A Brief Reply to Robert Miller and Amy-Jill Levine

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I thank both Professors Miller and Levine for their consideration of my work.

Reply to Robert Miller

Robert Miller’s position is that this discussion is futile. It is because the gulf between how his camp and mine read the Gospels is too wide. Now, in point of fact, he is right about this, but the discussion is not only between the camps but also involves those who listen to both of them. I may never persuade Miller of my reading of Peter’s confession or several other events, but I may persuade others that I have made a good or better case than he has about an event (or vice versa). In that case, the discussion is far from futile in my view. It lets people look at both sides, so widely different in approach, and make a judgment.

Miller also argues that evangelicals only use the method for positive results. This actually misreads what takes place and largely ignores the point I made about an evangelical’s use of texts and materials. If something is not brought into the discussion because it cannot meet the criteria, then it becomes useless and is set aside. Whether one says it is ahistorical or says that it cannot be corroborated may depend on the detail in question and which evangelical is discussing the matter, but the fact that an event or detail is not used means it has been excluded. In fact, the criteria work in a way that can exclude consideration of evidence that might actually be valid. (By the way, I agree with Miller
that much about the criteria and other elements in the discussion in his list of six issues are fraught with difficulty in making the judgments we do. This only means that when we do get across the corroboration-authenticity line or get many to think we are there, something significant has been achieved.)

Next, to see what the actual conversation looks like with reference to a specific event, let’s look at his critique of my example. He says I argue the text has the ‘feel’ of a true event. Actually, I argue more than this. I say Mark does not give this locale in a style that reflects how he usually identifies locations. The fact that this does not look like the way he generally presents events points to the account being pre-Marcan. But this is only one point about the event I am making.

Miller rejects my appeal to the criterion of embarrassment in view of the diversity of early Christianity. He argues that when Jesus calls Peter ‘Satan’ one might be telling a story that vilifies a church leader from a rival group. But the problem here is that this story has ended up in our canon, accepted by people who revered Peter. So would this story be made up by an anti-Peter group and then embraced by a pro-Peter group? That seems very unlikely. So that speaks to the authenticity of the scene.

Miller says that speaking of Jesus as Messiah may be contested because it fails the criterion of dissimilarity: Christianity spoke of Jesus this way, so Jesus did not speak of himself this way. Is this the only criterion that counts? And would later attribution of such a title to Jesus really fit what the church did in the context of persecution they lived in? Again, I think that Miller has missed the point of my argument. The account does not point to a resounding outright acceptance of the title Messiah but a nuanced one, with inherent ambiguity. One might expect a church creation to be more direct. We also have the problem, not addressed by Miller, that if Jesus denied the title to himself, why did early Christians confess it at such great risk to themselves? What motivated them to do this, especially when belief that Jesus had been raised would not require or lead to a confession that he was the Messiah? Why go there at all, especially when other more lofty titles were also used by the church for Jesus? None of this explains how the title Christ came to be so quickly attached to the name Jesus.