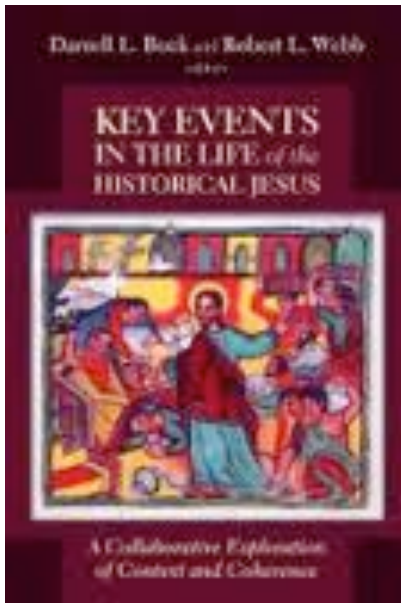


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Bock, Darrell L., and Robert L. Webb, eds.

Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus: A Collaborative Exploration of Context and Coherence

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In the field of biblical studies, which includes scholars of widely differing theological views, there is often a tacit agreement to disagree. This is nowhere more important than in investigation and interpretation of the historical Jesus, so “loaded” with implications for faith. Fortunately, the agreement to disagree is rooted not simply in professional toleration and civility but in an appreciation that those with different theological or secular perspectives can learn from each other. This volume by eleven evangelical or “biblically orthodox” Christian scholars, who met together in a “seminar” for thoroughgoing discussion of their respective essays over a period of ten years, presents much that those of different viewpoints can learn from.

This weighty volume includes twelve essays on key events and activities of Jesus, plus an introduction, a summary, and a substantial essay on historical method. Many of the “key events” or activities chosen are generally viewed as historical and integral to Jesus’ mission: Jesus’ baptism by John (Robert Webb), exorcisms (Craig Evans), the temple “incident” (Klyne Snodgrass), the Last Supper (I. Howard Marshall), and Jesus’ crucifixion by the Romans (Robert Webb). The historicity of other events chosen for treatment is doubted to some degree by more skeptical scholars: Jesus and the Twelve (Scot McKnight), Jesus’ table fellowship with sinners (Craig Blomberg), Peter’s declaration in

Caesarea Philippi (Michael Wilkins), Jesus' royal entry (Brent Kinman), and the Jewish trial of Jesus (Darrell Bock). A couple of the events have been neglected or regarded as not susceptible of historical investigation: the Sabbath controversies (Donald Hagner) and Jesus' empty tomb/ appearances (Grant Osborne).

By focusing on events and activities, this collection of essays presents a more relational, historically interactive Jesus than do books that focus mainly on text-fragments of his teaching. The portrayal of a Jesus who communicates with his followers and is engaged in conflict with opponents persists even when the authors assert his transcendent authority (as the Messiah), especially at the end of their respective essays. Among other attractive features, the essays, some of great length, are also reviews of previous scholarship, although not always complete.

Each essay aims to do three things: (1) establish the case for the probable historicity of the event on standard criteria for "authenticity"; (2) explore the sociocultural context; and (3) state the significance for understanding Jesus.

The contributors are concerned to find Gospel accounts historically credible. The analyses are generally critical, using the standard criteria of "authenticity," although sometimes, after critical assessment of the key passages, the ensuing discussion takes Gospel texts at face value as virtual transcripts of what happened. Also, at points some authors portray Jesus as the sole actor and "the onlookers" as reacting, in contrast to the interaction portrayed in the Gospel accounts (e.g., "the royal entry").

Context, for most of these essays, means a cultural context of concepts and ideas. In pointed contrast with the Jesus Seminar, which tended to focus more on Hellenistic context, these essays focus on Second Temple Jewish culture. While including late Judean texts, this often means mainly Scripture, which is sometimes treated almost as a closed system of thought. But this more general cultural context as the key to interpretation is broader than the Jewish eschatological scenario within which the neo-Schweitzerians (Allison, Ehrman) locate the apocalyptic Jesus or the Cynic philosophers that provides the key to the liberals' sapiential Jesus (Crossan). Only a few of these essays pay much attention to the concrete historical (political-economic) context, such as the effects of Roman rule on the Judean temple-state. Only a couple of the contributors give some attention to the fundamental division between village life in Judea and Galilee and the Herodian, high-priestly, and Roman rulers based in Jerusalem and the newly built cities of Galilee. As with much study of "the historical Jesus," the concrete aspects of historical religious-political-economic life remain obscured by continuing use of the broad essentialist constructs of "Judaism" and "(early) Christianity." Most of the essays assume

that the framework of Jesus' actions was Jewish "restoration eschatology," although not in the more grandiose biblical-theological synthesis of some recent interpreters of Jesus.

While it is impossible to comment on all the essays, let me deal briefly with some salient points in a few. In contrast to the frequent practice of treating fragments of "data" piecemeal, Scot McKnight points out that Jesus' choosing "the Twelve" is present in various strata and forms of Jesus traditions (Mark, Q, Paul; narrative, sayings, lists, a creed). Of special importance as we begin to recognize the importance of tradition in the formation of a movement, he lays out the much greater depth of the twelve tribes and twelve pillars, stones, bulls, lambs, goats, staffs, and pieces of a robe in Israelite tradition than previously discussed. "Twelve" symbolizes the people Israel (not "nation," which is a modern concept) as a whole, but not necessarily the particular twelve tribes (e.g., Elijah's altar of twelve stones). Twelve representative leaders of Israel-in-restoration then appear prominently in Qumran texts and other late Second Temple texts. In the cultural context of this deep Israelite tradition, McKnight suggests, on the basis of accounts of Jesus and the Twelve, that Jesus chose the Twelve as representative of the people Israel, but not to represent each tribe. Jesus commissioned them to extend his own mission of healing/exorcism and proclaiming the kingdom and limited their mission to Israel. They thus symbolize that his mission was the restoration or renewal of Israel. Looking for links and broader patterns (unfortunately unusual for Jesus-interpreters), he suggests that the renewal was also a covenant renewal, which was also linked with John's baptism (as in Webb's essay). He even suggests that constitution of the Twelve representative leaders of Israel undergoing restoration was part of a political mission to replace the Jerusalem rulers.

Robert Webb's contribution to the volume is by far the most extensive (250 pages out of 850), the most distinctive (essays on Jesus' baptism by John, on Jesus' crucifixion by Pilate, and a fine essay on "doing" history), and the most important. In his three lengthy essays, Webb is unusual, not only among contributors to this volume, but among Jesus scholars in general, in several respects. More than the other contributors he attends to sources beyond the canonical Gospels. Further, the most important contribution to historical Jesus studies in the volume may be Webb's twenty-seven-page discussion of historiography and historical method in chapter 2, rarely discussed by historical Jesus scholars. Particularly suggestive is his summary on history/historiography as representation. But taking this seriously would, of course, require the authors of these essays, like other historical Jesus scholars, to recognize that the Gospel sources are also representations, only "evangelical" representations, without the critical historical awareness of current critical historiography. Of special importance for historical Jesus scholars is critical self-awareness (self-criticism). One would think that this would mean that Jesus scholars would recognize how the questions they bring to the "data" and the

context in which they understand the “data” are derived from the New Testament branch of theology, not from critical (postmodern) historiography, hence are limiting and distorting, reducing and obscuring particular historical relations in synthetic essentialist constructs such as “Judaism” and “Christianity” or “eschatological” and “the Messiah.” Further, Webb’s courageous discussion of “historical explanation” and the “supernatural” raises the question of whether there should be a special historiography for Jesus with different explanation as distinctive among historical figures. “Natural” and “supernatural” are modern concepts, not features of ancient worldviews. Should critical historiography of Jesus or of any ancient figure couch its representation in distinctively modern concepts? Or should historians attempt to discern and understand and represent in terms of the appropriate ancient worldview of historical figures and their culture?

Unusual among Jesus scholars, Webb himself moves beyond the standard issues rooted in traditional Christian faith/doctrine and the theologically based agenda of New Testament studies. To deal with Jesus’ crucifixion as a rebel leader by order of a Roman governor, Webb seriously investigates the Roman rule of Judea and Galilee, perhaps the major factor that determined life and events there. He discerns the fundamental division in Roman Palestine between the Herodian and high-priestly rulers, who were appointed by the Romans, and the ordinary people. He recognizes that there was (thus) political conflict between John the Baptist and Antipas in Galilee-Perea and between Jesus and the high priests and Pilate in Jerusalem. In contrast with most interpreters, Webb sees that Jesus was not merely an individual teacher and healer but was generating a popular movement. Also unusual for Jesus scholars, who discuss Jesus in terms of christological titles and/or scholarly constructs, Webb recognizes that historical figures act in particular roles that are given in their particular cultures. Appropriately, Webb attends to how John the Baptist and Jesus were acting in a role attested by evidence for first-century Judean and Galilean society (thus a “leadership” popular prophet or a popular king/messiah, but not “the eschatological prophet” or a Jewish “Cynic sage,” which are both modern scholarly constructs).

Attending to the social roles in which our sources portray Jesus as acting, as only appropriate to an investigation into a historical figure, however, leads to some tension in the volume’s interpretation of Jesus. As many would probably agree, both the accounts of the theophany (perhaps) at his baptism and the accounts of his association with John, indicate that Jesus assumed the role of a prophet (like Moses and/or Elijah). But to what extent do the Gospel sources suggest that Jesus himself claimed to be (acted as) “the king of the Jews,” on which charge Pilate ordered him crucified? There is considerable tension in the Gospels and Jesus traditions themselves about whether Jesus was acting as a (popular leadership) prophet like Moses and Elijah and/or as a (popular) king/messiah.

In addressing the significance of their essays for understanding Jesus several of the contributors make elaborate claims, particularly regarding the transcendent authority of Jesus, clearly a major issue for evangelical scholars. Yet the tension within the Jesus tradition and other New Testament texts about how, when, and in what role Jesus had or gained what authority goes largely unaddressed in these essays. Authority is not only an issue for faith and theology. It is also a historical issue. Rulers cannot control populations for long by propaganda and the threat of violence alone. They must have some sort of legitimacy, that is, legitimate power. By the time of Jesus, the high-priestly aristocracy had lost much authority. In “Roman” Palestine the Romans and their Herodian clients had virtually none. Authority is/was relational. Jesus did not already have authority to heal, but in the historical circumstances he generated authority by healing (in the recognized role of a new Elijah) and thus gained authority/power to heal. In Q Jesus has authority as a (martyred) prophet. Mark presents Jesus acting mainly as a prophet (like Moses and Elijah) and is uneasy about how or whether he was a messiah. The speeches in the early chapters of Acts present Jesus as having become the Messiah at his exaltation only after his crucifixion. Paul proclaims Jesus Christ as transcendent Lord. It seems clear that there were some disagreements among Jesus’ followers about how and when he exercised authority.

In sum, this volume features an important shift in focus from Jesus’ teaching to events and activities in which Jesus was involved, the stuff of which history is made. What remains is to deal with events and activities as relational and in historical political as well as cultural context, as represented in some (but not most) of these essays and in the Gospel sources for the historical Jesus.