A Brief Reply to Robert Miller and Amy-Jill Levine

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I am grateful to Robert Miller and Amy-Jill Levine for their honest responses to my essay.

Reply to Robert Miller

I agree with Professor Miller that much historical-Jesus work involves inferences based on extrapolation, yielding a wide variation of opinions; to some extent this problem is an inevitable one when working with limited sources at the remove of two millennia. Incidentally, I also am happy to concur with Miller in affirming Q. I further agree that we would disagree on what is devastating to the other’s position, but the interested reader can well enough infer from my own essay my views on that subject.

Miller and I would disagree on whether dialogue is helpful among scholars of different ‘camps’. I believe that such dialogue helps keep us honest about how far the evidence goes, even when we disagree. It also helps us to avoid caricaturing those who disagree with us. Here I agree more with Professor Levine’s conclusion about the helpfulness of dialogue.

Miller and I may also disagree regarding the range of current scholarship. Miller divides scholarship into two camps: ‘traditional’ versus ‘evangelical’. This way of framing the discussion could be construed as rhetorically designed to exclude some voices from being regarded as genuinely critical scholarship (i.e., intellectually honest).
I see the divide differently. For example, many scholars place the burden of proof only on authenticity, but others place that burden on whoever offers an argument either way. I would not put the approaches of John Dominic Crossan or (differently) Burton Mack in the same category as the approaches of E. P. Sanders, John Meier or Gerd Theissen (the last of whom endorsed my book as developing a current trend in Jesus scholarship). Robert Webb and I were both participants in the second Princeton-Prague Symposium on the Historical Jesus, and I did not get the impression there that our approaches were regarded as idiosyncratic. A binary division of scholarship may be rhetorically effective, but there are hardly only two ‘camps’.

The most extensive collection of Jesus scholarship to date, Brill’s four-volume *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (2010), includes a range of voices, from Professor Crossan to James Dunn and Rainer Riesner. Why should some voices on the latter end of the spectrum be excluded if they offer historical arguments for their positions? If scholars, be they Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox Jewish, agnostic, etc., marshal public evidence, should that evidence be excluded by highlighting their personal faith convictions (or lack thereof)? That is, if no one were aware of my personal faith based on my teaching in a seminary or writing elsewhere, would they respond to my essay in the same way?¹

What does Miller mean that ‘evangelicals’ see the Gospels as fully reliable historically? I know very few scholars of any persuasion who deny the Gospel writers’ editorial freedom; the disagreements focus on how much and in what passages. Certainly I have not offered here (or anywhere) an argument for the reliability of every detail in the Gospels; I have argued against approaches that I believe dismiss too much of the evidence *a priori*. One scholar I knew, who argued that any professor who publicly admits faith in God should be fired, classified both Rudolf Bultmann and myself as fundamentalists, because we both had faith convictions. The label ‘evangelical’ (which historically was

¹ By the way, among the contributors to what Levine characterizes as the ‘evangelical’ *Dictionary of New Testament Background* are James Charlesworth, Rachel Hachlili, Howard Clark Kee, Hyam Maccoby, Jacob Neusner, Gregory Sterling, and James VanderKam. My citations of Martin Goodman, Alan Culpepper, Loveday Alexander and others seem to have merited less attention.