

## **Masters in Divinity vs Well-Instructed Amateurs** **The Tabor Affair**

*By Jacob Aliet, June 2006*

### **Introduction**

Recent events in the world of bloggers and internet discussion groups marked a climax of the growing tension between conservative scholars who have wrapped themselves tightly around the mantle of New Testament Scholarship on the one hand, and the ever-improving, pervasive group of amateurs who progressively engage the works published by the mainstream scholars. It was a clash of two worlds, and the heat that the impact generated boiled off the boundary between these worlds and forced a confrontation that unmasked the conservative scholars. Observers were able to get a glimpse of the terrified and insecure intellectual weakling that lurks behind the scholastic mien that conservatives adorn.

In May 2006, through a review, a well-instructed amateur ruthlessly debunked a freshly-published book by a respected scholar in the field and left it to waste even before impressionable crowds of lay Christian readers could eagerly line up to purchase the book. This review predictably embarrassed the scholar and his privileged friends in the academia. In the past, amateur reviews of "magisterial" works by scholars were met with smug indifference. But the review in question, which we discuss below, instantly shattered the mask of smug indifference and elicited intellectually hollow denunciations, instead of a crushing blow-by-blow logical refutation from them.

The review in question was written by Michael Turton, a language lecturer at the university and a keen discussant and writer on New Testament issues. Turton has written critical reviews of more than a dozen books on NT scholarship and debated with various New Testament scholars at lists like [XTalk](#). He maintained a very active blog called [The Sword](#) in which he discussed contemporary issues in New Testament scholarship. One of Michael's recent works has been his [The Historical Commentary on the Gospel of Mark](#) - hereafter *HCGM*. In that work, Michael's central thesis is that a literary analysis of the Gospel of Mark demonstrates that it is a fictional product from the writer of the gospel. In *HCGM*, Michael employs literary criticism, narrative criticism, rhetorical and historical criticism and draws from the techniques used by German scholar Hermann Gunkel, arguably the father of form criticism, and other scholars like John Dart and Ann Tolbert. From his detailed study of Mark, Michael concluded that the character of Jesus in Mark is not a historical person but a fictional construction by the author of the gospel.

Turton's tenor in the dozens of discussions that he has been engaged in has recently entailed a strict adherence to rigorous methodology and a strong antipathy for arguments that rely on unproven assumptions. In a field that has pastors and other individuals with confessional interests as the vanguards, Michael inevitably rubbed most of them the wrong way. Turton realized that he that he had stumbled upon a field of study mobbed by some grossly incompetent "scholars" with fixed ideas, who employed sham reasoning in

their work, devoid of a methodology to help them separate facts from fiction in the NT texts.

One such "scholar" is Dr. James Tabor. Tabor chairs the department of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He has a Ph.D. in biblical studies from the University of Chicago and is an expert on the Dead Sea Scrolls and Christian origins.

### **Tabor in the Neck of the Woods**

Now, James Tabor recently wrote and published [\*The Jesus Dynasty\*](#). Tabor regarded the book as his ultimate contribution to the New Testament Scholarship and saw it as the ticket to his place alongside the rank and file of other New Testament Scholars that have written books on the Historical Jesus. In his view, it was a culmination of several decades of teaching and research on the Historical Jesus. Pumped up with favorable reviews from conservative readers and eager to display his magisterial work to the world, Tabor registered in an ancient history list that examines historical questions surrounding Jesus. The discussion list he joined is [\*The JesusMysteries\*](#) - hereafter called *JM*. In *JM*, the listers approached Tabor's work enthusiastically and in no time, Tabor was flooded with damaging questions and, predictably, howlers started emerging from him.

Within a few days, Tabor found himself in a corner and everything he gave out was taken apart with relentless logic backed by historico-critical method. He was left with nothing to hold on to. As most people do when they find themselves in the neck of the woods, Tabor sought a quick exit.

James Tabor walked out of the *JesusMysteries* list, [declaring](#) that he was "utterly convinced that Jesus existed, as is every competent historian" at any major university in the Western world.

The tendency of imposing a narrow interpretation of the evidence by dogmatic scholars and declaring it to be the only way was one Turton was all too familiar with. Indeed, this dogmatic assertion got Tabor locked on Turton's crosshairs and Turton promised to go through the book with a toothcomb.

One of the listers, Rod Green, remarked:

Dr. Tabor's comments [are] a great reminder of the walls that still exist between academia in all disciplines and the rest of the intellectual world (and there is an intellectual world existing outside the walls of academia).

I was most interested in his statement that every competent historian in the western world (that he knew of) asserted the historicity of Jesus. This statement would have been more impressive if it had asserted that "every" or even "most" historians in the western world agreed with Dr. Tabor's position (we'll set aside the regional geo-political bias in that statement), but of course, this would not have been an accurate statement.

There are, of course, historians and academics of various stripes who have challenged the historicity of Jesus and certainly the Jesus of Dr. Tabor's imaginings, but they would thus not qualify in Dr. Tabor's eyes as

“competent.” Competence here means agreeing with the commentator’s position. All others become, by definition, incompetent

The walls between the conservative right and the liberal left in New Testament studies that Green comments on were further manifest later when Turton stuck a pin in the backside of Tabor’s bloated work, and the vituperative reaction that ensued after the deflation.

In a week's time, as promised, Michael wrote a review of Tabor's *The Jesus Dynasty*. It was a scathing, hard-hitting review. Michael had no kind words for Tabor and it was clear from Michael's review and the ensuing discussions that Tabor's training and presumed familiarity with New Testament Scholarship had no bearing on the contents of the book. In short, it was a methodology-free, amateurish work written by a scholar. Turton stated that it constituted "an insult to the efforts of all the New Testament scholars" and was "an insult to his [Tabor's] lay readers whose minds he filled with pap, and whom he did not take the time to educate."

### **No Patient Objections to the Ludicrous**

Patient objections to the ludicrous become ludicrous themselves, Roger Kimball observed in *The Rape of the Masters: How Political Correctness Sabotages Art*. Kimball's sentiments resonated in Turton's review because Tabor's work relied on sham reasoning and exposed acute absence of critical scholarship. Indeed, as Turton observed, Tabor's work was no more supported by any credible methodology than any of the looney tooney fringe stuff like the *Da Vinci Code*. He further observed that, "The really ironic thing is that Tabor's work is being posited as an antidote to the *Da Vinci Code* when in fact it is exactly like it. The only difference is that its breathless secret reading of the text is orthodox, whereas *Da Vinci Code's* isn't."

But some of Tabor's conservative buddies were not pleased. They would not stand by and watch a "dilletante" use one of their own to mop the floor.

### **Divine Science or Star Trek?**

Michael's review got a disparaging, emotive [reaction](#) from Dr. Jim West, titled [Invincible Ignorance and Inept Reviewers](#). West's response was a poorly-written, choking kludge peppered with paradoxes like "mindless idea" and hyperbolic use of superlatives in expressions like "the worst, rudest, and most revolting", but devoid of substance. Dr. West was so furious that he became incapable of realizing that his position was contradictory. I have captured an image of West’s response at the end of this write up just in case West deletes it from his blog.

One reader [notes](#) regarding West's contradictory and vacuous response:

"The issue" according to Dr West is "the rightness or sensibleness of dilettantes delving into arena's in which they have no competence, ability, or training." When I read this blog entry I saw no defence of this issue. I saw no evidence regarding the competence of the dilettante he is haranguing. All I saw was the writer's anger, the writer's feeling of some affront caused by the dilettante somehow encroaching on his turf, turf for which he has a license to be on.

Dr West writes "Does free speech really mean any and every fool who has a stupid or mindless idea or opinion should befoul the airwaves with it?" However, we know by the fact that he took the trouble to read the review that he is not in fact dealing with a stupid person with mindless ideas, unless Dr West is a masochist who likes reading foolish rubbish despite himself. He actively sought out the review. He went to the site. He didn't have to.

West complains that Turton is "not a professionally trained exegete" and yet fails to provide readers of his blog with a link to Turton's review so that they can judge Turton's alleged incompetence for themselves. He would rather limit the readers of his blog into relying on his own content-free, vituperative assessment of Turton's review.

Clearly angry, West questions "the rightness or sensibleness of dilettantes delving into arena's in which they have no competence, ability, or training." But West fails to illustrate that Turton lacks competence or ability. He merely asserts it.

West appears unfamiliar with the case of the Russian, Harry Igor Ansoff, who was trained as an engineer and mathematician yet he became Professor of Strategic Management and is arguably the father of Corporate Strategy. West would otherwise not wonder why "a person who teaches one subject imagines himself an expert in another." Besides, Michael never claimed expertise: he simply debunked Tabor's work, which was, for all intents and purposes, pure bunk.

It is strange that Jim West thinks that one's abilities are limited to the training they have gained. Indeed, several fields in scholarship have been influenced remarkably by contributors from other fields. So much so that the expression "think outside the box" has become a common phrase among people seeking innovative solutions to problems or fresh perspectives. Any interested observer knows that the New Testament scholarship needs fresh perspectives, perspectives that are unchained by the confessional interests that have becalmed several conservative scholars in the field as they stand in stagnant hermeneutical waters, unperturbed by the choking putrescence of their flatulent paradigms.

West's fulminating response completely failed to address anything substantive that Michael wrote and focused solely on Turton's credentials. His overwrought carping on

Turton's alleged dilettantism was a smokescreen designed to hide the glaring defects of the work of Tabor. But the bloated mentality of West's patronizing stance cannot camouflage the slow-thinking anemic mentality behind Tabor's theological pap.

It is clear that West and like-minded critics of Turton are incapable of mustering a scholarly response that directly address the issues that Turton raises regarding Tabor's book. Since West's vaunted credentials fail to help West in any way to respond to Michael, and since his response is purely fuelled by bigoted anger and sectarian bias, West has failed to show exactly how his credentials make him better qualified to comment on the matter.

### **Meeting Dr. Jim West – Divinity Master**

Who is Dr. Jim West? We encounter the following introduction in [biblioblog](#):

Jim West is the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Petros, Tennessee. He received his MDiv and ThM from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and his ThD from Andersonville Baptist Seminary

From this brief introduction, we learn that West is a pastor and a holder of a couple of cornflake certificates from Theological Seminaries. What is a Masters in divinity worth? An observer has [remarked](#) that it is "as valuable as a doctorate in Star Trek". But more seriously, a Philosophy Doctor reminds us in the same page:

...a degree simply points to a person having an extensive knowledge about a field. It does not automatically make that knowledge truthful. People should not use the fact of their degrees in place of arguments for positions, whether the degrees are accredited or not. A degree does not guarantee truth or prevent one from being in error.

As a pastor, Jim West works as a priest having spiritual charge over a congregation. This means that West presides over certain ceremonies where dogmatic assertions are made regarding Biblical texts: the very texts that critical scholarship demands that West studies objectively. The very same texts West considers sacrosanct when he puts on his pastoral work.

In Andersonville's "Doctrine" page, under The Scriptures, we find the following passage:

We believe that the Bible is the Word of God and is the absolute authority in determining the faith and practice of God's people. We affirm that the sixty-six books of the Bible are inerrant, divinely and uniquely inspired, and are given to mankind written as they were inspired by the Spirit of God. These Scriptures are divinely intended for personal study through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Recall that West got his ThD from Andersonville. The Seminary where the Bible is held as inerrant.

## **Objective Biblical Inerrantist?**

Clearly, West lumps with Biblical inerrantists. How much objectivity can we expect from a pastor who has committed himself to such dogmatic beliefs? Indeed, doesn't honesty demand that West and like-minded individuals, who are supposed to be objective, disqualify themselves on the grounds of lack of impartiality?

Let us consider whether West's entire response is rational. In *Why People Believe in Weird Things*, Michael Shermer defines rationalism as the practice of arriving at conclusions based on evidence or logic and dogmatism as forming conclusions based on authority rather than logic and evidence. West demands that we disregard Turton's logic and evidence because Turton is a dilettante, and solely rely on whether Turton is licensed to speak on the subject at hand. We thus clearly see that West's response was irrational.

West's substance-free put-down exposes his lack of impartiality and is an effort to suppress the free expression of ideas that are contrary to the doctrinaire historical Jesus axiom of which West is a strong believer. West is deluded if he thinks that anybody is naive enough to regard a pastor as capable of critical scholarship. It would be like expecting objective history about the Holocaust from a Holocaust denier.

## **The Theology Contagion in NT Scholarship**

To appreciate the extent to which theology has engulfed critical scholarship in NT studies, let us redirect a bit. Fifteen years ago, in *The Historical Jesus*, John Dominic Crossan wrote regarding the unstandardized nature of historical Jesus research: "the historical Jesus research is becoming something of a scholarly bad joke". Crossan added that because of this unscholarly, foggy nature "it is impossible to avoid the suspicion that historical Jesus research is a very safe place to do theology and call it history, to do autobiography and call it biography". However, J. P. Meier, believes that Crossan and like-minded scholars are deluded on this and he contends that HJ scholars are doing theology, whether they realize it or not.

Interestingly, Crossan received a doctorate of divinity from Maynooth College, Ireland, in 1959. JP Meier, his compatriot, and who is normally on the receiving end of his criticism, is a Catholic University scholar who believes that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human. He is a scholar who, among other things, has tried to bridge the gap created by Rudolph Bultmann's dichotomy, which sought to separate Christ from the historical Jesus. Meier holds a doctorate in sacred Scripture (1976) from the Biblical Institute in Rome. In 1968, he graduated from the theology program at Gregorian University and has served as a Catholic priest.

Meier thinks that "a lot of the confusion comes from the fact that people claim they are doing a quest for the historical Jesus when *de facto* they're doing theology, albeit a theology that is indeed historically informed. Go all the way back to Reimarus, through Schleiermacher, all the way down the line through Bultmann, Kasemann, Bornkamm. These are basically people who are theologians, doing a more modern type of

Christology". When asked about historicity of Jesus' miracles, he opines that "It's a matter of faith."

### **We Are Only Going To Improve**

This matter-of-faith approach regarding the existence of a historical Jesus is what set off Turton. And since Turton dismembered Tabor's work, followed by Jim West's assault, a number of strange things have unfolded including Turton's public apology to Tabor and his deletion of the infamous review from the net.

As Jim and like-minded theologians celebrate Turton's withdrawal, I would like to remind them of Turton's recent [observation](#):

For the nonce their output, like my own, is that of dilettantes, people who have to study in their spare time. It is unruly -- uneven, polemical, enormously energetic, wildly erroneous, sometimes amazingly uninformed, sometimes staggeringly insightful. But whatever its faults it is only going to improve. And each year that the Christian Right digs at the foundations of the United States, the number of ahistoricists will grow, because it is the natural response of people like me who were once willing to live and let live ...Doherty himself is an excellent example of how these two ideas cross-fertilize, for not only does he work on ahistorical Jesus theories, he also works with groups that oppose the Christian Right. And as the number of ahistoricists grows, Jim, we're going to get better at it. Why? Because there is no historical Jesus, Jim. He's a legitimating construction of the early proto-orthodox Christian Church in its struggles with competing Christianities, evolving out of many roots.

We are only going to improve.

Below is Jim West's response as it appears in his [blog](#).

The screenshot shows a blog post by Dr. Jim West. The header includes the name 'Dr. Jim West' and a Hebrew quote: 'כי בער אנכי מאיש ולא בינת אדם לי - PROV 30:2'. The date is '18 MAY 2006'. The title of the post is 'Invincible Ignorance and Inept Reviewers'. The main text discusses a review of Jim Tabor's book, expressing frustration with the reviewer's lack of expertise and the resulting misrepresentation of the author's work. It mentions that the reviewer spends time attempting to force Tabor's book to say things it clearly doesn't say. The post also touches on the broader issue of dilettantes delving into areas where they lack competence and the impact of such reviews on the search for truth. It concludes by recommending a good review of Tabor's book from Christianity Today or Witherington's blog over the one mentioned in the post.

**Dr. Jim West**  
כי בער אנכי מאיש ולא בינת אדם לי - PROV 30:2

18 MAY 2006

### Invincible Ignorance and Inept Reviewers

I just finished reading a review of Jim Tabor's book on one of the weblogs (that I neither link to nor read normally, nor endorse so I will not name it lest it receive publicity which it clearly does not deserve) that left me a bit more disgusted than normally.

The reviewer, not a professionally trained exegete (though he talks endlessly about his exegesis), spends his time in the review attempting to force Tabor's book to say things it clearly doesn't say. As a review, it's the worst, rudest, and most revolting I've ever bothered with. But I mention it because it raises a broader issue which concerns me greatly and which arises far too often.

The issue- the rightness or sensibleness of dilettantes delving into arena's in which they have no competence, ability, or training. What, after all, gives the blogger the right to speak on Tabor's book when he clearly has no idea about the issues involved? And why does he believe that he deserves a hearing?

It's so very curious to me that a person who teaches one subject imagines himself an expert in another. How has this state of affairs come to pass? Does free speech really mean any and every fool who has a stupid or mindless idea or opinion should befoul the airwaves with it? And more importantly, when seekers of the truth encounter such ignorance and stupidity as they will in the aforementioned dilettante's review, will they have the tools to recognize exactly how inept it is or will they be befuddled by the reviewers malignant ignorance?

The old "let the buyer beware" mentality of the marketplace surely needs to be broadened to "let the reader beware". There's more manure on the internet than is spread in all the fields of Europe and if people aren't very, very careful, they will step into a big steaming pile and ruin their shoes.

If you want a good review of Tabor's book, even Book's in Christianity Today or Witherington's on his blog or one of the numerous newspaper reviews is better than the garbage on that dilettante's blog. Let the reader beware.

POSTED BY JIM AT 5/18/2006 07:33:00 AM

**Biblical and Theological Blogs**

- Aantekeningen bij de Bijbel
- Arcanum
- Blue Cord
- Buddy Boone's Biblical Studies Blog
- Cafe Apocalypse
- Chrisendom
- Codex Blogspot
- Daily Hebrew
- Das Bibel-Blog
- Dave Black
- Deinde
- Dr. Joe Cathey
- Dr. Mariottini's Blog
- Earliest Christian History
- Euangelion
- Faith and Theology
- Gospel of Matthew
- Higgsion
- Hypotyposesis
- Novum Testamentum
- NT Gateway Blog

Send comments to: [jaliet\\_2000@yahoo.com](mailto:jaliet_2000@yahoo.com)