

# Historical Criticism and the Bible

*Historical criticism of the Bible often threatens believers' faith. Dr. Michael Gleghorn explains that it is often grounded in false assumptions.*

## What Is Historical Criticism?

Throughout the history of Christianity, students of the Bible have used many different methods of interpreting the text. But since the Enlightenment, one particular method (or rather, family of methods) has been quite influential, especially in the academy.[\[1\]](#) I'm speaking of what is often called *historical criticism*, or the *historical-critical method* of biblical interpretation.



So what is historical criticism, you ask? Although the term gets used in different ways, I will here be using it to refer to a method of biblical interpretation which attempts to read the Bible as a *purely* human document from the distant past. In other words, the historical-critical method does not typically regard the Bible as divinely inspired. It is *merely* a human book, like any other, and should thus be read like any other book."[\[2\]](#)

In the past (and to some extent even today) scholars liked to portray this method as “scientific” in character, able to obtain “assured” and “objective” interpretive results. But critics tell a different story. For example, Eta Linnemann, who before her conversion to Christianity was a well-respected scholarly advocate of historical-criticism, claims that in practice the so-called “scientific” character of this method

is grounded in a prior assumption of naturalism, perhaps even atheism. As Linnemann observes, "Research is conducted . . . if there were no God.'" {3}

Another critic of this method is the renowned Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga. After rehearsing certain principles of historical investigation, which many historical critics would endorse, Plantinga notes that these principles are understood "to preclude" God's direct involvement in the world. {4} Because of this, he notes, such principles "imply that God has not in fact specially inspired any human authors in such a way that what they write is really divine speech addressed to us; nor has he . . . performed miracles of any other sorts." {5}

As I'm sure you can see, at least some of the results of this method come about simply because of assumptions the interpreter brings to the text. The problem, however, is that the assumptions are biased *against* Christianity in *favor* of naturalism. We must thus think rather critically about the historical-critical method. But first, we need a bit of background on how and when this method originated.

## The Origins of Historical Criticism

Although many scholars helped develop the historical-critical method, Johann Salomo Semler, an eighteenth-century theologian, is widely regarded as its "father." {6} Semler was primarily interested in "critical work" on the canon of biblical writings. {7} For our purposes, the "[canon](#)" can simply be thought of as the books of the Old and New Testaments. The Church regards these books as the divinely inspired Word of God and, hence, completely authoritative for Christian faith and practice.

Semler, however, considered these books (especially those of the Old Testament) to be largely of merely historical

interest. They might give us some interesting information about the religion of ancient Israel or (in the case of the New Testament) the beliefs of the early church, but they could not be regarded, at least in their entirety, as the divinely inspired Word of God.<sup>{8}</sup> Hence, Semler was led to make a distinction between “the Scriptures and the Word of God.”<sup>{9}</sup> Although the Church had always considered the Scriptures to *be* the Word of God, Semler made a distinction between them. In his opinion, “some books belong in the Bible through historical decisions of past ages, but do not make wise unto salvation.”<sup>{10}</sup> Books of this sort, he reasoned, can still be called “Scripture” (for they are part of the biblical canon), but they are *not* the Word of God (for in his view, they are not divinely inspired).

Although historical criticism continued to be developed after Semler, it’s easy to see why many consider him to be this method’s “father.” In his own study of the Bible, Semler generally disregarded any claims that either it or the Church might make regarding its divine inspiration and authority and attempted instead to read the Bible like any other book. In the opinion of theologian Gerhard Maier, it’s “the general acceptance” of Semler’s view which “has plunged theology into an endless chain of perplexities and inner contradictions.”<sup>{11}</sup> Before we examine such difficulties, however, we must first consider why so many scholars see value in the historical-critical method.

## **Some Proposed Benefits of Historical Criticism**

To begin, virtually everyone agrees that when you’re attempting to understand a book of the Bible, it can be helpful to know something about the origin of the book. Who was the author? When did he live? What sorts of things were happening at the time the book was written? Was the author

influenced by any of these things, or attempting to respond to them in some way? Who was he writing for? How might they have understood him? Answering such questions can often clarify what the author may have been trying to communicate in his book. Historical critics are right to see this as an important part of understanding the books of the Bible. And most everyone agrees on this point.{12}

More controversial would be the principles of historical investigation originally proposed by Ernst Troeltsch in an essay written in 1898.{13} These principles are still generally embraced (though with some modifications) by historical critics today.{14} Briefly stated, Troeltsch proposed three principles that can simply be called the principles of criticism, analogy, and correlation.{15} Although there's no universal agreement about how these principles should be used in actually doing historical research, historical-critical scholars have generally regarded these principles as helpful guides in critically evaluating what is written in the Bible in their effort to determine what *really* happened. This is considered a great benefit of historical criticism. For, rather than simply accepting the claims of a biblical author uncritically, Troeltsch's principles provide some help in critically evaluating such reports in order to assess their believability.{16}

Now in one sense this is commendable, for it is good to search for truth about what the Bible is trying to teach us. But there's a problem with how these principles are typically understood by historical-critical scholars. As the Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga reminds us, such scholars generally take these principles to exclude any "*direct divine action* in the world." {17} That is, such principles forbid us to believe that God has ever directly intervened in the world which He has made. And for Christians, this presents a real difficulty with historical criticism.

# Some Problems with Historical Criticism

According to Christian scholars Norman Geisler and William Nix, a fundamental problem with historical criticism is that “it is based on an unjustified antisupernatural bias which it superimposes on the biblical documents.”[{18}](#) This can easily be seen by examining some of the things which have been written by proponents and advocates of this method.

For example, Rudolf Bultmann, who was interested in “demythologizing” the New Testament, famously wrote, “It is impossible to use electric light . . . and to avail ourselves of modern medical . . . discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles.”[{19}](#) Similarly, another theologian has written that whatever the biblical authors may have believed about such things, “we believe that the biblical people lived in the same” world we do, that is “one in which no divine wonders transpired and no divine voices were heard.”[{20}](#)

Now if we ask such scholars why it is that we’re to think that miracles are either unbelievable or impossible, we’ll usually notice rather quickly that the responses are generally short on arguments and long on assumptions. That is, such scholars typically just *assume* that God is not directly involved in the world and that miracles never occur. But if a personal Creator of the universe exists (and there are [good reasons](#) to think that one does), then why should we simply *assume* that He would never directly intervene in the world which He has made? Such intervention would hardly seem *impossible*. And if it produced an effect which would not have come about had nature been left to itself, then this could quite properly be regarded as a miracle.

So it seems to me that if a personal God exists, then miracles are possible. And if miracles are possible, then it is nothing more than “an unjustified antisupernatural bias” (as Geisler and Nix assert) to simply *assume* that the Bible’s reports of

miracles are all false and unbelievable. And since historical criticism of the Bible often begins with just such an assumption, it appears to offer us an inadequate method for correctly reading the Bible.

## **An Alternative to Historical Criticism**

Having looked at some problems with historical criticism, we can now consider a preferable alternative, namely, theological interpretation.[{21}](#)

So what is theological interpretation? As I'm using the terminology here, it's a method of reading the Bible like a Christian, with the aim "of knowing God and of being formed unto godliness."[{22}](#) Theological interpretation takes a sober and serious account of what Christianity is, believes, and teaches. It then attempts to read and interpret the Bible as "a word from God about God."[{23}](#)

It's a radically different way of reading the Bible from that practiced by historical critics. Of course, as theologian Russell Reno reminds us, "There is obviously a historical dimension" to the truth found in the Bible. "Nevertheless," he continues, "to be a Christian is to believe that the truth found in the Bible is the very same truth we enter into by way of baptism, the same truth we confess in our creeds, the same truth we receive in the bread and wine of the Eucharist."[{24}](#)

But historical criticism attempts to read the Bible in the same way one would read any other book from the ancient world. It assumes that the Bible is merely a human book. The only way to really understand a book of the Bible, then, is to try to understand how it originated and what the original author was trying to say.

Theological interpretation, on the other hand, does not view the Bible as a merely human book. Of course, it realizes that each of the biblical books has a human author. But it also

insists, along with the consensual teaching of the Christian community, that each of these books also has a Divine author.[\[25\]](#) It thus views the Bible as a divinely-inspired document.

Is this a legitimate way to read the Bible? Alvin Plantinga has written extensively on the theory of knowledge.[\[26\]](#) According to him, the biblical scholar who is also a Christian “has a perfect right to assume Christian belief in pursuing her inquiries.” Doing so, he says, is just as legitimate as assuming the principles of historical criticism.[\[27\]](#) Indeed, for the Christian it is arguably better—for it allows us to read the Bible in continuity with the tradition and faith we profess and believe.

## Notes

1. Gregory Dawes, for example, notes that both form criticism and redaction criticism would fall under the umbrella of historical criticism. See Gregory Dawes, “‘A Certain Similarity to the Devil’: Historical Criticism and Christian Faith,” in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Authority of Scripture: Historical, Biblical, and Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. Carlos R. Bovell (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 354.
2. Benjamin Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” in Josephine M. Guy, *The Victorian Age: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*. n.p.: Routledge, 1998. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (accessed February 9, 2013), 295.
3. See Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?* trans., Robert Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), 84.
4. Alvin Plantinga, “Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship,” in “*Behind*” the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation, edited by Craig Bartholomew, C. Stephan Evans, Mary Healy and Murray Rae (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 33.
5. Ibid.
6. James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: The*

*Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 29.

7. Ibid.

8. Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Toward a Hermeneutics of Consent* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 38-40.

9. Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 19.

10. Ibid.

11. The first sentence of Maier's book declares, "The general acceptance of Semler's basic concept that the Bible must be treated like any other book has plunged theology into an endless chain of perplexities and inner contradictions." See Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*, trans., Edwin W. Leverenz and Rudolph F. Norden (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 11.

12. Plantinga, echoing the language of Robert Gordon, grants that we might refer to the attempt to answer such questions as a "warranted" form of historical biblical criticism. See Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Scripture Scholarship: A Response to Robert Gordon and Craig Bartholomew," in *"Behind" the Text*, 94.

13. For those interested in this essay, see Ernst Troeltsch, "Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology (1898)," trans. E. Fischhoff, rev. W. Bense in *Religion in History-Ernst Troeltsch: Essays*, trans. J. L. Adams and W. F. Bense (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991).

14. Edgar Krentz states, "Contemporary historians use Troeltsch's three principles, but with significant modifications" (*The Historical-Critical Method*, 56). However, it does not seem necessary to qualify the modifications of Troeltsch's principles by practicing historical-critical scholars with the adjective "significant," for (in my opinion, at any rate) they are generally more severe in critically evaluating the sources with which they are dealing than the average historian is with his.

15. For two very helpful discussions of Troeltsch's



principles, see Alvin Plantinga's discussion of "Troeltschian HBC" in "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship," in *"Behind" the Text*, 31-35, as well as Gregory Dawes discussion in "'A Certain Similarity to the Devil': Historical Criticism and Christian Faith," in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Authority of Scripture*, 358-70. Although Plantinga and Dawes reach different conclusions about if and how Troeltsch's principles can be legitimately employed, both discussions are well worth reading.

16. Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 45.

17. Alvin Plantinga, "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship," in *"Behind" the Text*, 33.

18. Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible: Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 440.

19. Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth*, edited by Hans Werner Bartsch (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 5.

20. Langdon Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," reprinted in Owen C. Thomas, ed., *God's Activity in the World: the Contemporary Problem* (Chico, CA: Scholar's Press, 1983), 31; cited in Alvin Plantinga, "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship," in *"Behind" the Text*, 34.

21. Kevin Vanhoozer defines "theological interpretation" as "the process of keeping the canonical practices alive and well in the believing community." A bit later he describes a "canonical practice" as "divinely authorized use of language and literature, which, when learned, presents and forms Christ." As examples of "canonical practice," he discusses, first, the typological, or Christological, interpretation of the Old Testament in light of the person and work of Jesus Christ and, second, prayer. He concludes his discussion by noting, "Christians learn to speak about, to think about, and to live for God by indwelling the diverse canonical practices that comprise the Scriptures. By participating in such

practices-interpreting figurally, praying to the Father, and the like-Christians grow in faith toward understanding.” This, it seems to me, is a helpful way of fleshing out, in greater detail, all that is involved in the concept and practice of the “theological interpretation” of Scripture. See Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 219-226. The citations in this note are from pp. 219 and 226.

22. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Introduction,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 25.

23. Ibid., 23.

24. R. R. Reno, “A Richer Bible,” *First Things* (August/September, 2010), 44.

25. I adopt this language from Thomas Oden who, in his book on *Classic Christianity*, states as his intention the setting forth of the “classic consensual ecumenical teaching” of the church throughout history. See Thomas Oden, *Classic Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), xiii.

26. See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford, 1993), *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford, 1993), and *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford, 2000).

27. Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Scripture Scholarship: A Response to Robert Gordon and Craig Bartholomew,” in *“Behind” the Text*, 99.

# The Historical Christ

## Introduction

Can we trust what our New Testaments tell us about Jesus? Or must we look elsewhere and possibly conclude that Jesus was just a man like all others whose teachings became the basis of a religion largely created by his followers?

Over the past fifteen years or so, New Testament scholars have been involved in what has been called the Third Quest for the historical Jesus. The television program "From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians,"[\[1\]](#) which aired on Public Broadcasting System (PBS) stations April 7th and 8th, 1998, was intended to bring the public up-to-date with the latest "new and controversial historical evidence" about Jesus and the establishment of the church.

If you watched the program you might have been surprised by some of the things you heard. The narrator said that "archaeologists must sift clues and scholars decode the stories told by the first followers of Jesus" in order to find the truth. It was suggested that the differences between Mark's and John's reports about Jesus' arrest is evidence that they aren't historically accurate accounts. One participant said that the Gospel writers were only giving their own theology using Jesus as a spokesman.

For the scholars on "From Jesus to Christ," Jesus was just a man who preached about the coming kingdom of God. He was not the incarnate Son of God. But he had enough charisma that he was able to gather about himself a group of people who were attracted to his ideas, and who sought to keep his memory and teachings alive after he died. As time went by, legends began to develop as words and actions were attributed to Jesus which weren't really his. The new Christians needed Jesus to speak

to their own difficulties, so they put words in his mouth or invented miracles to address whatever the difficulty was.

The views aired on “From Jesus to Christ” are widespread among mainline scholars, and they are the views typically heard on college campuses and in the media. Two assumptions are made about the life of Jesus, and they are considered such common knowledge that they typically aren’t defended. They are: first, that the Gospels aren’t reliable historical documents; and second, that there was no real supernatural element in Jesus’ life and ministry. In fact, the belief that Jesus really didn’t perform miracles or rise from the dead is part of the reason many scholars reject the Gospels as historical documents. One of the participants in the program, John Dominic Crossan, wrote in one of his books, “I do not think that anyone, anywhere, at any time brings dead people back to life.” [\[2\]](#) If one begins with anti-supernatural assumptions, that will affect how one reads historical accounts such as those in the New Testament.

The question of the historical reliability of the Gospels is critical, because Christianity rests upon historical events. If the possibility of having true knowledge of these is gone, we have nothing upon which to base our beliefs. Without the historical events, Christianity becomes just another set of beliefs.

Since the PBS program focused on historical issues, we’ll concentrate our attention there and leave the matter of the supernatural for another time. But before making a case for the historicity of the Gospels, we should have some background information on the project of searching for the historical Jesus.

## **A Brief History of the Quest**

The first indication that “From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians” might not be presenting historically orthodox

views of Jesus is the title of the program itself. The viewer might have thought that "From Jesus to Christ" referred to what Peter said in Acts 2:36: "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ this Jesus whom you crucified." The scholars on "From Jesus to Christ," however, weren't thinking of the position to which Jesus was exalted by God the Father; they were thinking about the position Jesus' *followers* gave him through the development of the Christian religion. In other words, Jesus the man from Nazareth was transformed *by his followers* to Jesus the Christ, the Son of God. The result was a break between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.

So, where did this idea come from?

In the last century and a half there have been three so-called "quests" for the historical Jesus. The first quest began in the 19th century when David Strauss published a book titled *The Life of Jesus*. Believing "that the Gospels could no longer be read straightforwardly as unvarnished historical records of what Jesus actually said and did,"[\[3\]](#) Strauss said that "unbiased historical research" needed to be done to find out who Jesus really was. Why did Strauss think we could no longer accept the Gospel narratives at face value? As philosopher Stephen Evans says, "The quick answer is simply 'modernity.'" In the era of the Enlightenment, optimism about the power of human reason quickly led to the renunciation of the supernatural, so that reports of miracles and resurrections were now to be considered pre-scientific and mythological.[\[4\]](#) Since so much of the Gospels deals with the supernatural, the documents were no longer to be trusted historically.

In the 1940s a second quest began with students of German theologian Rudolf Bultmann. According to Bultmann, very little could be known about the historical Jesus, not much more than that he lived and died on a cross. Some of his students began a new effort to find the historical Jesus. This second quest continued until the early 70s.[\[5\]](#)

In the early 80s the Third Quest for the historical Jesus began with the rise of a new enthusiasm about the prospects of historical study.[\[6\]](#) New archaeological and manuscript data have greatly increased our knowledge of Jesus' world. This quest seeks to know who Jesus was by understanding the world in which he lived.

These three quests have been based upon the idea that the Gospels are deficient in giving us a true picture of Jesus of Nazareth. Now, it's tempting to just brush all this aside as liberal balderdash, but we should be careful not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Some good information is coming out of current studies.[\[7\]](#) However, not everything is to be accepted simply on the academic merits of participating scholars. In fact, the work of the Jesus Seminar, a splinter group that was represented in the program by at least three of the scholars, has drawn conclusions that even most liberal scholars reject. What we need to do is to look at the arguments presented and see if they hold water historically.

What follows, then, is a brief defense of the historical reliability of the Gospels.

## **Dating the Gospels**

The assumption in "From Jesus to Christ" that the Gospels are not historically reliable records was very clear. Historian Paula Fredriksen said, "What [the Gospels] do is proclaim their individual author's interpretation of the Christian message through the device of using Jesus of Nazareth as a spokesperson for the evangelist's position" (FJTC, Pt. 2). Thus, these documents aren't to be taken literally as historically true. There are at least three reasons many scholars believe this: a late date for writing; biased writers; and differences between the Gospels. Let's look first at the question of dating.

Mainline New Testament scholars believe that the Synoptic

Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—were written after the fall of Jerusalem to Rome in A.D. 70. Mark was written first, drawing on earlier written and oral traditions. Matthew and Luke drew from Mark and still other traditions. Even conservative scholars recognize an interdependency in the Synoptics. The crucial issue here is *when* the documents were written. A late date would give more time for legends to develop. Late dates for the Synoptics would also suggest that they weren't really written by Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

However, although the dates aren't firmly established, good arguments have been given for earlier dating which would strengthen the case for the historicity of the Gospels.

Craig Blomberg, a professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary, provides several arguments for early dates. For one thing, the early church fathers said that Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written by the biblical characters we're familiar with. "No competing traditions assigning these books to any other authors have survived," he says, "if any ever existed." [\[8\]](#) For example, in the late second century, one of the church fathers said Matthew composed his gospel before Paul was martyred under Nero in the 60s A.D. Blomberg wonders why the early believers would have attributed these writings to such unlikely candidates as Matthew, Mark and Luke if they were written by others. Mark and Luke weren't apostles. And Matthew didn't have an especially good reputation. "The apocryphal Gospels," Blomberg continues, "consistently picked more well-known and exemplary figures for their fictitious authors—for example, Philip, Peter, James, Bartholomew or Mary." [\[9\]](#)

Another argument Blomberg presents is built upon the date of the book of Acts. Acts ends abruptly with no record of what happened to Paul. Why would Luke have left out that important information if he wrote the book a decade or more after Paul's death? And why would he make no mention of the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70? The likely explanation for the abrupt

ending of Acts is that it was written as the events unfolded—in other words, while Paul was still alive (Paul died in the mid-60s). If so, then Luke's Gospel—as the first part of his two-part history—must have been written earlier. Since Luke drew from Mark, Mark must have been written earlier still.

A case can be made, then, that the Synoptic Gospels were written within about 30 years of Jesus' death. This puts them close enough to the events that the facts they report could be corrected if wrong.[{10}](#)

## The Gospel Writers and Historical Truth

Assuming that we have presented a plausible argument for early dates for the Synoptics, this still leaves unanswered the question whether the writers *intended* to write factual history.

On the program, Prof. Dominic Crossan suggested that we are mistaken in taking the Gospels factually because the writers didn't intend us to do so. He says that the issue "is whether the people who told us the stories in the ancient world took them all literally, and now we're so smart that we know to take them symbolically, or they all intended them symbolically and we're so dumb that we've been taking them literally." Crossan takes the second option. He says, "I think we have been misinterpreting these stories because the people who write [sic] them don't seem the least bit worried about their diversity. We see the problem and then we want to insist that they're literal. I think that we have misread the Scriptures, not that they have miswritten them" (FJTC, Pt. 2).

Thus, it is thought that Matthew inflated the importance of the Pharisees in his Gospel because they were so influential later in the first century when the book was written. Mark, they say, presented Jesus as the persecuted one because Mark's community was suffering. And Luke embellished his narrative



with “shipwrecks and exotic animals and exotic vegetation” (FJTC, Pt. 2) to make it more in keeping with the novelistic literature of his time.

While it’s surely true that each writer chose the events and sayings of Jesus that he thought were significant and which would be meaningful to his audience, this doesn’t mean the stories were made up.

Craig Blomberg offers some help here. First, he points to the opening statement in Luke’s Gospel where Luke declared his intent to “write an orderly account” of the things he had “carefully investigated . . . from the beginning” (Lu. 1:1-4).[\[11\]](#) Luke wanted to convey the truth.

But were Luke’s sources *themselves* concerned with accurately passing on what Jesus said and did? Some believe that, since the church thought Jesus was returning soon, they wouldn’t worry about accurate reporting. But first, it isn’t certain that Jesus’ followers thought he would return right away. And second, the Israelites before them had kept accurate records of the things prophets said, even though they were expecting at any time the coming Day of the Lord (Joel 2:1; Obad. 15; Hab. 2:3). The words of Jesus, who was considered greater than a prophet, would have held even greater value to early believers. They had a good reason for accurately remembering and reporting.

Prof. Blomberg also says that if the Gospel writers devised the words and works of Jesus to suit the needs of the early church, one might expect that they would have addressed the controversies that arose after Jesus ascended to heaven. The writers could have put in Jesus’ mouth answers to these issues. But this didn’t happen. Jesus didn’t answer the controversy over circumcision; he didn’t say whether Christians could divorce non-Christian spouses; he didn’t settle the matter of speaking in tongues. It seems that “the first Christians were interested in preserving the distinction

between what happened during Jesus' life and what was debated later in the churches."

Thus, contrary to what Prof. Crossan said, we are not "dumb" to believe the Gospel writers intended to give us factual history.

## Differences Between the Gospels

A crucial piece of evidence for the view taken by the scholars of "From Jesus to Christ" is that of the differences between what the Gospel writers report. The sequence of some events, and some of the things Jesus said, are recorded differently. This is said to indicate that the Gospels aren't accurate historical documents.

Dominic Crossan gives as an example the accounts in Mark and John of the night before Jesus' death. Mark has Jesus in agony over his coming death, while John shows a more victorious Jesus standing up against the troops which came to arrest him. Crossan concludes, "You have a Jesus out of control, almost, in Mark; a Jesus totally in control in John. . . . Neither of them are historical," he says. "I don't think either of them know [sic] exactly what happened" (FJTC, Pt. 2). Prof. Crossan didn't mention the possibility that, while both writers told the truth, they only told part of the truth. The events recorded in the four Gospels can be put together to form a coherent account of what happened in the Garden of Gethsemane. [\[12\]](#)

Blomberg argues that the Gospel writers were capable of remembering what Jesus said and did, but they weren't concerned to record it all word for word.

On the one hand, the written word was at a premium in the ancient world, so oral transmission was the primary means of passing on knowledge. Thus, people learned to memorize a great deal of information. To illustrate, Blomberg notes that rote

memorization was the method of education for Jewish boys, and rabbis were encouraged to memorize the entire Old Testament.{13}

On the other hand, as another conservative New Testament scholar, Darrell Bock, points out, the tradition for reporting history in the Greco-Roman world involved a “concern for accuracy in reporting the gist of what had been said, even if the exact words were not remembered or recorded.” Ancient historians didn’t take it upon themselves to simply make up speeches and put them in others’ mouths.{14} They saw it as their duty to record what really happened or was said. As Craig Blomberg says, certain details could be omitted and the sequence of events could be changed “*so long as the major events of the narratives and their significance were not altered*” (italics his).{15}

This shouldn’t be alarming for those of us who accept the Gospels as God’s inspired Word. Even in our *own* experience we don’t, for example, question the word of an attentive and trustworthy person who summarizes a speech he heard. Likewise, if I tell you that our *Mind Games* director asked me today to participate in an upcoming conference, I’m telling you the truth of what he said, even if I’m not quoting him verbatim. We can’t avoid the fact that Jesus’ words and deeds are reported differently in the Gospels. Understanding the method of ancient historians, however, assures us that we have been given the truth about Jesus. Accepting Paul’s testimony that “all Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Tim. 3:16) assures us that the Gospel writers gave us the truth exactly as God wanted it presented.

We have attempted in this essay to show that the Gospel writers *could* have written historical truth because they wrote soon enough after the events to insure against legend; that they *intended* to report what really happened; and that the *differences between the Gospels* do not make for a valid case against their historical truthfulness. There is no reason,

then, short of theological bias, to reject what is in the Gospels, and instead search for the real historical Jesus elsewhere.

While those involved in the program "From Jesus to Christ" have benefited the church by their archeological finds and new information about the world in which Jesus lived, they have erred in rejecting the clear message of Jesus in the Gospels. The Christ of faith *is* the Jesus of history.

## Notes

1. "From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians," April 7 (Part 1) and April 8 (Part 2), 1998, PBS (hereafter cited in text as FJTC). Transcript obtained from PBS web site: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/>.
2. John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), 95.
3. Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 9.
4. C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 13.
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8. Craig L. Blomberg, "Where Do We Start Studying Jesus?" in Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire*, 28.
9. Ibid., 28-29.

10. Ibid., 29.

11. Ibid., 30. Material for the remainder of this section was drawn from Blomberg, 30-32.

12. See for example A. T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels for Students of the Life of Christ* (New York: Harper and Row, 1950), 201-208.

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15. Blomberg, "Where Do We Start?" 32.

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