

Jesus and history, the believer and the historian: The Elusive Messiah: A Philosophical Overview of the Quest for the Historical Jesus. By Raymond Martin. Westview, 236 pp., \$25.00.

by [Van A. Harvey](#) in the [January 26, 2000](#) issue

The Elusive Messiah: A Philosophical Overview of the Quest for the Historical Jesus,
by Raymond Martin

Elusive Messiah indeed! At the end of the 19th century Jesus was Adolph von Harnack's teacher of "the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of mankind"; in the early years of the 20th century, Albert Schweitzer's despairing Messiah; in the '30s, Rudolf Bultmann's preacher of obedience. Now, after another generation of New Testament scholars has produced its portraits, Jesus has become many things—eschatological prophet, "marginal Jew," magician, secular sage.

No portrait is more radical and disturbing to traditional Christian belief than that put forth by the Jesus Seminar, a group of scholars who regularly meet to sort out the historically valid from the invalid in the New Testament narratives. Their picture of Jesus is disturbing not only because the supernatural elements have been stripped away but because it is utterly unlike that of the Gospels. These scholars claim not just that the early church expressed its response to Jesus by ascribing supernatural status to him, but that the church has preserved an utterly false picture of him.

Unfortunately, there are very few books to which laypeople can turn for aid in confronting this issue of the historical Jesus, since most books on the subject have axes to grind. On the one hand, some evangelical philosophers argue that the Holy Spirit "caused" them to believe that the New Testament narratives are true. They counsel their readers to disregard secular biblical scholars because such scholars

approach the materials with skepticism and, moreover, differ among themselves. On the other hand, some New Testament historians believe that the church has completely obscured the real Jesus and that those who cling to the New Testament picture are either ignorant or practicing bad faith.

It is with hopeful expectation, then, that one turns to a book written by an author who claims to have no religious or antireligious beliefs and wants to investigate this issue only because it throws light on the way a scholar's methods determine her results. Raymond Martin's book also seems promising because Martin is a philosopher who says he just wants to help the ordinary reader and the ordinary Christian understand the challenge of life-of-Jesus research.

On one level, the book is indeed very useful for laypeople. The author summarizes the agreements among scholars about the New Testament texts and the problems they face in trying to recover the historical Jesus—the lack of eyewitnesses and the fact that the Gospels were not written individually and probably not by the authors to which they were traditionally ascribed. Martin also discusses and criticizes the work of important contemporary New Testament scholars—E. P. Sanders, John Meier, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and John Dominic Crossan—as well as some of the critical responses to their work.

But Martin is primarily interested in what, for lack of a better formula, I shall call the problem of faith and history. What should Christians make of New Testament scholarship and the challenges it poses to traditional Christian belief about Jesus? In the book's final pages Martin delineates what he regards as the only three possible solutions: "Only Faith," in which the believer is dismissive of the expert opinions of the historians; "Only Reason," in which the believer is "totally submissive to the historians"; and "Faith Seeking Understanding," in which some sort of compromise is worked out between the historian and faith. The author then proposes his own solution, to which I will return below.

Two main theses govern Martin's criticism of the various New Testament historians he discusses. The first is relatively uncontroversial to most believers except, perhaps, to evangelical philosophers and fundamentalists of various types—namely, that laypeople are in no position to adjudicate disputes among experts in New Testament scholarship because the scholars have an expertise in languages and ancient history that laypeople lack.

The second, more debatable thesis has three parts. It is what I call the “presuppositions gambit” and is most often employed by evangelical apologists. It begins with the indisputable assumption that every historian has his or her presuppositions and hence is not neutral. But it then proceeds to equate these presuppositions with “faith” so that it can move to the conclusion that even secular historians who reject appeals to supernatural intervention in history are no less acting “in faith” than are those believing historians who accept them. Thus Martin concludes, for example, that N. T. Wright’s approach to Jesus, which mixes supernaturalism and ordinary biography, is just as historically valid as Sanders’s method, which does not deal with miracles or the resurrection—although, paradoxically, Martin finds Wright’s arguments about the resurrection very unconvincing.

An ordinary reader might think that Martin’s argument for openness to supernaturalism is intended to give aid to conservative Christians who reject secular scholarship because, they argue, the believing historian is just as justified in bringing her faith in supernatural intervention to life-of-Jesus research as the secular historian is in rejecting it. But surprisingly, Martin is very harsh in his criticisms of those evangelicals who, like C. Stephen Evans, argue in this fashion. These evangelical philosophers do not tell us what rules of historical inquiry and reasoning will apply if the events of the New Testament are exempted from the standards governing ordinary historical reasoning. They only offer us a “game without rules.” Martin points out, for example, how Evans argues “on faith” that Jesus possessed foreknowledge, but then endorses an interpretation of a New Testament story in which Jesus expected something that did not happen.

Indeed, none of the supernaturalist historians discussed in this book survive Martin’s criticisms in this regard. He considers Wright’s arguments for the historical facticity of Jesus’s resurrection to be unconvincing and Paul Johnson’s work to be contradictory. All these supernaturalists, he charges, engage in a history in which anything goes. Still, Martin believes that, in principle, it is not impossible to write a history in which the supernatural intervenes. He suggests a type of evangelical history that is a middle way between skepticism and faith alone: the supernaturalist should first specify the circumstances that are to be considered exceptions to ordinary historical reason and then specify what rules would apply to these exceptions.

As anyone familiar with my own work will expect, I have many serious reservations about this book, the most inclusive being that I do not think the author helps either the nonbeliever or the believer to understand the problem of faith and New Testament criticism. He does not help the unbeliever because his discussion of the presuppositions of history-writing is faulty. He assumes that it is just as legitimate to approach history with the assumption that supernatural intervention occurs as it is to reject it as a mode of explanation. In addition, the three alternative solutions he delineates are not the only possible ones. He does not help the believer both for these reasons and because the solution he proposes is both lame and inconsistent with any sort of Christian faith, evangelical, liberal or Roman Catholic.

First, consider Martin's view that being open to supernatural intervention in history is as reasonable as not being open to it. This may appear to be an admirable expression of an undogmatic attitude, but it depends upon characterizing as "practical atheists" historians who, like Sanders, reject supernatural intervention. This is misleading because it suggests that these historians lack faith, and it is a nonstarter because it implies that supernaturalism is a live option for academic historians. The issue is far more complex than Martin's simple division between supernaturalists and nonsupernaturalists implies. First of all, an historian can be a Christian without being a supernaturalist, as M. J. Borg, an historian Martin discusses, demonstrates. Without engaging in supernaturalism, Borg believes that Jesus's grounding in the Spirit was the "source of everything that he was," and that it was on this basis that the Fourth Gospel ascribes to him the words, "I am the bread of life."

Second, the discipline of critical history, as Martin himself acknowledges, depends upon bringing forth publicly accessible evidence and employing modes of reasoning that are commonly accepted in everyday life: in newspapers, law courts and inquiries of many different sorts. Although there are undoubtedly dogmatic historians who reject miracles out of hand, an intellectually sophisticated historian would never claim that miracles cannot happen, but only that the historian, as historian, is never able to claim that a given event is supernaturally caused. For an historian to argue that a given event was a miracle, he would have to have some public grounds for claiming that only a supernatural power could have caused it. But historians cannot know this; far less can they know that this power was the Christian God.

Indeed, if a witness were to report a miracle—say, that Muhammad flew from Mecca to Jerusalem in seconds and then ascended to heaven, or, as it written in Matthew 27:52, that when Jesus died the tombs were opened and many of the saints were also resurrected and came into the city and appeared to many—all the historian can do is to judge that these events are so uncommon that compelling evidence would be required before he could conclude that they had occurred. Even if there were such evidence, all he could do would be to regard these events as extremely mysterious, even astonishing. But he could not conclude that the only possible explanation is that they resulted from supernatural intervention.

To argue that historians might judge such and such to be a miracle because they believe antecedently in the religion that regards such miracles as signs of the intervention of its deity is to open the floodgates for all religious claims to miracles and, indeed, even to nonreligious “miracles” such as the widespread reports that people have seen Elvis Presley. This is the problem with Martin’s “middle way.” If believing historians can simply declare some event to be an exception to the usual modes of historical reasoning and then make up rules that apply only to that alleged exception, how can this strategy be limited to Christians? Many other religions are replete with miracle stories and require of their adherents the suspension of ordinary historical reasoning. Why are the New Testament stories approached any differently than these stories? To argue for supernaturalism as an alternative to critical history would be to reopen a Pandora’s box. As Marc Bloch once observed, before the rise of critical history, three-fourths of all reports of alleged eyewitnesses were accepted as fact.

It does not follow that because every historian has presuppositions, all presuppositions are equally valid. One might as well argue that since all medical science has presuppositions, it is still legitimate to believe that diseases are caused by demons rather than by viruses and germs. Do Christian medical colleges teach that this theory is a live alternative? Martin seems to be aware of this troublesome implication. He asks evangelical apologists whether the history of Socrates, Buddha, Muhammad and other historical figures are also amenable to supernatural history. And if not, why not?

Martin fails to help both believers and unbelievers understand what the alternatives are for dealing with this issue of faith and history because, in a fashion now considered politically correct, he advocates what he calls “multiperspectivism.” This view claims that since there can be no one true interpretation of anything, including

an historical interpretation of Jesus, and since laypeople are in no position to argue with the experts, “they should suspend belief among all kinds of expert interpretations, including religiously inspired ones.”

Martin seems vaguely uncomfortable about the adequacy of this recommendation. He senses that it will not satisfy Christians, since it “requires one to suspend judgment about some truth that one thinks one knows, such as that Jesus rose from the dead.” That is, it requires Christians to suspend judgment about that which is central to their faith and which raises the problem of faith and history in the first place, the problem which Martin proposes to solve. But he thinks he has a compensation for those who give up this faith. He offers them “a more relaxed kind of methodological, multiperspectival faith” which does not engage in “epistemological imperialism.” But this more relaxed, multiperspectival faith is not Christian faith at all; it is just another name for historical skepticism.

Martin might respond that my criticism is unfair because he is not asking for skepticism about those points on which historians agree; he is only asking that Christians suspend judgment about the resurrection taken as a physical, historical fact. But therein lies the problem. Martin tends to equate Christian faith with the acceptance of the supernatural elements in the New Testament picture of Jesus. In the option he favors—faith seeking understanding—what he means by “faith” is really belief. Thus, to have faith in the resurrection means to believe in a physical resurrection and an empty tomb.

But it is not at all clear that “faith” can be identified with “belief” or that faith in the resurrection means belief in physical resurrection and an empty tomb. As many New Testament scholars such as Willi Marxsen have shown, what it means to have faith in the resurrection must be derived from the texts themselves. Paul, who gives us the earliest tradition, explicitly rejects the notion of a physical resurrection and says nothing about an empty tomb, but still speaks of faith in the resurrection. As a historian, Marxsen rejects the physical resurrection not because he does not believe in miracles, but because the earliest tradition simply doesn’t identify resurrection with a resuscitated body. Martin never seems to consider that a person might be both a Christian who believes in the resurrection and one who fully accepts the presuppositions and the work of what he calls the “practical atheistic historians.”

Just as the definition of philosophy is a philosophical question, so the definition of faith is a theological issue. And during the past half century a whole generation of

impressive theologians has argued that Christian faith is not to be equated with assenting to the supernatural elements in the New Testament narratives. Faith, they argue, means being brought to self-examination in the present and accepting God's acceptance. This self-examination is brought about by the proclamation that the life and death of Jesus are a revelation of God's righteousness. Because Jesus' death seems to call into question that God is righteous, the hearer of this proclamation must make a decision. To have faith is to take this particular life and death as decisive for one's relationship to God. It is to confess with Paul and others that "Jesus is Lord" and that "Jesus lives."

Martin is free to criticize this solution, but surely he is obligated to consider it as one alternative to the problem of faith and history. He does not discuss a single major Protestant or Catholic theologian who has systematically discussed this issue of faith and history—not Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Hans Conzelmann, Gerhard Ebeling, Hans Frei, Friedrich Gogarten, Hans Küng, Schubert Ogden, Karl Rahner, James M. Robinson or Paul Tillich (who, incidentally, is dismissed in a footnote as "too mystical for most Christians, including most Christian intellectuals").