



Keener, Craig S.

The Historical Jesus of the Gospels

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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You wouldn't know it by looking at Craig Keener's list of publications but he's actually written quite a bit on the historical Jesus; he's just hidden it in commentaries. In *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (hereafter *HJG*) Keener draws heavily from his previous commentaries on *Matthew* (Eerdmans, 1999; 2009) and *John* (Hendrickson, 2003) as well as his forthcoming commentary on the book of Acts (Hendrickson). In the preface he notes the role that Richard Bauckham and Craig Evans played in him finally writing this book. Knowing that people don't generally read commentaries from cover to cover they urged him to publish his research in a book devoted specifically to the topic and so we have this massive tome which is sure to prove useful to interested non-scholars.

From the historical Jesus books that I've read I've come to expect one of two things: (1) the author will discuss the criteria of authenticity employed in historical Jesus research and then proceed to examine the various sayings attributed to Jesus in the canonical Gospels (and sometimes the Gospel of Thomas) in light of these criteria determining which are likely to have actually been uttered by Jesus and which were put in his mouth by later believers, or (2) the author will sketch his own narrative portrait of Jesus from the Gospels, sometimes focusing on each Gospel individually and providing a concluding synthesis, or sometimes crafting a harmony

not unlike Tatian's *Diatesseron*. *HJG* doesn't (merely) satisfy either expectation which isn't necessarily a bad thing.

Keener presents his research in 22 chapters (not including introduction and conclusion) spread out over 3 sections with an additional 9 appendices and indices, notes and bibliography to match. While many books proceed along the lines I mentioned above *HJG* advances beyond them; not in its presentation of Jesus—which is far from novel—but in its attention to detail when discussing topics like genre (the Gospels are biographies based on eyewitness testimony) and historiography or the thoroughgoing Jewishness of Jesus' parables. Keener's encyclopedic knowledge of the ancient world really shines in these areas as he's able to show the concerns of ancient writers (e.g., in crafting "a cohesive narrative more than a simple citation of facts" [p. 110]) and the expectations of ancient readers/hearers. Pointing out the differences between ancient and modern historiography or the similarities and continuities of Jesus' style of teaching with teaching that came before it is extremely helpful and will certainly help the beginning reader to avoid anachronism.

Throughout *HJG* Keener is concerned with nothing more than placing Jesus in his first-century Jewish context and given his predilection for Bible background material (see his *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* [IVP, 1993]) there's hardly a better scholar to do this at a popular level. There's no Cynic or non-eschatological Jesus in the pages of this book but there is a good refutation of both of these views (and quite a few more). The Jesus that we can know from our earliest and best sources (the Gospels) was an itinerant preacher/charismatic healer/exorcist/miracle worker who believed himself to have been commissioned by God to bring about Israel's restoration. He was an eschatological prophet who taught of a coming kingdom that he believed he would play a significant role in ushering in. He envisioned his mission at least partly in messianic terms and called for radical discipleship, placing allegiance to himself along the lines that were reserved for God alone, hence there is good reason to see continuity between the extremely early emphasis on Jesus' exalted status and Jesus' own exalted self-awareness (see esp. chap. 19). In short, the historical Jesus of the Gospels is the Jesus that the Church has traditionally proclaimed.

For as much praise as I've lavished on *HJG* I have a couple of withstanding criticisms. I'll begin with a bit of a rant: Keener, along with a good number of other NT scholars, puts a lot of stock in 'Q' although I can't for the life of me figure out why. He acknowledges that "'Q' is hypothetical – we have no actual manuscript of the document." (61) The problem is that this assumes that 'Q' was an actual *document* without any concrete proof (it's plausible that if such a source existed that it could have been oral). But then he goes on to say that "if there is a 'Q,' it is one of our *best* sources for reconstructing Jesus' teaching." (61) I can't be alone in seeing some kind of strange irony in saying that "if" it existed (which no one can prove) "then" it is (presently) one of our

best sources. How can't this be?! The larger problem is that this comes in a chapter (chap. 4) that has looked at Apocryphal and Gnostic gospels and found them wanting because of their lateness and the ideas they represent. But how can an alleged document for which there is no proof be a better source than documents that we can actually examine? It might not be worse but it certainly can't be better! Having said that, Keener is right to focus on the historical Jesus *of the Gospels*. The canonical Gospels, as Keener ably demonstrates, are our earliest and best witnesses for the life of Jesus.

The book's biggest strength is at the same time its biggest weakness and that's very obviously the 209 pages of end notes (394-603). Its strength lies in abundance of important information that these notes contain. Its weakness lies in the great inconvenience of putting your reading on pause to flip to the back of this very large (!) book and find the note. To be honest, I probably read maybe 1 out of every 25 notes, and that's probably being generous. And lest you think I'm an extreme case, I'm not! Many readers will treat these notes in the same way. I'd like to offer a word of advice for publishers who insist on using end notes: Don't start renumbering with every chapter. Continuous numbering throughout the volume would make tracking down the end notes much easier since we wouldn't be forced to look to the page's header or flip through and look for chapter headings.

Throughout *HJG* we find exactly what we'd expect to find in a historical Jesus book written by Craig Keener. We find erudition which is displayed in his seemingly unmatched familiarity with primary literature of both the Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds. We find interaction with a broad (although admittedly not exhaustive) range of secondary literature. We find fairness in his representation of other scholars' viewpoints and research even (especially) when he disagrees with them. We find respect in his correction/refutations of other scholars' views whether they be on the fringes (e.g., Crossan; Mack) or in the mainstream (e.g., Jeremias; Dodd). We find lucid arguments that support his (what some would call traditional) conclusions, and finally, we find honesty in his approach which is displayed in his admission of the limits of historical inquiry and his acknowledgment of his own presuppositions. Most of all we find a fantastic introduction to the so-called historical Jesus of the Gospels that will greatly aid any undergraduate or interested non-specialist. *HJG* will likely be rehearsal for the specialist, but from my experience, rehearsal only makes us better.