene Creeds began with the birth of Jesus and then jump to the end of Jesus’ life without saying anything about what Wright calls “the missing middle.” As a result, Christians often talk about the gospel with little or no reference to the Gospels. In *How God Became King*, Wright tells the story of Jesus from the Gospels, placing the story in the context of ancient Jewish history. He argues that the gospel is about Jesus as the fulfillment of the Jewish story of God becoming King in Israel.

Scot McKnight makes essentially the same point in his book *The King Jesus Gospel* (2011). More specifically, McKnight argues that what we call the plan of salvation is really just a subset of what the New Testament calls the gospel. The gospel is the good news of Jesus as the Jewish king. In *I Pledge Allegiance to the King* (2013) Dennis Ingolfsland provides an apologetic for the deity and resurrection of Jesus as a basis for accepting the gospel story of Jesus as ultimate King of kings. He likens faith to a declaration of allegiance to King Jesus as presented in the Gospels.

Finally, in a book reminiscent of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *The Cost of Discipleship*, David Platt’s popular but powerful book *Follow Me* (2013) shows how modern “Christianity” has in large part completely misunderstood Jesus’ call to follow him. Platt argues that many evangelicals have replaced Jesus’ call to genuine repentance and discipleship with a prayer about asking Jesus into one’s heart. Platt fears that the result will be that many will one day stand before Jesus at the final judgment and hear those terrifying words, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (Matthew 7:23) – but we’ve now moved from history to Christology and preaching, which is perhaps an appropriate way to end an article about Jesus. †

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