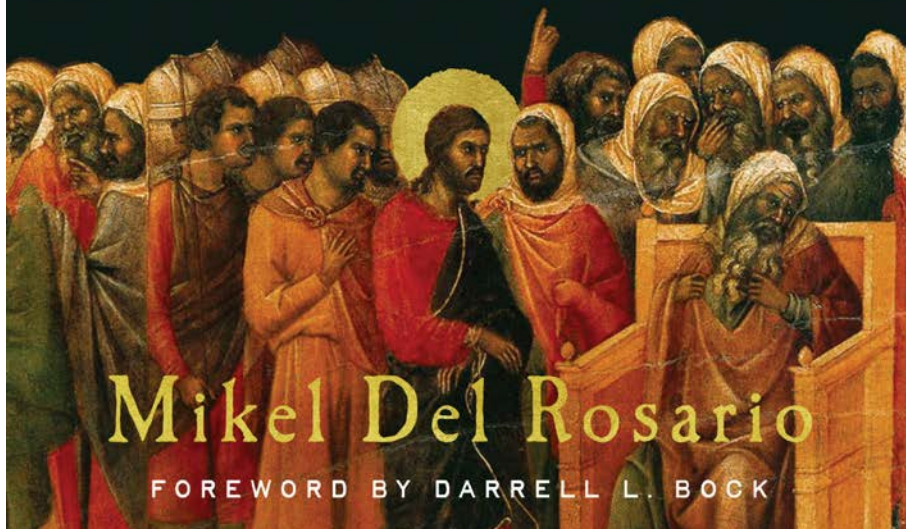


Did Jesus Really Say He Was God?

MAKING SENSE OF HIS
HISTORICAL CLAIMS



Mikel Del Rosario

FOREWORD BY DARRELL L. BOCK



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PART ONE

Person of Interest

INVESTIGATING JESUS AS A FIGURE IN ANCIENT HISTORY

Long before Christianity was legalized and long before the deity of Christ was discussed at the Council of Nicaea, an artist meticulously arranged small pieces of glass and colored stone to decorate the floor of a small worship hall with a beautiful mosaic. It included a remarkable dedication mentioning the contribution of a woman named Akeptous to the prayer space: “The God-loving Akeptous has offered the table to God Jesus Christ as a memorial.” Dating to around AD 230, the Megiddo



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mosaic is striking physical evidence of Jesus being called God.¹ The table mentioned was likely used to worship Jesus during the eucharistic ritual in what is now the earliest Christian prayer space to have been discovered in Israel.²

On September 15, 2024, the Museum of the Bible in Washington, DC, unveiled this groundbreaking artifact to the world.³ Conversations surrounding this archaeological find bring us back to the million-dollar question: How much continuity is present between the early belief in Jesus as a divine figure and the things Jesus said about himself? Before we investigate his historical claims, we need to get oriented to the world of professional historians. That's what part one of this book is all about.

In many role-playing video games, players often begin with a tutorial level or staging area that introduces the world of the game as well as basic moves and rules before embarking on an important quest. Consider the next two chapters as two parts of the staging area for our historical investigation of Jesus' words and deeds.

- Chapter one introduces you to the world of professional historians. How do they seek to discover what happened in the past?
- Chapter two shows you the basic moves and the rules for our quest—how can we operate in the world of historical Jesus studies using the rules of evidence that apply to a critical investigation of any figure in ancient history?

You are about to engage with the top philosophical and methodological considerations that face historians as they seek to uncover what happened in the past. The staging area is ready. Let's get started.

¹Vassilios Tzaferis, "Inscribed 'To God Jesus Christ,'" Biblical Archaeology Society Library, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://library.biblicalarchaeology.org/article/inscribed-to-god-jesus-christ/>.

²"The Megiddo Mosaic," Biblical Archaeology Society, November 13, 2024, www.biblicalarchaeology.org/exhibits-events/the-megiddo-mosaic/.

³"The Megiddo Mosaic: A Community Coming Together to the Table," Museum of the Bible, September 26, 2024, www.museumofthebible.org/magazine/exhibitions/the-megiddo-mosaic-a-community-coming-together-to-the-table.

Let's Make History

HOW HISTORIANS DISCOVER PAST EVENTS



Imagine finding yourself in an elegant castle-style home that features a two-story turret library. As you begin to climb the spiral staircase, you recognize the sweet, enchanting scent of well-worn books. You emerge high atop the library and admire the high ceiling and rolling ladders. Dark built-in bookshelves hold decades of academic journals and books on the philosophy of history and literary theory. Peering over the balcony to the lower level, you look down at the open workspace and see an antique oak desk with a magnifying glass and a 1920s-style brass banker's lamp illuminating a variety of tomes, including a large open codex—an ancient book. Fragments of old parchment manuscripts are framed on the walls of the lower level. Dark academia meets Harry Potter meets Indiana Jones. Your eye is drawn to some gentle track lighting, which softly illuminates an intriguing collection of red, pink, gray, and black beads displayed on the lower level, right next to the bottom of the spiral staircase where you began your ascent.

Welcome to our staging area. We will use this mental construct as a metaphor for the world of professional scholars who study Jesus as a figure in ancient history. First, think of the theoretical space as the upper level of the library. This is where we consider questions such as, “Can we know things about the past?” and “To what extent can we know those

things?” These epistemological concerns are related to the philosophy of history—the way historians can obtain knowledge about the past. Second, think of the methodological space as the lower level of the library. Here, we encounter questions such as, “How do historians work to accurately reconstruct past events?” and “Can we investigate Jesus’ words and deeds using the same tools that historians employ to study any other figure in ancient history?” Answering these questions will help us learn to employ standard rules of evidence in our own investigation.

We will need to play by these rules as we embark on a quest to recover the historicity of Jesus’ divine claim. Why? In order to find common ground with those who do not privilege the Bible as an authoritative source. Thinking about the upper and lower levels of our library can help us visualize and distinguish two levels of scholarly discussion in the world of historical Jesus research: theoretical and methodological considerations for investigating the evidence surrounding any figure in history.

Your orientation to the world of professional historians begins on the upper level. This is where we will survey the following seven theoretical considerations that relate to investigating the past:¹

1. understanding historiography
2. the question of hermeneutics
3. the concept of horizon
4. the limits of historical knowledge
5. the challenge of postmodernism
6. the nature of truth
7. the nature of historical facts

These are important because of two kinds of objections we encounter to investigating Jesus as a figure in ancient history. First, some people say that the limitations of historical inquiry prevent us from discovering anything about the past. Is our historical project really doomed to failure from the very beginning? Second, others may automatically reject any

¹This list of considerations is adapted from Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010).

book written by a Christian scholar—especially if its conclusions support the historic church's view of Jesus as a divine figure. Why? Many skeptics doubt that a Christian scholar can conduct a sound investigation of the historical Jesus due to their personal bias. However, let me explain why neither of these concerns prohibits the kind of detective work that allows us to discover real, historical facts about the words and deeds of certain people who lived in ancient times—even Jesus.

WHAT HAPPENED HERE? DEFINING HISTORY

Before we survey the seven theoretical considerations, we need to define a key term: *history*. What is history? What we commonly call history is actually someone's reconstruction of the past. That's because historians distinguish a past event itself from a written report that describes that past event. For example, think of the dramatic surge in remote work and online education during the lockdowns associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. The widespread practice of telecommuting and remote instruction that began in 2020 represents a unique historical shift that is distinct from the ways that various news outlets reported on it. So, writing a history of something means writing an explanation of a past event.²

Robert L. Webb is a historian who founded the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, a respected periodical for academic discussions of Jesus within his first-century Jewish context. He perhaps gives the best definition of history: it is “a narrative account that we historians write to express an understanding of past events based on our interpretation of the traces which have survived from those past events.”³ This was the approach of the Institute of Biblical Research Jesus Group's decadelong collaborative project, published in 2010 as *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus*. It is a significant critical investigation of twelve highly evidenced events in Jesus' life that employed rules of evidence we will

²G. Kitson Clark, *The Critical Historian: Guide for Research Students Working on Historical Subjects*, History and Historiography (New York: Garland, 1985), 1.

³Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb, eds., *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus: A Collaborative Exploration of Context and Coherence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 16.

discuss in the next chapter—rules that were not invented by the church but grew out of critical scholarship’s quests for the historical Jesus. We will adopt Webb’s definition of history for our investigation of Jesus’ claims.

LET’S MAKE HISTORY: UNDERSTANDING HISTORIOGRAPHY

Philosophers of history ask, “To what extent can we actually know things about the past?” and “How can we really know what someone said or did?” Epistemological questions such as these are part of the theoretical side of historical research called historiography. Historiography relates to the means by which historians can know things about past events and to what extent they can know them. If you look up “historiography” in *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, you’ll find it defined as “intentional attempts to recover knowledge of and represent in writing true descriptions or narratives of past events.”⁴

Some insist that it’s impossible to accurately represent a past event. But adopting this view would mean throwing out virtually everything we know about the past. Most historians reject such radical skepticism and work with the understanding that we can reach at least an adequately accurate account of the past. Like an archaeologist on a dig, we can do the historical spade work to uncover highly evidenced data relevant to our question about Jesus’ divine claim. As we dig deeper into ancient texts, we will seek what British scholar James D. G. Dunn famously described as the only realistic objective of any quest for the historical Jesus—discovering Jesus as he was remembered.⁵ So, the purpose of historical Jesus investigations in general is to explain Jesus’ words and works as preserved in the memories of ancient people who wrote about him. To do this, we will have to get our hands dirty sifting through the data. This kind of work can be technical and nuanced. At times, it may seem like we are employing the precision of a toothbrush to dust off the debris so we can arrive at historical bedrock. Despite the challenges, we can

⁴Daniel Woolf, “Historiography,” in *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, ed. Maryanne Cline Horowitz (New York: Thomson Gale, 2004), 1:xxxv.

⁵James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, Christianity in the Making 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 882.

work to put together an adequately accurate representation of at least some of Jesus' words and deeds.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?

THE QUESTION OF HERMENEUTICS

Historical Jesus researchers include Jews, Christians, agnostics, atheists, and others who represent a range of religious views. When these scholars disagree on something Jesus said or what he meant by what he said, the disagreement often comes down to the way they interpret historical data that can be gleaned from the Bible or other ancient sources.

Can we adequately determine what a person meant to communicate? This is the question of hermeneutics—the study of interpretation. Since we as twenty-first-century readers are so separated from the time and place of biblical authors or the events they describe, some say it is impossible for us to understand what an author was trying to communicate.⁶ Again, most historians reject such radical skepticism. The mere fact that someone decided to write a literary work tells us that the author intended to communicate something to people who would later read the work. In the same way, speakers also speak in order to communicate with hearers. What applies to understanding authors also applies to understanding reports about what a speaker said.

True, we cannot hop into a DMC DeLorean equipped with a working flux capacitor to go back in time to interview someone who wrote in the past. While this retrofitted time-traveling vehicle from the classic *Back to the Future* movies remains the stuff of science fiction, an author's intention or voice is still accessible enough that we can move toward an adequate interpretation of what someone meant to communicate.

For example, if you read Mark Akenside's eighteenth-century poem "The Pleasures of the Imagination," you might be initially confused by a line that says that the great creator "rais'd his plastic arm."⁷ To modern

⁶Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 25.

⁷Mark Akenside, *The Pleasures of Imagination: A New Edition* (London: Old Bailey, 1806). See line 313 on page 61. <https://ia803207.us.archive.org/27/items/pleasuresofimagi00aken/pleasuresofimagi00aken.pdf>.

readers, this could sound like the creator had a prosthetic arm made of plastic. However, when we discover that the word *plastic* used to carry a “formative” or “creative” sense in the author’s day, we take one step closer to the world of the author and his intended message.⁸ This shows that an author’s meaning is not hopelessly inaccessible to today’s readers, as a famous educational theorist, E. D. Hirsch, once observed: “It is far more likely that an author and an interpreter can entertain identical meanings than they cannot. . . . The inaccessibility of verbal meaning is a doctrine that experience suggests to be falsity. . . . The skeptical doctrine of inaccessibility is highly improbable.”⁹ Indeed, the nature of human communication ensures that at least some of an author’s meaning is accessible to the reader who works to understand a text. When we recognize an author’s cultural and situational context (as well as our own), we can better position ourselves to accurately understand what a figure in ancient history said and what the figure likely meant by it.

WELCOME TO MY WORLD: THE CONCEPT OF HORIZON

It’s been said that when scholars go on a quest for the historical Jesus, they peer into a dark, deep well of data and tend to see a reflection of a Jesus who looks very similar to themselves.¹⁰ This is because everyone has a bias. Every historian writes from the perspective of their own worldview and ideology. Scholars call this your *horizon*. But this doesn’t mean that researchers never change their minds. It’s very possible to transcend your horizon and even be persuaded by opposing theories—even in religious matters.¹¹ For example, Ehrman was a former pastor of

⁸For example, consider the term *plastic surgery*, used to indicate reconstructive surgery. The first known use of *plastic* with this kind of creative sense likely occurred in 1624. See “Plastic,” *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, accessed October 22, 2018, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/plastic.

⁹E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), 18.

¹⁰Although this image is associated with Albert Schweitzer, it perhaps originated with George Tyrrell: “The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well.” Tyrrell, *Christianity at the Cross-Roads* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1913), 44.

¹¹Licona notes some of the same examples in *Resurrection of Jesus*, 51.

Princeton Baptist Church but became an agnostic atheist.¹² Although C. S. Lewis (the author of *Mere Christianity* and the Chronicles of Narnia) was baptized in the Church of Ireland, he left his faith for atheism as a teenager but later returned to the Anglican tradition.¹³ Historian Jaroslav Pelikan converted from Lutheranism to Eastern Orthodoxy.¹⁴ Historical Jesus scholar Geza Vermes was a Hungarian Jew who escaped the Holocaust and became a Catholic priest but eventually left the church for a Jewish synagogue.¹⁵ Philosopher of religion Anthony Flew gave up his atheism and embraced belief in God, in part because he was persuaded that DNA investigations revealed evidence for an intelligent designer.¹⁶ Yes, everyone has a perspective and a bias. But people can change their minds. They may shed previous beliefs and adopt new ones. They may even reject or revise their once deeply held religious beliefs and adopt different ones.

Still, some critics view Christian faith as a showstopping liability when it comes to doing historical work. Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter wrote *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus* and go so far as to say that “Christian faith . . . is guaranteed to corrupt objective scholarly work.”¹⁷ But this bold insistence seems too fatalistic. If Jewish scholars can conduct sound investigations of the historical evidence surrounding the Hebrew Scriptures, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Holocaust, why can't Christian scholars conduct sound investigations of the historical Jesus? Perhaps they mean that one cannot be absolutely objective—totally devoid of presuppositions of any kind. But why single out Christian scholars? Again, everyone has a perspective. Although views of faith,

¹²“Author Traces Christianity’s Path from ‘Forbidden Religion’ to a ‘Triumph,’” *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio, March 20, 2018, www.npr.org/2018/03/20/595161200/author-traces-christianity-path-from-forbidden-religion-to-a-triumph.

¹³C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017).

¹⁴Robert L. Wilken, “Jaroslav Pelikan and the Road to Orthodoxy,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 74, nos. 1-2 (January 2010): 92-103.

¹⁵“Geza Vermes,” *The Economist*, May 18, 2013, www.economist.com/obituary/2013/05/18/geza-vermes.

¹⁶Anthony Flew and Roy Abraham Varghese, *There Is a God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

¹⁷Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter, *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus: The Question of Criteria* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 252.

religion, and spirituality are part of what all of us bring to the table as researchers, it does not follow that Christian faith must prevent us from uncovering highly evidenced data about Jesus—in the same way that our peers in the scholarly community can. This is especially true when we observe the common checks and balances used in critical studies of other figures in history.

So, we can work to recognize and reduce our biases when it comes to interpreting data about Jesus. A great way to do this is to hold ourselves to high standards. We can insist that our own views of Jesus must account for historical bedrock. By this I mean strongly evidenced data, supported by multiple arguments, that most historians recognize as facts.¹⁸ This is not a mere appeal to authority. Rather, it is the recognition that when scholars across a range of commitments agree on bedrock facts, there is likely enough data to take the event or saying seriously. In other words, there are probably some very good reasons why scholars from opposite sides of the aisle and across a spectrum of belief can agree on something. That should turn our attention to evaluating the data that so many from disparate views find persuasive. Despite challenges, it is possible for us to sufficiently transcend our own horizons enough to do sound historical work.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW? THE LIMITS OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

How sure can we be that a past event occurred? Historians work to determine the degree of certainty we can have in a hypothesis such as “Jesus claimed to possess divine authority” or “Jesus did not claim to possess divine authority.” This represents the way most historians approach their investigations.¹⁹ In Michael Licona’s study of the historical Jesus, he explains the concept of “adequate certainty”:

When historians say that “*x occurred*” in the past, they are actually claiming the following: *Given the available data, the best explanation*

¹⁸Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus*, 55-58.

¹⁹Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus*, 89.

*indicates that we are warranted in having a reasonable degree of certainty that x occurred and that it appears more certain at the moment than competing hypotheses. Accordingly, we have a rational basis for believing it. However, our conclusion is subject to revision or abandonment, since new data may surface in the future showing things happened differently than previously proposed.*²⁰

The data we find in ancient manuscripts can help us arrive at provisional answers to historical questions. Why? Because future data may come to light that invite us to reassess a hypothesis. So, historical answers fall somewhere on a spectrum of certainty.

However, this does not mean that investigations are futile because we cannot have 100 percent certainty about the past. We don't have to be omniscient to have a reasonable or justified belief and come to historical knowledge. To be fair, we just need to be humble when we come to our conclusions. Despite the limits of historical knowledge, we can have adequate certainty (a high degree of confidence) in the hypothesis that a past event happened (e.g., that Jesus was crucified) when that hypothesis is the best explanation of the available data. This represents what scholars call "critical realism." Here, the word *critical* refers to making judgments, and *realism* refers to making judgments about reality. This is how the overwhelming majority of practicing historians approach investigations of surviving traces of past events in the real world.²¹

LET'S BE REAL: THE CHALLENGE OF POSTMODERNISM

John Dominic Crossan is a historian who rejects supernatural explanations for Jesus' reported miracles and many of the words and deeds attributed to Jesus in the Gospels. In his book *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, he calls the "stunning diversity" of

²⁰Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus*, 69, emphasis original.

²¹Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus*, 89. While Bernier recognizes the variety of critical realisms, he notes that Wright's, Dunn's, and Meyer's critical realism is the kind of "critical realism already present to a certain extent in New Testament scholarship . . . pioneered by and associated with Bernard Lonergan." It is this he believes must be developed in historical Jesus studies. See Jonathan Bernier, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus After the Demise of Authenticity: Toward a Critical Realist Philosophy of History in Jesus Studies*, Library of New Testament Studies 540 (New York: T&T Clark, 2016), 5-6.

scholarly conclusions about Jesus “an academic embarrassment.”²² Indeed, it can be frustrating to discover various researchers who peer into the same well of data and yet end up with vastly different ideas about what Jesus thought about himself (scholars call this his “self-identity”). Because of this, some wonder whether ancient texts can tell us anything at all.

In the mid-twentieth century, a French philosopher named Jacques Derrida challenged traditional views of language and meaning. In *The Postmodern Bible*, he and other poststructuralists assert that readers must endlessly create and re-create the meaning of the text themselves, because the author’s words do not have a fixed meaning.²³ This approach to the Bible is based on an underlying philosophical assumption that all interpretations are equally valid because there are no such things as objective historical events. On this view, all historical reporting is powerless to inform the reader about the details of real past events.²⁴

Postmodern scholars say that it seems too limiting to restrict the text to any one “correct” interpretation. On this view, the words *red ball* do not unequivocally indicate a specific, unchanging referent (such as an actual spherical object with the property of redness). At first, this does not seem too problematic. After all, *red ball* may refer to a setting sun or the planet Mars rather than a piece of playground equipment used in a game of kickball. However, the observation that a metaphor can refer to one thing and not another thing is not proof that a word can mean just anything at all! In reality, an author may intend to use a metaphor precisely to refer to one thing and not another. Referents are not as fluid as some suppose. In fact, the limitations of postmodernism seem to render the approach less helpful in historical investigations.

It is the postmodern view that is too limiting. Why insist that the text cannot have a definite meaning at all? Just think about why postmodern authors write books (seemingly to educate their readers and persuade them to adopt their views). Presumably, these authors want to be understood.

²²John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), xxviii.

²³Bible & Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 124, 130-31.

²⁴On this view, its power is to elude the reader and continually overturn one’s interpretation.

You can imagine how they might object if someone were to deconstruct their texts and reinterpret their work in a way that misrepresented their intentions or their views. However, this is similar to many postmodern approaches to texts about Jesus. How well can seeing the biblical text as totally independent from the author's intended meaning advance historical studies? Trying to live out the postmodern approach in the world of historical research would create methodological chaos for researchers.

While no one can be absolutely objective or mechanically neutral in historical studies, literary deconstruction seems unhelpful when applied to documents such as police reports, hospital records, academic transcripts—or ancient narratives that purport to describe actual events. We should allow the genre of a text (e.g., poetry, biography) to determine how it should be read rather than blindly proceeding with a one-size-fits-all kind of reading.

In order to do any productive historical work, we must approach the text believing there is an objective reality independent of human knowledge and language. Indeed, books on the historical Jesus make a kind of truth claim about the nature of reality. In *Historiography and Hermeneutics in Jesus Studies*, Donald L. Denton rightly observes that “the world of historical Jesus studies would have little sympathy with any form of anti-realism in historiography.”²⁵ In fact, Licona notes, “Replies by realist historians to postmodernists have convinced the majority of practicing historians and philosophers of history that realism, rather than postmodernism, is correct and practical. . . . Postmodernism has lost the battle of ideologies among professional historians.”²⁶ Indeed, the postmodern approach doesn't seem useful to our investigation of Jesus' words and deeds.

WHAT IS TRUTH? THE NATURE OF TRUTH

According to John 18:38, the Roman procurator Pontus Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?” The correspondence theory of truth is the most helpful

²⁵D. L. Denton Jr., *Historiography and Hermeneutics in Jesus Studies: An Examination of the Work of John Dominic Crossan and Ben F. Meyer* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 170.

²⁶Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus*, 86.

and the most widely accepted view among historians, including those who study Jesus.²⁷ The correspondence theory refers to the idea that when a proposition corresponds to the actual state of the world, we can say that proposition is true. For example, the proposition “It is raining outside” is true if and only if it is raining outside. Similarly, the proposition “Jesus of Nazareth was crucified in the first century AD” is true if and only if Jesus of Nazareth was really crucified in the first century AD.

Still, some say that historical truths are just the stories told by those with privilege: “History is always written by the winners.”²⁸ But those who reject metanarratives (overarching, grand stories that explain reality) promote a competing metanarrative. Even though history as a discipline cannot yield 100 percent certainty about the past, we can have at least a reasonable level of certainty about the truth of propositions about the past. Based on a justified belief, research can produce an adequate (even if not completely exhaustive) narrative account that positively corresponds to the past event described. The most reasonable view is that truth exists independent of language and the interpretations of researchers. Correspondence theory best conforms to our everyday experience of the world. To do good historical work, we must proceed with the idea that truth is something we discover, not something we invent.

IS THAT A FACT? THE NATURE OF HISTORICAL FACTS

Richard Evans, a leading British historian of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany at Cambridge University, saw a historical fact as a past event that researchers seek to discover through verification.²⁹ This definition is used in historical Jesus studies as well. For example, Licona uses it in *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach*.³⁰ We will adopt this view for our study.

²⁷Scot McKnight, *Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005), 14-15.

²⁸This phrase was popularized by Dan Brown, e.g., *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 256.

²⁹Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: Norton, 1999), 66.

³⁰Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus*, 94.

One of our first tasks will be to discover historical bedrock and the evidence that supports it. This will allow us to begin our investigation with common ground accepted by critical scholars who are not sympathetic to our cause.³¹ The beauty of building our case on what some might call “minimal facts”—highly evidenced data the majority of critics acknowledge as facts—is that it can allow us to come to the table with people from a variety of religious backgrounds (as well as those who do not identify with a faith tradition) and have a reasoned conversation about some of the things that Jesus did and things he said about himself.³² It can also demonstrate how certain details in the Bible can be corroborated and qualify as historical facts—even when working in scholarly contexts that do not privilege the biblical text beyond any other source from antiquity.

For the most radical skeptics, however, almost everything is up for debate. This limits a scholarly consensus on what constitutes a historical fact. The reality is that everyone has biases, agendas, and horizons. For example, some people claim that Jesus never even existed. This idea represents a small group of conspiracy theorists who advocate for the Jesus-myth theory online and in fringe publications. Virtually every respected historian believes that Jesus existed—not because of a religious commitment but due to the overwhelming weight of data supporting the reality of Jesus’ life and death.

Influential critic Rudolph Bultmann questioned supernatural elements of the Bible but still wrote, “The doubt to whether Jesus really existed is unfounded and not worth refutation.”³³ More recently, Crossan acknowledged that “Jesus’ death by crucifixion under Pontius Pilate is as sure as anything historical can ever be.”³⁴ Ehrman, an agnostic atheist, recognizes that “there was a Jesus of history” and that “it is a historical fact that some of Jesus’ followers came to believe that he had been raised from the

³¹Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus*, 55.

³²Gary Habermas popularized the term *minimal facts* in his work with Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004).

³³“The doubt to whether Jesus really existed is unfounded and not worth refutation.” Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, trans. L. P. Smith and E. H. Lantero (London: Collins, 1958), 13.

³⁴John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 145.

dead soon after his execution.” These “minimal facts” are part of the historical bedrock about Jesus.³⁵ Indeed, online discussions with self-proclaimed mythicists do not represent scholarly conversations about Jesus happening in academic journals. In fact, the editorial board for the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* represents a diverse group of scholars, including atheists, agnostics, Jews, and Christians from a range of theological persuasions. All of them agree that Jesus existed. For example, Ehrman posted this on the HuffPost Contributor platform:

One may well choose to resonate with the concerns of our modern and post-modern cultural despisers of established religion (or not). But surely the best way to promote any such agenda is not to deny what virtually every sane historian on the planet—Christian, Jewish, Muslim, pagan, agnostic, atheist, what have you—has come to conclude based on a range of compelling historical evidence. Whether we like it or not, Jesus certainly existed.³⁶

While discovering minimal facts can be helpful, the reality of historical facts themselves is not dependent on consensus or a majority view. When we find highly evidenced data that is widely acknowledged by scholars, we must remind ourselves to avoid *argumentum ad verecundiam* (appeal to authority), *argumentum ad numerum* (appeal to the majority), or similar logical fallacies. All that a consensus or majority view tells us is what a group of historians—whether on the theological left, right, or center—regards as authentic. For example, although there is strong agreement among virtually all critical scholars on the existence of Jesus, a consensus on the historicity of Jesus’ claim to possess divine authority may not seem likely outside conservative biblical scholarship. Not everyone will believe that Jesus made divine claims regardless of the strength of the evidence because persuasion will always be person-relative. But the recognition that not everyone will be persuaded by our findings should not prohibit us from potentially concluding that our hypothesis that Jesus

³⁵Gary R. Habermas, “Resurrection Research from 1975 to the Present: What Are Critical Scholars Saying?,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 3, no. 2 (June 2005): 135-53.

³⁶Bart D. Ehrman, “Did Jesus Exist?,” *HuffPost*, March 20, 2012, www.huffpost.com/entry/did-jesus-exist_b_1349544.

made divine claims is strongly supported by the data and is a true fact of history.

So, how can recognizing a consensus or majority view be helpful? For some who may be hesitant to begin a conversation about Jesus assuming the truth of the Bible, this could serve as an invitation to read the Gospels and consider the claims of Jesus. When researchers discover agreement across a spectrum of historians holding various theological and philosophical positions, it's like getting an audible ding that alerts you to a text message on your phone. The message is, "Pay attention to the evidence that led to this majority view! These facts may help us come to a better understanding of the historical Jesus."

CONCLUSION

What is history? History is a narrative account written to explain past events based on what a historian believes is the best interpretation of the surviving traces of those events. The surviving traces of Jesus' words and deeds include highly evidenced data gleaned from ancient texts. Contrary to those who remain hyperskeptical, our historical project is not doomed to failure. The limitations of historical inquiry do not prevent us from obtaining knowledge about the past—even as Christian scholars.

The following key points from our discussion of the seven theoretical considerations are foundational to our study:

1. We can create an adequately accurate representation of at least some of Jesus' words and deeds.
2. Understanding Jesus' cultural context can help us more accurately understand what he said and what he likely meant by it.
3. It is possible to sufficiently transcend our own horizons enough to conduct a sound historical investigation of Jesus.
4. We can have a high degree of confidence in a hypothesis about a past event when that hypothesis is the best explanation of the available data.
5. We can discover real historical facts about people who lived in ancient times—including Jesus.

6. Truth is something we discover, not something we invent.
7. A historical fact is a past event that researchers discover through verification.

When a strongly evidenced event approaches historical bedrock, historians inquire as to the cause of the event. How should one investigate the reasons a given event occurred? Our orientation to the world of professional historians now moves from theoretical conversations to practical methods for doing the detective work required to uncover the truth about Jesus' divine claim. It's time to head back down the spiral staircase and explore the ground level of our turret library.

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