

CONTENTS

ARTICLES

Characterization in the Hebrew Bible: Nabal as a Test Case	311
<i>John Dekker</i>	
“Forget Your People and Your Father’s House”: The Core Theological Message of Psalm 45 and Its Canonical Position in the Hebrew Psalter	325
<i>Simon Chi-Chung Cheung</i>	
Nahum and the Question of Rape	341
<i>Gregory D. Cook</i>	
Is the Sky Falling in the World of Historical Jesus Research?	353
<i>Michael Licona</i>	
Prophetic Script and Dramatic Enactment in Mark’s Prologue	369
<i>Max Botner</i>	

BOOK REVIEWS

Benjamin D. Sommer, <i>Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition</i>	381
<i>Reviewed by Kenneth Bergland</i>	
Samuel E. Balentine, ed., <i>The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Theology</i>	383
<i>Reviewed by Gerald A. Klingbeil</i>	
Bonnie Howe and Joel B. Green, eds., <i>Cognitive Linguistic Explorations in Biblical Studies</i>	385
<i>Reviewed by William A. Ross</i>	
John A. Cook, <i>Time and the Biblical Hebrew Verb: The Expression of Tense, Aspect, and Modality in Biblical Hebrew</i>	388
<i>Reviewed by Scott N. Callahan</i>	
James S. Anderson, <i>Monotheism and Yahweh’s Appropriation of Baal</i>	390
<i>Reviewed by Andrew M. King</i>	
Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, <i>Encountering the Old Testament: A Christian Survey</i>	392
<i>Reviewed by Larisa Levicheva</i>	
Carol M. Kaminski, <i>Was Noah Good? Finding Favour in the Flood Narrative</i>	394
<i>Reviewed by Benjamin J. Noonan</i>	
Yitzhak (Itzik) Peleg, <i>Going Up and Going Down: A Key to Interpreting Jacob’s Dream (Genesis 28:10–22)</i>	395
<i>Reviewed by Benjamin S. Davis</i>	
Jeremy Schipper, <i>Ruth</i>	397
<i>Reviewed by Charlie Trimm</i>	
Ariel Feldman, <i>The Dead Sea Scrolls Rewriting Samuel and Kings: Texts and Commentary</i>	399
<i>Reviewed by Ryan N. Roberts</i>	
James M. Todd III, <i>Remember, O Yahweh: The Poetry and Context of Psalms 135–137</i>	401
<i>Reviewed by Leslie C. Allen</i>	
Ernest C. Lucas, <i>Proverbs</i>	403
<i>Reviewed by Elaine A. Phillips</i>	
Andrew T. Abernethy, <i>Eating in Isaiah: Approaching the Role of Food and Drink in Isaiah’s Structure and Message</i>	405
<i>Reviewed by Gary V. Smith</i>	
Timothy P. Mackie, <i>Expanding Ezekiel: The Hermeneutics of Scribal Addition in the Ancient Text Witnesses of the Book of Ezekiel</i>	406
<i>Reviewed by Leslie C. Allen</i>	
Barbara Schlenke, <i>Gottes Reich und Königs Macht: Komposition und Redaktion in Daniel 4–6</i>	408
<i>Reviewed by Gerhard Pfandl</i>	
Joshua L. Harper, <i>Responding to a Puzzled Scribe: The Barberini Version of Habakkuk 3 Analysed in the Light of the Other Greek Versions</i>	410
<i>Reviewed by David J. Fuller</i>	
Beato Ego and Ulrike Mittmann, eds., <i>Evil and Death: Conceptions of the Human in Biblical, Early Jewish, Greco-Roman and Egyptian Literature</i>	411
<i>Reviewed by Matthew McAfee</i>	
Steven Joe Koskie Jr., <i>Reading the Way to Heaven: A Wesleyan Theological Hermeneutic of Scripture</i>	414
<i>Reviewed by Larisa Levicheva</i>	

Heidrun Gunkel, <i>Der Heilige Geist bei Lukas</i>	416
Reviewed by Peter H. Davids	
Holly Beers, <i>The Followers of Jesus as the 'Servant': Luke's Model from Isaiah for the Disciples in Luke-Acts</i>	417
Reviewed by Mark L. Strauss	
Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV, <i>The Gospel of John</i>	420
Reviewed by Peter H. Davids	
Michael F. Bird, <i>The Gospel of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus</i>	421
Reviewed by Matthew D. Jensen	
Brant Pitre, <i>Jesus and the Last Supper</i>	422
Reviewed by Peter H. Davids	
Jack J. Gibson, <i>Peter between Jerusalem and Antioch: Peter, James, and the Gentiles</i>	424
Reviewed by Victor Copan	
Thomas Schmeller, <i>Der zweite Brief an die Korinther (2Kor 7,7–13,13)</i>	425
Reviewed by Robert W. Yarbrough	
Peter Oakes, <i>Galatians</i>	427
Reviewed by Russell Morton	
Mark Elliott, Scott J. Hafemann, N. T. Wright, and John Frederick, eds., <i>Galatians and Christian Theology: Justification, the Gospel, and Ethics in Paul's Letter</i>	429
Reviewed by Joel Willitts	
Kyle B. Wells, <i>Grace and Agency in Paul and Second Temple Judaism: Interpreting the Transformation of the Heart</i>	430
Reviewed by Brian C. Dennert	
Clair S. Smith, <i>Pauline Communities as 'Scholastic Communities': A Study of the Vocabulary of 'Teaching' in 1 Corinthians, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus</i>	432
Reviewed by Victor Copan	
Scott J. Hafemann, <i>Paul's Message and Ministry in New Covenant Perspective: Selected Essays</i> ...	434
Reviewed by Thomas R. Schreiner	
Michael J. Gorman, <i>Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission</i>	435
Reviewed by Timothy J. Wiarada	
Volker Gäckle, <i>Allgemeines Priestertum: Zur Metaphorisierung des Priestertitels im Frühjudentum und Neuen Testament</i>	437
Reviewed by Eckhard J. Schnabel	
Hanna Stettler, <i>Heiligung bei Paulus: Ein Beitrag aus biblisch-theologischer Sicht</i>	440
Reviewed by Eckhard J. Schnabel	
Christoph Heilig, <i>Hidden Criticism? The Methodology and Plausibility of the Search for a Counter-Imperial Subtext in Paul</i>	442
Reviewed by James Miller	
Ulrich Huttner, <i>Early Christianity in the Lycus Valley</i>	443
Reviewed by David W. Pao	
C. Kavin Rowe, <i>One True Life: The Stoics and Early Christians as Rival Traditions</i>	445
Reviewed by Joshua W. Jipp	
Christoph Markschieß, <i>Christian Theology and Its Institutions in the Early Roman Empire: Prolegomena to a History of Early Christian Theology</i>	448
Reviewed by Joshua W. Jipp	
David W. Congdon, <i>The Mission of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann's Dialectical Theology</i> ...	450
Reviewed by Joshua W. Jipp	
Sean A. Adams and Seth M. Ehorn, eds., <i>Composite Citations in Antiquity, vol. 1: Jewish, Graeco-Roman, and Early Christian Uses</i>	452
Reviewed by Aaron White	
John J. Collins, <i>Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy</i>	454
Reviewed by Kent L. Yinger	
Ann E. Killebrew and Gabriele Faßbeck, eds., <i>Viewing Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology: VeHinnei Rachel. Essays in Honor of Rachel Hachlili</i>	456
Reviewed by Craig A. Evans	
Daniel M. Master, ed., <i>The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Archaeology</i>	458
Reviewed by Eckhard J. Schnabel	
Dale C. Allison et al., eds., <i>Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception. Vol. 10: Genocide–Hakköz</i>	460
Reviewed by Robert W. Yarbrough	
BOOKS RECEIVED	463

Is the Sky Falling in the World of Historical Jesus Research?

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For years, historians of Jesus have employed the criteria for authenticity in their work and a few scholars have occasionally called the value of the criteria into question. Fairly recently, however, a team of scholars, many of whom are highly esteemed, contributed critiques in a volume in which they expressed doubts pertaining to the value of the criteria. Several of the contributors even called for their abandonment. But the extent of their pessimism is ill-founded and based on a postmodernist approach to history that, while gaining momentum within biblical scholarship, has already been debated for decades among historians practicing outside the world of religious studies and has largely been found wanting.

Key Words: criteria, historical method, postmodernism, realism, historical Jesus

The philosophy of history is a fascinating field that addresses questions such as what historians actually do, how “history” should be properly defined, whether historical knowledge is possible and, if so, to what extent and how it is obtained.¹ Course offerings on the philosophy of history and historical method are virtually nonexistent in departments of religious studies. This deficit is unfortunate, since authors will sometimes argue for approaches they appear to regard as groundbreaking, while being unaware that those very approaches have been thoroughly discussed, refuted and abandoned by many philosophers of history who have focused their research in these matters. Scot McKnight writes,

Historiography is a field vast and wide and deep, where controversies abound and with which many Jesus “historians” are completely unfamiliar. . . . Most of us were not trained in history but in Bible, exegesis, and plenty of theology. We came into the historical Jesus debates with plenty of passion and gobs of hope and, because such folks have doctorates and are intelligent, we are historians because we think we are.²

1. I have provided somewhat of a primer on these matters in chs. 1–2 of my *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010).

2. Scott McKnight, “Why the Authentic Jesus Is of No Use for the Church” in *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity*, ed. Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012) 177. Hereafter, this work is abbreviated JCDA.



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A CHALLENGE TO HISTORICAL JESUS RESEARCH

Because the philosophy of history is often neglected in biblical studies, the conversations in a fairly recently published book titled *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity* (*JCDA*) edited by Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne are valuable and we are in debt to its contributors for providing a thoughtful dialogue and challenge to the important matter of the criteria of authenticity in historical Jesus research. The contributors do not form a single voice when it comes to answering the question of whether the criteria can still play a helpful role in historical Jesus research. Some of them, such as Allison, Hooker, Keith, and Rodriguez regard the criteria as useless and want to jettison them altogether. Others, such as Goodacre, Le Donne, and Winter, see value in the criteria once they are refined and the expectations of what they can provide are lowered.³

I found some of the essays helpful in challenging an overly optimistic view of the criteria. And I admit that I found myself chided in a good way. I knew the criteria do not necessarily confirm the authenticity of a logion or an act of Jesus but suggest probability. However, it is easy to forget this while practicing history, as Goodacre reminds us.⁴

Several of the contributors remind us of the challenges involved in obtaining accurate historical knowledge and the tentativeness of our historical conclusions. Although this is basic discussion among philosophers of history, it is refreshing to see it articulated in *JCDA*. Allison reminds us that human memory is often flawed, especially when we are attempting to recall an event that had occurred many years earlier, in which case we tend to corrupt details unintentionally and fill in missing or forgotten data with our imagination.⁵ According to Schröter, historians can only assess the surviving data and reinterpret what occurred. Some reconstructions are more accurate than others, but we may never know which is most accurate. He goes on to say historical sources were penned by persons who, given their interests and objectives, were selective in what they reported. Moreover, their biases and imperfect memories color their accounts with interpretations that may be inaccurate to varying degrees. Accordingly, historical hypotheses are, technically speaking, descriptions of what may have occurred.⁶ Winter informs readers that we can no longer say, as was once thought, that if historical inquiry is properly conducted it will always result in accurate conclusions and that historians can be entirely objective while examining bare facts.⁷ Instead, historical conclusions conducted with

3. Morna D. Hooker, "Foreword: Forty Years On" in *JCDA*, xvii; Chris Keith, "The Indebtedness of the Criteria Approach to Form Criticism and Recent Attempts" in *JCDA*, 47; and Chris Keith, "The Fall of the Quest for an Authentic Jesus: Concluding Remarks" in *JCDA*, 200–201.

4. Mark Goodacre, "Criticizing the Criterion of Multiple Attestation: The Historical Jesus and the Question of Sources," in *JCDA*, 156.

5. Dale C. Allison, Jr., "It Don't Come Easy: A History of Disillusionment" in *JCDA*, 197.

6. Jens Schröter, "The Criteria of Authenticity in Jesus Research and Historiographical Method" in *JCDA*, 51.

7. Dagmar Winter, "Saving the Quest for Authenticity from the Criterion of Dissimilarity: History and Plausibility" in *JCDA*, 115.

great integrity will sometimes be mistaken and we can only speak in terms of degrees of probability.⁸

Hooker, Le Donne, Theissen, and Winter contend that the criterion of double dissimilarity should be abandoned.⁹ And they are probably correct. But, as Winter suggests, it should be replaced by the criterion of historical plausibility.¹⁰

Tradition that is early does not require that it originated with Jesus.¹¹ And Stuckenbruck has shown in his essay that the presence of Semitisms does not automatically mean the tradition is early. He quotes John Meier offering a similar acknowledgment: "At best, then, this criterion of Aramaic traces can provide additional support for an argument for historicity—but only when the material in question has already given indications of being authentic on the grounds of other criteria."¹² Stuckenbruck's essay does not lead us to conclude that the presence of Semitisms is a useless criterion. But it informs us it is not one of the stronger criteria and should be used alongside other criteria.

For me, Goodacre's essay was one of the most valuable contributions in *JCDA*, perhaps because it touched on areas of my present research. He does not question the value of the criterion of multiple independent sources.¹³ In fact, he recognizes a number of data pertaining to Jesus in both Paul's letters and Mark that may confidently be identified as independent of one another.¹⁴ But because he rejects the idea of a Q source, Goodacre questions whether the criterion of multiple independent sources can be applied to the Gospels. Of course, if we have remnants of a Q source, as most scholars hold, the use of multiple attestation is secure for the Gospels and it yields substantial fruit.

Although Goodacre has not dissuaded most scholars of Q's existence, he has brought attention to the fact that many instances of multiple attestation rely on a hypothetical source for which there is neither documentary evidence nor mention of it in the early Christian literature. His point rightly justifies some caution in our appeal to a Q source. However, only limited caution is justified, because, similar to Q material, there is

8. Winter, "Saving the Quest," 116, 125.

9. Hooker, foreword, xvii; Anthony Le Donne, "The Rise of the Quest for an Authentic Jesus: An Introduction to the Crumbling Foundations of Jesus Research" in *JCDA*, 108. See Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter, *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus: The Question of Criteria*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002). See especially the concluding remarks on pp. 167–71.

10. Winter, "Plausibility," 126.

11. Loren T. Stuckenbruck, "'Semitic Influence on Greek': An Authentic Criterion in Jesus Research?" in *JCDA*, 74 n. 2. See also Eric Eve, "Meier, Miracle and Multiple Attestation," *JSHJ* 3 (2005) 23–45.

12. Stuckenbruck, "Semitic Influence," 94. See also John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1: *The Roots of the Problem and the Person*, AYBRL (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 179–80.

13. Winters's contribution likewise acknowledges the legitimacy of multiple attestation (*Quest for the Plausible Jesus*, 127).

14. Goodacre, "Multiple Attestation," 168–69.

no documentary evidence for oral formulas, creeds, and hymns, which are also not mentioned in the early Christian literature outside the NT. However, on a regular basis we can identify oral content embedded in the NT. Because I am fairly convinced by the arguments for the existence of a Q source, I feel no sense of despair in using Q material for multiple attestation. Yet, I am rightly warned by Goodacre to be mindful of the tentative nature of a Q source. Q is not equivalent in value to Mark.¹⁵ Goodacre also helpfully challenges readers to consider instances where Luke's texts in the triple tradition differ significantly from Mark and Matthew. In such instances, are we reading independent tradition or has Luke redacted Mark to a greater extent than usual?¹⁶

The pericope of the woman anointing Jesus is a good example (Mark 14:3–9; Matt 26:6–13; John 12:1–8; Luke 7:36–50). The story told in Matthew, Mark, and John is certainly the same event. But what about the story in Luke? The differences are significant and so are the similarities. Has Luke severely redacted the pericope or is he reporting the same event while having unintentionally cross-pollinated some details from a different event, or does he preserve a tradition independent of Matthew and Mark, or is he reporting a different event? We can have an opinion on the matter. But the answer is ultimately indeterminate. This is one of the challenges behind identifying independent sources.

HESITATIONS OVER JCDA

Many of the contributors argue that the challenges of historical knowledge lead only to pessimism over ever arriving at a historical Jesus.¹⁷ For example, Schröter and Allison worry that the criteria cannot overcome subjectivity and have not led to a consensus among scholars about Jesus.¹⁸ Thus, Allison and Hooker suggest that historians of Jesus should jettison the criteria.¹⁹ In my opinion this pessimism goes beyond what is justified.

For more than a century, it has been recognized that the horizons of historians are often the primary guide behind their investigations. A century ago, Tyrrell wrote the now often quoted statement that Harnack's Jesus "is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom

15. *Ibid.*, 156.

16. *Ibid.*, 165.

17. By "historical Jesus," I mean the Jesus composed solely of those elements about him that can be established with reasonable historical certainty and apart from faith. Of course, the "real Jesus" was much more than the "historical Jesus," just as my mother was much more than the person known from the minimal data on her tombstone: her name, date of birth, and date of death.

18. Schröter, "Jesus Research and Historiographical Method," 58, 195, 197. McKnight also notes that the criteria have not led to a consensus ("Authentic Jesus," 181) but is not skeptical concerning using the Gospels to construct a historical Jesus, although he regards historical Jesus studies as being "theologically useless" to the church with the exception of its use in apologetics (*ibid.*, 175, 179 n. 16, 183).

19. Hooker, foreword, xvii, 192.

of a deep well.”²⁰ Nearly a century later, Ben Meyer opined that conflicting views in NT studies “are not disagreements grounded in the limitations of evidence, which yield forthwith as sufficient evidence comes to light; they are disagreements grounded in disparity of horizons, which rarely find a resolution without some change of horizon.”²¹ More recently, Allison wrote, “To observe the obvious, people’s arguments regarding the origins of Christianity are unavoidably driven by large assumptions about the nature of the world, assumptions that cannot often if ever be the upshot of historical investigation.”²²

Data are pliable, as Allison observes,²³ and we can torture them “until they confess what we want to hear,” to borrow a phrase he uses elsewhere.²⁴ Tyrrell, Meyer, and Allison are spot on. The irresponsible handling of the texts by historians is largely fueled by their horizons and the best methods are incapable of preventing such a practice as Allison himself writes, “Tools do not dictate how they are used; the hands that hold them do that.”²⁵ Thus, the major challenge in historical Jesus research thwarting progress toward anything resembling a consensus portrait is not the lack of data (although we wish we had more) or the inadequacy of our methods (although they are by no means foolproof) but the horizons of historians.

Schröter and Allison worry because the criteria have not led historians of Jesus to a consensus of conclusions. However, it can likewise be observed that various scientific methods have not led scientists to a consensus in many matters. Is global warming the result of human abuse of the environment or is it part of the earth’s natural cycle? Scientists are encamped on both sides of the issue, and scientists have been known to fudge the data.²⁶ When we employ the tools of our trade in a manner that is guided by our horizons, the conclusions are often going to be skewed from where the data actually point and instead arrive at a conclusion that supports the historian’s horizon. Thus, the significant cause of the problem, perhaps the bulk of it, must be attributed to the historian. For it is the responsibility of

20. George Tyrrell, *Christianity at the Cross-roads* (London: Longmans, Green, 1910) 44.

21. Ben F. Meyer, *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship: A Primer in Critical Realist Hermeneutics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994) 59.

22. Dale C. Allison, “Explaining the Resurrection: Conflicting Convictions,” *JSHJ* 3.2 (2005) 133.

23. Allison, “It Don’t Come Easy,” 191.

24. Idem, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and its Interpreters* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005) 343.

25. Idem, “It Don’t Come Easy,” 197.

26. Harvard professor Marc Hauser was found guilty of “scientific misconduct” for fudging data. See Scott O. Lilienfeld, “Fudge Factor: A Look at a Harvard Science Fraud Case,” *Scientific American*, November 1, 2010 Online: <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/fudge-factor/>. See also Daniele Fanelli, “How Many Scientists Fabricate and Falsify Research? A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Survey Data,” *PLOS ONE* 4.5, e5738. Scientists operate with their horizons as much as historians. This can lead to the misuse of method. See PLOS (Public Library of Science), “How Many Scientists Fabricate and Falsify Research,” *Phys.org*, May 29, 2009. Online: <http://phys.org/news162795064.html>. For more information, a full study is referenced at the end of the news release.

the historian to consider what the evidence would look like if she was not wearing metaphysical bias like a pair of sunglasses that shades and colors her view of the world. It is not the responsibility of the evidence to shine so brightly that it renders these glasses ineffectual. Accordingly, rather than point an accusing finger at the criteria and blame them for offering me the fruit of a “consensus historical Jesus” that I took and ate, should we not instead look deep inside ourselves?

Instead of jettisoning the criteria as Allison suggests, I will suggest a twofold route. First, the proposals of Allison and Hooker to analyze patterns across the sources in order to assess how Jesus was remembered by the early Christians²⁷ is quite reasonable but should be performed in conjunction with the criteria. Stated differently, the historian considers the entire portrait of the main character in a biography (holism)—how that character was remembered—while also considering the probable authenticity of the individual logia and acts of that character (atomism). For example, a growing number of scholars now grant that Jesus predicted his impending death. Certain criteria can be employed to suggest Jesus made such predictions.²⁸ When we then observe the larger picture presented by the Gospels that portray Jesus making similar predictions on multiple occasions, the likelihood increases that Jesus actually predicted his imminent death and resurrection in some way and in some form. One could choose to observe the pattern of the predictions (holism) then work with particular logia to assess the probability of their authenticity (atomism) in order to test the conclusion arrived at from the pattern or start with the particular logia then observe the pattern to test the conclusion arrived at from the logia. Whether one begins with holism or atomism, using them together has the potential to yield a greater degree of certainty pertaining to a greater number of specific logia and acts than using one approach to the exclusion of the other.

Holism is problematic when used alone. If we were to assess Philostratus’s *Vit. Apoll.* (*Life of Apollonius of Tyana*) using a holistic approach, we might perhaps conclude that Apollonius was a itinerate teacher who gained followers, performed some deeds that astonished others, was put on trial before Roman authorities, his life on earth ceased, and he was seen by at least one of his disciples sometime afterward. However, historians do not accept most of these items as historical, because the sources in which they appear are neither early, nor from eyewitnesses, and it is virtually impossible to establish the existence of multiple independent sources. Holism alone cannot establish the historicity of an account. However, when used in conjunction with atomism, a much more plausible historical case can be made.

Second, historians of Jesus can admit that their expectations of the criteria have been too sanguine and revise those expectations. We want the

27. Hooker, foreword, xv; Allison, “It Don’t Come Easy,” 192–95.

28. See Michael R. Licona, “Did Jesus Predict his Death and Vindication/Resurrection?” *JSHJ* 8.1 (2010) 47–66.

criteria to work like a calculator. We enter the data, press the *enter* or “=” button, and receive assured results from objective mathematical formulas unpolluted by bias. Calculators do not make errors. Notwithstanding, statisticians can use them in an improper manner to get the numbers to say what they desire. So, even if the application of the criteria were similar to using a calculator, flawless historical conclusions would not be assured.

But the criteria are not like a calculator. And there are better analogies for describing their role. Physicians employ certain criteria when diagnosing a patient's condition. Gifted and experienced physicians will accurately diagnose their patients more often than their colleagues. Still, even the best will occasionally misdiagnose a patient, sometimes leading to tragic consequences. However, we do not want physicians to jettison their criteria for making diagnoses. Juries consider the data and sometimes arrive at wrong judgments, with the guilty going unpunished while the innocent are unjustly punished. Sometimes is it because of the jury's incompetence. But there have been plenty of occasions when the jury applied the rules correctly and the available data led them to the wrong conclusion. Had more evidence been available, such as DNA, a number of individuals would not have been wrongly convicted. Our legal system is by no means perfect. But we do not view it with the pessimism modeled by many of *JCDA's* contributors. The historian's use of the criteria should be viewed in a manner similar to those employed by physicians and jurists. Some are more proficient in their profession than many of their colleagues. But no one is perfect. And human error and incomplete data will often lead to false conclusions.

There are other positions in *JCDA* I wish to address. We can observe a few of the essays suggesting the criteria are outdated because they were initially developed for use within a form-critical methodological framework.²⁹ While that may be, the conclusion that the criteria are not useful outside of form criticism is not justified. Ronald Reagan initiated the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), dubbed “Star Wars,” as an answer to a growing nuclear threat. While the program was later scratched, the technology developed during its existence was later employed quite effectively in the development and use of the Patriot Missile in both Gulf Wars and missile defense systems used today by Israel and the United States.

Winter says, “We cannot determine an individual item of Jesus's life without considering the totality of his life.”³⁰ Rodriguez similarly writes, “Historians of Jesus never should have turned to isolating historical data apart from the larger historical representations of which those data are a part; the data simply do not survive the process of wrenching them out of their representations and forcing them into modern historiographical

29. Keith, “Indebtedness,” 31. Later in his essay, Keith writes, “For both Hooker and me, the criteria approach's indebtedness to form criticism is a damning one that inhibits the criteria approach from delivering the ‘authentic’ tradition it claims to deliver” (p. 48).

30. Winter, *Quest for the Plausible Jesus*, 117.

narratives.”³¹ These statements are surely mistaken. Jesus’s death by crucifixion can be established with a very high degree of historical certainty apart from the totality of Jesus’s life. We will examine this matter more below.

I wish to offer some comments pertaining to the criterion of embarrassment. John Meier defines this criterion as the focusing on actions or sayings of Jesus that would have embarrassed or created difficulty for the early church. The point of the criterion is that the early church would hardly have gone out of its way to create material that only embarrassed its creator or weakened its position in arguments with opponents. Rather, embarrassing material coming from Jesus would naturally be either suppressed or softened in later stages of the Gospel tradition.³²

Meier provides Jesus’s baptism by John as an example. Because John’s baptism was one of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and Jesus is presented as John’s sinless superior, Jesus’s baptism by John is quite awkward and provides fodder for ancient critics (and modern ones!). Meier comments, “It is highly unlikely that the Church went out of its way to create the cause of its own embarrassment.”³³

Allison, Goodacre, and Rodriguez are not persuaded this criterion has value. Allison suggests that those items preserved must not have been too embarrassing, because they were not expurgated from the Jesus tradition.³⁴ Rodriguez asserts the presence of embarrassing elements in the Jesus tradition suggests, “the criterion of embarrassment has never identified data so firmly rooted in the history that the tradition was forced to deal with them.”³⁵ And Goodacre states,

It is a strange state of affairs that scholars will simultaneously claim both that a given tradition was ‘embarrassing’ to the early church and that they repeated it on ‘multiple’ occasions. It is a counter-intuitive combination. . . . The very prominence given to the story by the evangelists suggests that they did not find it at all embarrassing. Multiple attestation of the tradition should be taken as *prima facie* evidence against embarrassment, and the idea that these criteria can work effectively in concert needs rethinking.³⁶

I do not find these criticisms convincing. Could the presence of embarrassing material suggest honesty on the part of the evangelists? Because they were willing to report details they knew were likely to invite scornful replies from their critics, the evangelists demonstrate they were not entirely biased in what they selected to report. It seems quite unlikely that

31. Rafael Rodriguez, “The Embarrassing Truth About Jesus: The Criterion of Embarrassment and the Failure of Historical Authenticity” in *JCDA*, 149.

32. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1:168.

33. *Ibid.*, 1:169.

34. Allison, “It Don’t Come Easy,” 191.

35. Rodriguez, “Embarrassment,” 145.

36. Goodacre, “Multiple Attestation,” 166.

an evangelist would invent Jesus' rebuke of the revered apostle Peter, even calling him "Satan" (Mark 8:33), the element of Jesus's family thinking he was out of his mind (Mark 3:21), that his brothers did not believe in him (John 7:7), and women as witnesses to an empty tomb (Luke 24:11)?³⁷

Finally, I think Schröter goes too far when writing the following:

One must take into account that a historical inquiry is always an enterprise in which the historian studies historical data to develop an idea of what might have happened. Thereby, the remains from the past must not be confused with the events themselves. Rather, the historical sources are selective and often subjective recollections and interpretations of events from which the historian attempts to recover the events themselves. On the other hand, "memory" is by itself a problematic historical category. It does not lead automatically to a more adequate picture of the past, but, to the contrary, can be affected by misperception, wrong information, oblivion, and projection.³⁸

As research on the Gospels at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century pointed out, even the Gospel of Mark, as the earliest story about Jesus, cannot be regarded as a reliable biographical account. Rather, it has its own theological agenda in presenting Jesus as the representative of God's kingdom, which is growing secretly and returning as the Son of Man at the end of time. It would be inappropriate, therefore, to apply the designation "historical Jesus" to the Gospel accounts.³⁹

The challenges inherent in historical inquiry articulated by Schröter are correct and are acknowledged by the broad communities of secular and religious historians. However, I do not understand why Mark's theological agenda disqualifies his Gospel as a reliable portrait from which historians may construct a historical Jesus. Plutarch certainly has agendas when writing his *Lives*, most of which are political and moral. Notwithstanding, these agendas do not lead classicists to conclude they are incapable of finding a historical Cicero or a historical Caesar or a historical Marcus Cato in Plutarch's *Lives*. If by "reliable biographical account" Schröter means that every detail in Mark cannot be taken to represent events precisely as they had occurred and that we cannot be confident all of them occurred, such can be granted.⁴⁰ But the same can be said of virtually all ancient biographies and

37. It is worth observing that classicists employ the criterion of embarrassment. See Anke Rondholz, "Crossing the Rubicon. A Historiographical Study," *Mnemosyne* 62 (2009) 440.

38. Schröter, "Jesus Research and Historiographical Method," 51.

39. *Ibid.*, 53.

40. Of course, defining what one means by "historically reliable" is a matter for which much could be said. I propose that, in a large though not absolute sense, we must think of historical reliability in light of the literary conventions belonging to the historical genre of the era in which the literature under consideration was written. Thus, modern conventions demanding an almost forensic accuracy should not be imposed on ancient historical literature if the conventions inherent in the latter did not require it. Moreover, since we may plausibly suppose the conventions for writing history a thousand years from now will differ from our own (e.g., suppose there were no allowance of loose paraphrasing, abbreviating, compressing, or conflating), it would be unfair for those future historians to regard history writing in the 21st

histories. However, this does not prevent historians from finding historical kernels in them in order to reconstruct minimal portraits of ancient figures and events that are believed to be quite accurate.

Moreover, similar statements could be made in reference to modern biographies, because the challenges inherent in historical inquiry mentioned by Schröter are equally present in modern and ancient historiography. The extant historical data are employed to develop an idea of what might have happened. The historical sources are selective and subjective recollections and interpretations of events the historian attempts to recover. Memory can be negatively affected by misperception, wrong information, oblivion, and projection. Moreover, biographers have their own agendas, which are not limited to being theological in nature. Geog Iggers writes, "Historical scholarship is never value-free and historians not only hold political ideas that color their writing, but also work within the framework of institutions that affect the ways in which they write history."⁴¹ Thus, if one follows Schröter's reasons and concludes that Mark's Gospel "cannot be regarded as a reliable biographical account," one must make similar conclusions regarding all biographies, including modern ones.

A historical Steve Jobs can be constructed based on elements about him that have been established with a high degree of certainty. However, it is not an exhaustive portrayal of Jobs. Nor can one expect that it will be entirely accurate, because memories are imperfect. There will also be items somewhat skewed because of bias. Jobs's mother may selectively remember him as being a better child than he actually was, while one of his two sisters may regard him as being worse as a brother than he actually was. Nevertheless, the biography of Steve Jobs is probably a fairly accurate portrait of him. We have general trust for eyewitness testimony, especially when provided close to the events (criterion of eyewitness/early sources). We have general trust for information about Jobs provided by two or more independent witnesses (criterion of multiple attestation), especially if one of the witnesses was someone who did not care much for him, such as Bill Gates (criterion of unsympathetic sources). And we would have general trust for data provided by a relative who loved Jobs and who relayed an event in which he was involved that casts that relative in a less than flattering light (criterion of embarrassment). The employment of these criteria

century to be historically unreliable, because we do not have the same standards for writing as they. We could, but have chosen differently. Similarly, ancient history writers could have reported as we moderns do. But almost all of them, even their finest such as Sallust and Tacitus, chose not to. (Quintus Asconius who wrote in the age of Nero appears to have been the lone exception.) Thus, we may say that an ancient source is historically reliable when the following conditions have been met: (1) we can verify numerous elements reported by an ancient author to be true in their essence though not necessarily in every detail; (2) we have reason to believe the author was not credulous or overly indiscriminate in his use of sources; (3) we have reason to believe the author intended to write an accurate account of what occurred notwithstanding his use of compositional devices appropriate in that era for historical/biographical genre; and (4) we have no good reason to believe the stories reported by an ancient author are false.

41. Geog Iggers, "Historiography in the Twentieth Century," *HistTh* 44.3 (2005) 475.

does not guarantee an entirely accurate biography of Jobs. But, given sufficient data and a competent biographer, we might conclude the biography is sufficiently accurate.

THE HISTORICAL JESUS

I wish to take a look at two items in historical Jesus research. There is a nearly universal consensus among historians of Jesus that he was executed by crucifixion and that shortly thereafter a number of his disciples had experiences they believed were of the risen Jesus appearing to them. How do historians arrive at these “facts”?⁴²

Space limitations prohibit an extensive answer,⁴³ so I will offer three condensed reasons. First, Jesus’ death by crucifixion is multiply attested by a fair number of ancient sources, Christian and non-Christian alike. It is very probable that Josephus reported the event in his original version of *Ant.* 18.3.⁴⁴ Tacitus, Lucian, and Mara bar Serapion are aware of the event.⁴⁵ Jesus’ execution is widely reported in early Christian literature, with and without specifying the mode of crucifixion. All four canonical Gospels report Jesus’ death by crucifixion as does other NT literature referring to it regularly.⁴⁶ Jesus’ death and/or crucifixion is abundantly mentioned in the noncanonical Christian literature.⁴⁷ It is worth observing that the reports of

42. I have placed “facts” in quotation marks because there is no agreement among historians pertaining to the definition of a historical fact.

43. For an extensive treatment on Jesus’s death by crucifixion, see Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus*, 303–18.

44. Much literature has been written on the authenticity of this text, with a majority of scholars concluding Josephus mentions Jesus’ death while also granting that a Christian editor redacted and added a number of elements in the text. See Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus*, 235–42.

45. Tacitus does not specifically name crucifixion as the mode of Jesus’ execution but instead reports that Jesus suffered “the most extreme penalty” (*Ann.* 15.44). Mara bar Serapion does not mention the mode of execution. Lucian adds that Jesus was crucified in Palestine (*Peregr.* 11).

46. Mark 15:24–37; Matt 27:35–50; Luke 23:33–46; and John 19:16–37. Before the canonical Gospels were written, the death of Jesus is reported abundantly throughout the Pauline corpus and in all of Paul’s undisputed letters except Philemon: Rom 1:4; 4:24; 5:6, 8; 10; 6:3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10; 7:4; 8:11 (*bis*), 34; 10:9; 11:26; 14:9, 15; 1 Cor 8:11; 15:3, 12, 13, 15, 16, 20; 2 Cor 5:14, 15; Gal 1:1; 2:21; Phil 2:8; 3:10, 18; Col 1:18, 20; 2:12, 14, 20; 1 Thess 1:10; 4:14; 5:10; and 2 Tim 2:8, 11. Crucifixion of Christ (crucifixion, cross): 1 Cor 1:17, 18, 23; 2:2, 8; 2 Cor 13:4; Gal 2:20; 3:1; 6:12, 14; Eph 1:20; and 2:16. We find Jesus’s death also attested in Hebrews and 1 Peter: Heb 2:9, 14; 9:15–10:14; 12:2; 13:20; 1 Pet 1:3, 21; 2:24; and 3:18. Both letters were certainly written in the first century and may predate the canonical Gospels (Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996] 151, 164).

47. Ignatius, *Eph.* 16:2; *Trall.* 9:1; *Rom.* 7:2; Barn. 7:9; 12:1; Mart. Pol. 17:2. Gos. Pet. (10, 18) and Ep. Apos. (9) report Jesus’s death by crucifixion. Gos. Heb. mentions Jesus’ death by implication of his bodily resurrection. Gos. Mary and Gos. Truth likewise mention Jesus’s death. Jesus’ crucifixion—without mentioning whether he died—is mentioned in the Gos. Sav. (91–92, 100–108). Jesus is crucified and dies in Apoc. Pet. and Disc. Seth, Gnostic writings dated to the third century. Gos. Thom. (65) and Gos. Jud. (57) probably refer to the death of Jesus in Gos. Thom.’s version of Jesus’ parable of the vineyard and the wicked tenants and Gos. Jud.’s mentioning of Jesus’s betrayal resulting in a sacrifice of Jesus’s body.

Jesus' death by crucifixion appear in multiple literary forms, being found in annals, historiography, biography, letters, and tradition in the form of creeds, oral formulas, and hymns.

Second, some of the reports of Jesus' death by crucifixion are very early. Paul mentions Jesus' death by crucifixion no later than A.D. 55 (Gal 2:20–21) and said he preached the same to those in Corinth in A.D. 51, within only 21 years of Jesus' crucifixion, having received it even earlier from others (1 Cor 15:1–11). There is likewise widespread agreement that it was composed very early, reflected what the Jerusalem apostles were teaching, and is the oldest extant tradition pertaining to the resurrection of Jesus.⁴⁸ Jesus' death appears numerous times in the kerygma of the oral formulas.

A third evidence for Jesus' death by crucifixion is the passion narratives appear largely credible given their satisfying of the criterion of embarrassment. When we come to the passion narratives in the Synoptic Gospels,⁴⁹ we find a number of traits shared with other stories of Jewish martyrs such as the seven brothers, Eleazar, and Rabbi Akiba.⁵⁰ Like the others, Jesus stands bold in his convictions after his arrest, has moments of great composure during his painful ordeal, and offers a prayer to God. Even Jesus' enemies are impressed with his behavior as are those witnessing the martyrdoms of the seven brothers, Eleazar, Rabbi Akiba, and Rabbi Hanina ben Taradion.⁵¹

However, the accounts of Jesus' martyrdom differ significantly from the others. Whereas a number of the martyrdom reports seem constructed to provide encouragement to others who may face similar situations, the passion narratives of Jesus provide no such encouragement. Jesus anguishes over his impending treatment and wants to avoid it if at all possible (Mark 14:32–42; Matt 26:36–46; Luke 22:39–46). This would certainly not inspire those whom he had told to take up their own cross and follow him if they wanted to be his disciple (Mark 8:34; Matt 16:24; Luke 9:23). Jesus' request for God to remove the cup from him if possible stands in contrast to the defiant words of the martyrs: "Bring it on!" "Racks and stones may break my bones, but resurrection awaits me!" Rather than proclaiming that he will not forsake God or his Law as did many of the Jewish martyrs, Jesus cries out asking why God has forsaken him (Mark 15:34; Matt 27:46). Given the embarrassing nature of these comments of despair, they are unlikely to be inventions of the early church.⁵²

48. See Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus*, 223–35, 318–29.

49. Mark 14:32–41; Matt 26:36–45; and Luke 22:39–46.

50. 2 Macc 7; 4 Macc 6:1–30; y. Ber. 9, 7/8 [14b]; b. Ber. 61b; and b. 'Abod. Zar. 18a. For accounts of early Christian martyrs, see Acts 6:8–7:60 and Mart. Pol. 7:1–16:1.

51. Mark 15:4–5, 39; Matt 27:54; Luke 23:39–42, 47; and John 19:7–12.

52. Louis H. Feldman, introduction to *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity*, ed. Louis H. Feldman and Gohei Hata (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987) 42; Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary of His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 965–66; Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 682; and Geza Vermes, *The Passion: The Story of an Event That Changed Human History* (New York: Penguin, 2006) 122.

For this reason, we get a sense that in the canonical Gospels we are reading authentic reports of Jesus' arrest and death, even if a cleaning up or omission occurred to some of those embarrassing details by Luke and to nearly all of them by John. Accordingly, the embarrassing elements in the passion narratives weigh in favor of the presence of historical kernels.

While open to possibilities, historians must be guided by probabilities. Given the strong evidence for Jesus' death by crucifixion, without good evidence to the contrary the historian must conclude that Jesus was crucified and that the process killed him. And this is the conclusion shared by virtually all scholars who have studied the subject.

In summary, the historical evidence is very strong that Jesus died by crucifixion. The event is multiply attested by a fair number of ancient sources, some of which are unsympathetic to the Christian view, and in multiple literary forms. Some of the reports are very early and can reasonably be traced to the Jerusalem apostles, at least a few of whom must have been eyewitnesses. The passion narratives appear credible, because they fulfill the criterion of embarrassment. Perhaps some of the contributors in *JCDA* will charge me with arguing in a circle, because I am employing the criteria to support my point, when the use of the criteria is precisely the matter being questioned. However, I have addressed several of their objections to the use of the criteria and have employed the criteria to build a very strong case for the historicity of Jesus' death by crucifixion. If a contributor objects to my use of the criteria with respect to Jesus' death by crucifixion, I would want to ask that contributor whether he or she thinks Jesus was crucified and died as a result. If the contributor answers affirmatively, I would want to ask how that contributor arrived at that conclusion apart from the criteria.

That the apostles proclaimed Jesus had been raised and had appeared to them is likewise virtually undisputed by scholars. Once again, space limitations demand only a brief treatment.⁵³ Jesus' resurrection and appearances are mentioned in the oral tradition in 1 Cor 15:3–7. As mentioned above, the content of this tradition, though not necessarily its form, can be traced to Jesus' disciples with a high degree of confidence. Paul likewise mentions the appearance of the risen Jesus to him, affording us eyewitness testimony of an experience.

Jesus' resurrection appearances are likewise multiply attested in the kerygma of 1 Cor 15:3–7, the speeches in Acts (2, 10, 13), which most scholars agree contain summaries of apostolic teachings, the four canonical Gospels, 1 Clement (which may have been written by a follower of Peter), and possibly Josephus (unsympathetic).⁵⁴ The appearances also appear in multiple literary forms such as oral formulas, biographies, letters, and possibly a history. Thus, Jesus' death and the subsequent beliefs of his

53. For an extensive treatment, see Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus*, 318–461.

54. 1 Clem. 42:3; Josephus, *Ant.* 18.3.

disciples that he had risen from the dead and had appeared alive to them is abundantly evidenced. Hooker admits,

It is indisputable that he was put to death by the Roman authorities—though to what extent the Jewish authorities were involved is far from clear—and that his followers came to believe that he had been raised from the dead, though how and where they came to that conviction it is now impossible to say. This conviction about the resurrection may perhaps provide a good model for the way in which we should proceed. The details of the resurrection story differ from one account to another, and the more we ask ‘What exactly happened?’ the more perplexed we shall be. But that the disciples came to believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead is indisputable.⁵⁵

Hooker arrives at these conclusions using a holistic approach. But, as I observed above, a holistic approach when used apart from the criteria is likewise problematic.

In my view, many of the criteria employed in historical Jesus research are quite reasonable and based on common-sense principles, despite their inability to eliminate subjectivity and overcome a paucity of data. One would be hard pressed to find a historian who would deny Jesus’ death by crucifixion and that, shortly after his death, a number of his disciples and Paul had experiences they interpreted as the risen Jesus appearing to them. If we can arrive at these firm conclusions via the use of the criteria of authenticity, in principle at least, we should be able to use the criteria to assess other aspects of the life of Jesus, especially if used in conjunction with a holistic approach. The criteria may not be able to verify specific logia as being the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus or that his acts occurred precisely as reported in the Gospels. However, when employed in conjunction with a holistic approach, the criteria can suggest to varying degrees of certainty that Jesus said and did certain things, although we may not know the precise form or way in which they were uttered and performed. This conclusion is very far from the pessimistic view of the criteria articulated by some of the *JCDA* contributors.

CONCLUSION

The contributors in *JCDA* have challenged us to think more deeply about the craft to which we are devoted. And I am grateful to them. Some of the contributors are far more optimistic than the others in terms of the value of the criteria of authenticity in particular and our ability to know the past in general. Consider these words of Winter:

A church that is committed to intellectual integrity cannot but put the best of our human abilities to work in order to understand with historical method as best as possible the founding figure of the Christian faith, a historical person—without confusing historical knowl-

55. Hooker, foreword, xv.

edge with doctrine or a statement of faith. The tentative nature of historical insight, with scholars still arguing after many decades of Jesus research, has led some to argue for the whole enterprise to be called off. However, just because we cannot and do not know everything does not mean that we cannot know anything and that any research is futile.⁵⁶

Winter's essay could have appeared quite comfortably in a volume countering the claims of some of the contributors in *JCDA*. So, it would be a mistake to regard all of the contributors in *JCDA* as being of the same mind, as Hooker observes.⁵⁷

Historical investigation involves many challenges but often yields tasty (unforbidden) fruit when conducted properly. No one is suggesting historians be under the illusion that skillful historical work conducted with the utmost integrity always yields correct results. The day of von Ranke's naive realism is long past, and there is no hint of an attempt by historians to return to it. But it is likewise worth observing that, in the world populated by philosophers of history and historians who practice outside the community of biblical scholars, postmodernist views of history akin to those articulated by some of the contributors in *JCDA* have had their day in court and lost. Philosopher of history Behan McCullagh writes, "Most historians and many philosophers of history persist in believing that present evidence can warrant belief in the truth of descriptions of particular events in the past."⁵⁸ He adds, "In fact very few practicing historians are impressed by philosophical objections to the possible truth of history. They continue examining evidence and drawing conclusions about the past from it as usual."⁵⁹

We should not jettison the criteria because they did not eliminate subjectivity and produce a consensus on the historical Jesus. Historians who practice outside the community of biblical scholars do not expect consensus because they understand that conflicting horizons very often thwart it. For this reason and others, "pluralism is a basic characteristic of history as a discipline."⁶⁰ And because this is the state of the discipline of history outside of biblical studies, we should not be surprised to see a polarity of views on the historical Jesus when horizons are likely to play an even larger role than in historical matters that are nonreligious in nature. The soundest methods cannot solve the problem of horizons.

Contrary to the claims of Chicken Little and some of the contributors in *JCDA*, the sky is not falling in the world of historical Jesus research.

56. Winter, "Plausibility," 130–31.

57. Hooker, foreword, xvi.

58. C. Behan McCullagh, "The Truth of Basic Historical Descriptions," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 9.1 (2015) 97.

59. McCullagh, "Truth of Basic Historical Descriptions," 99.

60. Chris Lorenz, "Historical Knowledge and Historical Reality: A Plea for 'Internal Realism,'" *HistTh* 33 (1994) 326. See also Mark T. Gilderhus, *History and Historians: A Historiographical Introduction*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007), who writes, "The body of literature on almost any historical subject takes the form of an ongoing debate" (p. 86).

However, it is often good when an acorn drops on our head and gets our attention. There are challenges to historical knowledge we must always keep in mind. But before we follow Foxy Loxy into his den of historiographical pessimism and postmodernism, we should hear a few kings—philosophers of history who have devoted their academic careers to these matters—and see what they have contributed on the subject.⁶¹

61. Although there are many fine treatments on postmodernist debate, two book-sized treatments I found especially helpful are Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History*, rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 2000) and C. Behan McCullagh, *The Truth of History* (New York: Routledge, 1998).