

William M. Linden: The Historical Jesus for Beginners



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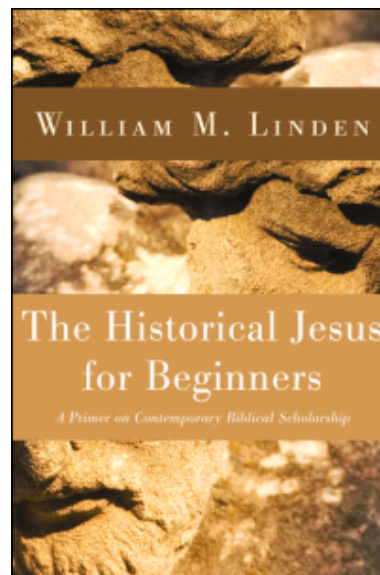
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The Historical Jesus for Beginners *A Primer on Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*

The last few decades have seen a resurgence of the scholarly quest for the historical Jesus – for the words and deeds that probably can be attributed to the human Jesus who walked the hills of Galilee some two thousand years ago. You might not be aware of the recent scholarship, and the reason is simple. For the most part, many scholars write and talk to other scholars, using their own technical language. This leaves huge numbers of Christians unaware of their discoveries. So even though you may have studied the Bible for years, you still may be a historical Jesus beginner.

After the life of Jesus, his followers began to develop their memory of his sayings and actions. Then, year after year and century after century, the tradition grew until it became Christianity as it is known in the twenty-first century. What if we could go back in time and delve under all the layers to find what Christianity would be if it were based upon the historical Jesus? If you are a person who would like to begin to be informed, this book is for you.

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"This very helpful book delivers what it promises and more. It combines a lucid introduction to the basics of historical Jesus scholarship with extended excerpts from several of today's scholars, thus putting the reader in touch with a number of voices. And more: it explores the implications of Jesus scholarship for those to whom it matters most, namely, Christians and churches in our time. Recommended not only for beginners, but also for those who already have some familiarity with this fascinating and important subject."

Marcus J. Borg,

Hundere Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture
Oregon State University

"Among the cacophony of voices surrounding the latest phase in the quest for the historical Jesus, Bill Linden is the thinking-person's guide to the heart of the matter. He knows the literature, the personalities, and the issues, and he knows how to focus our attention on what really counts in the larger scheme of things. If you're interested in the historical Jesus, but don't know where to start, start here."

Stephen Patterson,

Professor of New Testament, Eden Seminary
St. Louis, Missouri

"This introduction to contemporary theology clears up many long standing questions that go unanswered at 11:00 a.m. on Sunday. As a result, theology now emerges for me as a scholarly study of scripture, uncolored by the lense of any particular religious affiliation. In seeing this more contextual approach to sacred text, I no longer feel constrained to check my spiritual-seeker hat at the front door of the church!"

Stephen G. Scholl,

Attorney-at-law
Houston, Texas

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The Historical Jesus for Beginners.

**The following is a review by G. Richard Wheatcroft,
 the retired Rector of
 St. Francis Episcopal Church, Houston:**

In 1987 I was a beginner when I read *Jesus: A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* by Marcus Borg. His book was an early presentation of the contemporary scholarly quest for the historical Jesus. It marked, for me, the beginning of a journey of understanding the historical Jesus and the Christian life in a radically new way. Beginners, who read Linden's book, are most likely to have a similar illuminating experience. He is chairman of the board of directors of The Foundation for Contemporary Theology. A retired partner of the law firm of Vinson & Elkins, LLP, he holds a Postgraduate Diploma in theology from Oxford University. He describes his book as containing "a group of readings for members of the general public who are just beginning to learn about the academic analysis of the Christian Gospels."

In a preface the author shares the story of his experiences at The Episcopal Church of the Redeemer in Houston, Texas, which he believes "could be one possible model for what a church might be if it encapsulates and follows many of the teachings and the life of the historical Jesus." Although his quest for the historical Jesus began long after most of his time at the Church, he found that his experiences at the Church were reflective of "what he later learned about the historical Jesus." Pointing out that the focus of the message of Jesus was the Kingdom of God, he writes that "The community at the Church of The Redeemer was that kind of place where we glimpsed the Kingdom of God."

He describes the historical Jesus as "a collection of the words and deeds that probably can be attributed to the human Jesus who walked the hills of Galilee some two-thousand years ago." He explains that this term is helpful in distinguishing between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith which focuses on the meaning of the life and death of Jesus expressed in the New Testament and formulated in the creeds and doctrines of the Church.

He presents the basics of contemporary Biblical scholarship which is the source of the quest for the historical Jesus. Describing the Bible as a human document which is a combination of history and interpretation, he examines the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke as sources of portraits of the historical Jesus. He devotes a chapter to describing the task of isolating the words and deeds of pre-Easter Jesus in these Gospels, from the post-Easter Jesus voices of interpretation, which originated in early Christian communities.

He then presents four sketches of the historical Jesus drawn by four scholars, Robert W. Funk, Marcus Borg, Marvin F. Cain, and John Dominic Crossan. He makes the point that although the sketches "are not identical they certainly do have much in common. It brings richness to our vision to see the historical Jesus from these four points of view." A sampling of the sketches reveal the historical Jesus as "a comic savant, a "word wizard," "the proverbial party animal," "a spirit person and mediator of the sacred," "a teacher of wisdom," a social prophet," "a movement founder," "a revolutionary teacher in parables and aphorism focused on what he called the Kingdom of God," a prophet of "egalitarian sharing of spiritual and material power at the most grassroots level"

The author then turns to the question of the relevance of the quest for the historical Jesus for the Church. He uses, as a resource, a book by Bishop John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*. The thesis of the book is that the central problem facing the Church today, both in America and Northern Europe, is how Christianity can be expressed to comport with modern scientific knowledge. The author proposes that one of the changes in Christianity that can be made is a re-visioning of the Christian Church based upon what has been discovered by the quest for the historical Jesus. He uses the work of Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, Charles W. Hedrick, Stephen J. Patterson, and Marcus J. Borg to illuminate this re-visioning.

In his concluding chapter, the author states that, "Originally I had intended to confine this book to the historical Jesus alone.... However, Christianity cannot be based solely upon the historical Jesus." Originally, Christianity consisted of the memory of the historical Jesus and the interpretation of his life after his death which was called the Christ of faith. The author stresses that a "re-visioned Christianity must have a re-visioned Christ of faith" but that we substitute "the Spirit of the historical Jesus" for the Christ of faith. He writes, "I suggest there was a certain Godly spirit that enveloped and permeated the historical Jesus that attracted his followers. That spirit lived on after his death." He believes that the Gospel of John, which is not considered a source for the historical Jesus, is a prime example of this combination. He finds this understanding of the Spirit of Jesus in the Eucharist in Christian churches.

This comprehensive and compelling book is a masterful primer of the historical Jesus for beginners. But is also a valuable resource for those who have been on the journey for some years.

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Local Theologian Authors Book About Historical Jesus

HOUSTON (January 13, 2009) – William M. Linden, a Houston author and lecturer, has written *The Historical Jesus for Beginners, A Primer on Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*. The scholarly book is an introduction to contemporary theology that examines what Christianity would be if it were based upon the historical Jesus.

“This very helpful book delivers what it promises and more,” writes Marcus Borg, Hundere Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture at Oregon State University, in an early book review. “It combines a lucid introduction to the basics of historical Jesus scholarship with extended excerpts from several of today’s scholars.”

The Center for Progressive Christianity, a nationwide organization that networks with churches, selected *The Historical Jesus for Beginners* as its “Book of the Month” in October 2008.

The book is currently available by order from Amazon.com (\$21.70) or from Wipf and Stock Publishers (\$18.40) at orders@wipfandstock.com and 541-344-1528. It is also available in the religious section of many bookstores.

Linden is a retired law partner and federal tax attorney with the Houston firm of Vinson & Elkins L.L.P. He returned to school and completed a Postgraduate Diploma in theology from Oxford University in 2001. This is his first book.

About William (Bill) M. Linden

*Bill Linden is the author of **The Historical Jesus for Beginners, A Primer on Contemporary Biblical Scholarship**, an introduction to contemporary theology that examines what Christianity would be if it were based upon the historical Jesus. He is a retired partner of the Houston law firm of Vinson & Elkins, L.L.P., where he specialized in federal income tax law. Bill holds a Postgraduate Diploma in theology from Oxford University in England 2001. He is the chairman of the board of directors of the Foundation for Contemporary Theology in Houston. Bill has been a lecturer of theology for three years in the School of Continuing Studies at Rice University in Houston and many Christian churches. For information about the author and his work, visit www.williamlinden.com.*

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The book is currently available by order from Amazon.com.

The book also can be ordered from the publisher, [Wipf and Stock Publishers](#).
(Publisher's Note: All web orders receive a 20% discount. All direct orders (fax, phone, email) of 1-4 books receive a 20% discount, 5 or more books receive a 40% discount.)

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In Houston, the book is currently available in the religious section of many bookstores.

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William M. Linden
Author & Lecturer

Bill Linden holds a Postgraduate Diploma in Theology from Oxford University in England and is chairman of the board of directors of the [Foundation for Contemporary Theology](#) in Houston, Texas. He is also a member of [The Center for Progressive Christianity](#). Mr. Linden has concentrated his efforts in theology in the scholarly quest for the historical Jesus – the human being who walked about Galilee in the first century, a person who showed us what God is like and what a human life full of God is like. His published book on this subject is entitled, “The Historical Jesus for Beginners.” Bill has been a lecturer of theology for three years in the School of Continuing Studies at Rice University and in various Christian Churches in the Houston area. He is an associate member of the Westar Institute in California, which sponsors the Jesus Seminar, the leaders in academic historical Jesus research. Prior to concentrating his work on the historical Jesus, Mr. Linden was a Houston lawyer. He is a retired partner of the law firm of Vinson & Elkins, LLP, where he specialized in federal income-tax law. He is a member of St. Martins Episcopal Church in Houston.

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