

**Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009, xxxviii + 831 pages, hardback.**

Like many of Craig Keener's books, this one is thick and generously notated. It is academic though accessible. Keener writes very clearly and with commendable charity to those with whom he disagrees. He always keeps the reader's interest. In fact, even his many endnotes, all 210 pages of them (!), are often interesting.

I had wanted to give this work a longer treatment, but time will not allow it. But I hope these remarks will service readers with a good representation of what they will find in the work.

The book is divided as follows:

## **Introduction**

### **I. Disparate Views about Jesus**

### **II. The Character of the Gospels**

### **III. What We Learn about Jesus from the Best Sources**

Nine Appendices

Notes

Bibliography and Indices

#### **1. Overall Impressions**

This is undoubtedly one of the best, if not the best book on the subject of the Historical Jesus that I have read. Keener's knowledge of the ancient Mediterranean world enhances (rather than obscures) his interaction with the Gospels themselves. He presents a full, compelling portrait of Jesus as a real Jewish eschatological figure, while civilly dialoging with a spectrum of Jesus scholarship.

#### **2. Survey of Contents**

In the first section, "Disparate View about Jesus," the writer rehearses many of the varied "Jesus" Books that have appeared over the years. He believes J. D. Crossan's "Jesus as Cynic Peasant" never existed (22). And he has even less time for the "Cynic Jesus" of Burton Mack's imagination. Declaring that it was the "doggish" lifestyle of the Cynic which as much as anything else identified one (24), the author notes that if Jesus was a Jewish cynic Sage, "he is the only one we know about." (19).

In chapter 3 on "Jesus and Judaism" he interacts with three chosen theses of M. Borg, G. Vermes, and E. P. Sanders (his former mentor), before moving on in the next chapter to discuss

“Other Gospels.” Keener shows why these alternative “gospels” are late inventions which never competed at the same level as the four canonical Gospels (e.g. 50).

Keener starts off Section II, “The Character of the Gospels,” by agreeing with the likes of R. Burridge and L. Hurtado that the Gospels ought to be viewed as ancient biographies, though with certain unique features (Ch. 5), and he provides an enlightening discussion of ancient and modern biography.

The historical credibility of Luke-Acts is treated next, alongside ancient historiography (e.g. Polybius). Keener continues this theme in chapter 7, “Ancient Historiography as History,” and shows how the better historians were very concerned with accuracy; for example, by seeking out eyewitness accounts (Cf. the work of Richard Bauckham). Although the historian saw himself as more than a mere reporter of bare facts (Ch. 8), this did not mean they deliberately wrote down historical falsehoods. True, “Rhetoricians were permitted to “adjust stories” to provide cohesiveness to their narrative” (111 – especially where speeches were concerned, [110]), but Luke avoids the standard rhetorical embellishments of those who wrote for cultured audiences. His purposes were different. Yes, he had an agenda. But, as Keener says, admitting to an agenda does not automatically make someone an unreliable witness.

From there he turns to examine source materials. His [fairly cautious] acceptance of ‘Q’ forces him to see the Sermon on the Mount as not being one actual speech (134). However, an illuminating chapter (Ch. 10) on oral transmission and memory retention gets things back on track. There is much helpful background material here, including some informative data on the practice of ancient “Note-Taking” (148-149).

It might be of interest to note just here that by the close of Section II the careful reader will have poured over 88 pages of endnotes! These notes should not be skipped, as they often supplement the matter in the body of the book.

Then we move into Section III, “What We Learn about Jesus from the Best Sources.” The section kicks off with two short chapters: one on “John the Baptist,” and another on Jesus’ Galilean surroundings. Chapter 13 is about “Jesus the Teacher.” Keener notices that “few if any other teachers sometimes prefaced their words with ‘Amen [Truly], I tell you.’” (187). In this chapter the author concentrates on the Parables.

Chapter 14 focuses on Jesus teaching on the kingdom; a theme to which “virtually every stratum of Gospel tradition testifies.” (196). Keener sees the kingdom as entailing an anticipated eschatological actuality. The Jews did not view the kingdom simply in terms of “God’s mystical presence...for the present time; they were praying for God’s future reign to come.” (198. see also 208f., 246, 253-254). Jesus’ “Son of Man” sayings ought to be seen in this light (200-201).

Every chapter, especially in this middle section, is worthy of patient study. I particularly liked how the author connected earlier material from the first part of his book in his chapter on “Jesus the Prophet.” Throughout Keener draws our attention to the persistent eschatological tenor of the Lord’s teaching. Because of his adoption of ‘Q’ he carefully weaves what he believes to be its early testimony into his presentation (e.g. Ch. 19). He is constantly demonstrating the

plausibility of the Gospels' Jesus against His first century Jewish background. His long chapter entitled "Confronting and Provoking the Elite" for example, skillfully brings together the biblical witness with Second Temple scholarship to move the story along. Throughout the book, but notably so in the last quarter, the author refers to the 'Criterion of Embarrassment' to ground the plausibility of the inspired accounts (e.g., 308-309, 318, 324, 331).

In handling the data of the trial and execution of Jesus the writer quickly dispatches the silly, naive resuscitation myths devised by some popular infidels. Of the certainty of death by crucifixion he states that, "we know of no first century exemptions to that fate." (323). Similarly, he regards B. Mack's thesis about sources for "resurrection myths" as "historically incredible" (332).

In rejecting the modern site of the "Garden Tomb" the author sides with the increasing scholarly consensus. So too with the site of Golgotha; preferring somewhere at or near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (327-328).

In his assessment of "The Resurrection" (Ch. 22), Keener informs us that he will not endeavor to explore the "philosophic questions regarding supernatural causation." He sticks to his method, noticing among other things that the concept of bodily resurrection would have been virtually unintelligible to most Mediterranean people (344).

He does a good, quick job of refuting common so-called ancient parallels to the resurrection (e.g. Apollonius of Tyana; Mystery Cults; Osiris; Hercules, Adonis, etc.), explaining that "the Christian teaching is distinctly Jewish in its origin (338). when addressing the topic of "The Missing Body" he says that there is no known instance of the theft of corpses around Jerusalem (341).

### **3. A Few More Things**

*The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* is an outstanding contribution to the field. It is elegantly written, and despite its length there is no wastage of words. Throughout his argument Keener is open about his own biases, even as he exposes the biases in the less conservative academics with whom he chooses to interact (e.g. Chs. 2 & 3, 126, 306, Appendix 8).

I would have liked to see more interaction with the work of N. T. Wright and perhaps Darrell Bock, and I wish the author had chosen to critique a Crossan or a Borg to the same extent that he did with B. Mack, but you can't do everything.

There were some pointers to his forthcoming companion book on "Miracles" (just released). Also some tantalizing mentions of a massive three volume commentary on Acts which is in the wings! We shall have to be patient.

For the present Craig Keener has given us this terrific study to tide us over. I strongly recommend that you add it to your reading list.