Methodological Naturalism: Engaging the Responses of Robert J. Miller and Amy-Jill Levine

Robert L. Webb
McMaster University
Hamilton, ON, Canada
webb.bob@sympatico.ca

I would, first of all, like to thank Amy-Jill Levine and Robert Miller for the engaging and stimulating discussion on these matters that are of significance to our discipline of historical-Jesus studies. It has been a privilege to participate in this endeavor with them.

I address each of their concerns in a moment, but I begin with a general observation with respect to both their responses. Both Levine and Miller portray the issues and discussion as an ‘us-and-them’ dichotomy: Levine discusses ‘evangelicals’ and ‘liberals’, while Miller presents an ‘evangelical camp’ and a ‘traditional camp’. I would suggest that such a dichotomous portrayal is too simplistic to capture the broad and diverse reality that exists within our discipline. There is, rather, a spectrum of alternatives along a continuum. Many scholars may have difficulty pigeon-holing themselves with respect to this dichotomy (though it is, of course, much easier to pigeon-hole others). I, for one, would use neither the term ‘evangelical’ nor the term ‘liberal’ to identify myself and my approach to our discipline. While certainly more difficult to do, if we are to move forward in our discussions, we need to find ways to nuance our descriptions and portrayals beyond this ‘us-and-them’ dichotomy.

I turn to Miller’s response first, for discussing it aids in engaging with Levine’s response. Miller is very gracious in agreeing with much of my essay, but raises a specific question: ‘whether methodological naturalism, as Webb understands it, can lead to negative historical conclusions’? In other words, can one conclude ‘that an event reported
in the gospels did not occur as described or did not occur at all? My simple answer to this is, ‘Yes’. I would add the caveat of ‘within the grounds of historical probability’, for I have argued that all historical judgments are a matter of greater or lesser probabilities, whether concluding for historicity or against historicity. I would refer Miller and readers to my discussion in section two of the third element in the interpretive process: ‘the historian interprets and evaluates the surviving traces in terms of their evidentiary contribution’. The description there applies equally to the gospels as to any other ancient source. I would also draw attention to the conclusion to section two and the foundational principle of critical history as distinguished from acceptance of testimony.

Permit me to provide a couple of general examples. In my view as a critical historian, Jesus’ discourses as portrayed in the Fourth Gospel were not delivered by the historical Jesus, though some of them may have developed within the Johannine community from a kernel that likely goes back to the historical Jesus (sometimes so identified by the double Amen formulation; e.g., Jn 3.3, 5; cf. Mt. 18.3 = Lk. 18.17). Similarly, the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5–7) developed within the Matthean community, though many individual pericopae within it may be traced back to Jesus with a high degree of probability.

But to be more specific, let me give examples where I have argued such points in print. With respect to John the Baptist describing Jesus as ‘the light’ (Jn 1.7-8) or ‘the lamb of God’ (1.29, 36), I state that ‘this portrayal is, in my judgment, quite unlikely to be historical’.  

Similarly, with respect to Jesus’ examination before Pilate I raise four issues that make it ‘more difficult to reconstruct the details of what happened historically at Pilate’s examination’. With respect to these details that are found in the Gospel accounts, I state, ‘Yes, possible scenarios can be proposed, and the verisimilitude of certain details can be argued. But possibility and verisimilitude must be recognized for what

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