Cruci-Fiction and Resuscitation

A paid advertisement in a campus newspaper declaring Christ's resurrection a hoax was deeply disturbing to its readers. This essay raises 9 problems with the ad and answers them.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

The title used above was the headline of a paid advertisement in a campus newspaper from a major university. Allegedly written by a university student named "Daniel," the ad appeared as a result of Resurrection Week on that campus in the spring of 1997.

I received a copy of the ad in a letter from a long-time friend of my son. He was angry, confused, and scared by the article. He opened his letter by saying, "This is one of the most upsetting articles that I have ever read. This paid advertisement' has contradicted everything that I believe in. It makes a mockery out of the way I have chosen to pattern my life. It even frightens me."

In this essay we are going to address the misleading statements and half-truths found in the article. A few days after receiving this correspondence, I took the article and broke it down into nine significant errors or issues raised by the author. My procedure will be quote each half-truth or misleading statement, then address it.

I do not presume that this brief treatment will completely answer all of the objections raised by the "paid advertisement," but these thoughts were a great help to my son's friend as he took a deeper look at his faith. I trust that they will be equally helpful to you.

Christian Scholars and the Bible

Problem #1

"Have you ever wondered why so many biblical experts are so skeptical about Jesus' resurrection' and why even a growing number of Christian scholars and theologians are heard saying that his resurrection is not so central to Christianity" ("Cruci-fiction").

It appears that Daniel is only interested in going to those "biblical experts" and "Christian scholars" that support his position. It is no secret that there are a number of Christian scholars who hold a low view of the Bible and the deity of Christ, i.e., they do not believe in the veracity or trustworthiness of the Scriptures or the deity of Christ.

They very often question not only the deity of Christ and His resurrection, but also the Trinity, His uniqueness as a Savior, and His second coming. They also tend to discount hell as a place for eternal damnation and consider sin as only a mistake. They see guilt as being of no consequence because it is imposed on humanity by those who would enforce a strict moral code of conduct.

Daniel's comment about Christian scholars and theologians not considering the resurrection of Jesus being of any real importance is a ridiculous notion that denigrates the uniqueness of Jesus and ultimately places Him on the same plane as Buddha, Krishna, or any other "holy man" in history. Jesus is totally unique and that distinct difference is based on His resurrection in bodily form. Without the Resurrection, there is no salvation for we are still in our sin.

Next, we will look at Daniel's assumption that there were tens and possibly hundreds of "gospels" in existence at the time the church selectively chose the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as a basis for understanding God's truth, along

with his assertion that the Apostle Paul fabricated these writings to alter the truth.

Numerous Gospels

Problem #2

Now we are going to look at the question of the canon: just where did the Bible come from and how can we know that it is trustworthy?

Our antagonist, Daniel, continues by making this statement:

"Since preachers have often failed to inform the people of what really happened in events surrounding the so called resurrection,' I will make an attempt to give the most possible accurate picture. Our information source will be the four surviving gospels even though they have been carefully selected by the Church from a pool of a multitude of gospels' tens, possibly hundreds. . . . The four surviving gospels were edited and corrected over time to best fit the doctrines worked out earlier by Paul" ("Cruci-fiction").

There is no doubt that there were a number of "gospels" circulating during and after the first century. But, Daniel's problem is that he does not have an understanding of how the Bible was canonized. There were several ways various writings were judged to be authentic. If they failed in any one area, they were suspect overall.

First, for a gospel or other book to be considered authentic by the early church, the author must have been an Apostle, one who had been with Jesus during His ministry.

Remember that Jesus promised His disciples the Holy Spirit would enable them to remember His teachings so that they could communicate them accurately to others. He said to the Apostles, "These things I have spoken to you, while abiding with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father

will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (John 16:25-26). Jesus, who is absolutely reliable, believed that what the disciples wrote about Him would be just as true as if He wrote it Himself. That means that it would be historically accurate.

Second, the book had to be authoritative. Did it come from the hand of God? The previous passage indicates that a genuine message from God would come through the Holy Spirit.

Third, is it prophetic? Was it written by a man of God?

Fourth, is it authentic? When in doubt about a manuscript, the Church fathers threw it out.

Fifth, is it dynamic? Did it contain the life-transforming power of God?

Sixth, was the book received and used by the people and considered to be authentic and authoritative?

Daniel uses Irenaeus as a source for the idea of tens, even hundreds, of possible gospels circulating in the first century and subtly implies that he (Irenaeus) questioned their authenticity out of hand. However, we know that Irenaeus, according to historical documentation, gave credence to the four Gospels of the Bible.

Irenaeus was a student of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, had been a Christian for eighty-six years, and was a disciple of John the Apostle. Irenaeus wrote the following regarding the four Gospels of the New Testament:

> *So firm is the ground upon which the Gospels rest, that the very heretics themselves bear witness to them, and, starting from these (documents), each one of them endeavors to establish his own particular doctrine. For as there are four quarters of the world in which we live, and four universal winds, and as the Church dispersed over all the earth, and*

> *the gospel is the pillar and base of the Church and the breath of life, so it is natural that it should have four pillars, breathing immortality from every quarter and kindling the life of men anew. Whence it is manifest that the Word, the architect of all things, who sits upon the cherubim and holds all things together, having been manifested to men, has given us the gospel in fourfold form, but held together by one Spirit (Against Heresies III).*

It seems as if Irenaeus would probably differ with Daniel on this count.

The latter part of Daniel's statement, "The four surviving gospels were edited and corrected over time to best fit the doctrines worked out earlier by Paul" holds no water as well.

Daniel makes it seem that Paul was the official editor of the New Testament and that nothing made the canon unless he approved of its inclusion.

Daniel seems to overlook the fact that the books of the Bible were decided upon by Church Councils and not individuals. Plus, there is an overwhelming amount of manuscript evidence to help the inquiring student to recognize that there was no wholesale editing of the Gospels. (For more information on this, see the Probe article Are the Biblical Documents Reliable?)

Remember these manuscripts were being used daily by the Church and those using the Scripture were contemporaries of Paul. If, in fact, he had edited or distorted the writings of the Apostles, he would have had his hand called (see Acts 17:10-11) and would have been ostracized. The fact is, it didn't happen.

Crucifixion and Prophecies

Problem #3 Next, our antagonist, Daniel, questions the fact

that Jesus really died on the cross and makes this statement regarding the event.

"In order to speed up death of the crucified , he ordered the soldiers to break the legs of both criminals, but not those of Jesus" ("Cruci-fiction").

It appears that Daniel is not familiar with prophecy and, in particular, those prophecies relating to Jesus' death. Psalms 34:20 says, "He keeps all his bones; Not one of them is broken." The fulfillment of this prophecy is found in John 19:33 where it is said, "But coming to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs."

The Romans were not novices when it came to crucifixion and death. They knew a dead person when they saw one. It seems that Daniel cannot accept this possibility.

Problem #4

"But one soldier thrust a lance into his side. How can one see that a person is dead without a careful close inspection of signs of life as heartbeat and breathing? How many times are people pulled from water, fires, car wrecks who appear to be dead, but then are resurrected?' And if the soldier saw that Jesus was dead, why the lancing? No reason for it.

"Moreover, Romans never lanced the crucified. If the soldier did not get special orders from Pilate and if he was only a bit suspicious that Jesus was alive (as he had all reasons to be), he would have broken Jesus' legs like anyone else's, no preferential treatment. It seems that the lancing (was) observed only by a mysterious anonymous witness" ("Cruci-fiction").

Once again Daniel is allowing his bias to overtake his lack of understanding of the prophecies surrounding the Crucifixion

Zechariah 12:10 says, “They will look on me whom they have pierced.”

John 19:34 offers the fulfillment of this prophecy. It reads, “But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear.”

Daniel is caught up with the notion that Jesus did not die on the cross, but seemed to have fainted and was resuscitated at a later time, thereby ignoring some basic facts regarding the death of Christ. There is no record that any of the onlookers questioned the fact of Jesus’ death; also the centurion gave testimony of the death of Jesus to Pilate (Mark 15:44).

Furthermore, the piercing of His side confirmed that Jesus was indeed dead. But, equally important is the fact that from the wound came both blood and water. John 19:34 35 gives us an eyewitness account of the effect of the piercing. We read that blood and water poured from the wound, but had Jesus been alive at the time of the piercing, strong spurts of blood would have come forth with every heartbeat. Instead, we are told that a semi-dark red clot was seeping out and was separate from a flow of watery serum. These signs are evidence of massive clotting of the blood in the main arteries and, therefore, proof of death.

Problem #5

Next in our analysis of Christ’s crucifixion, we are going to deal with several problems about which our antagonist, Daniel, attempts to create doubt. In doing so, we catch Daniel using poor logic to make his case against the Resurrection.

Daniel continues by observing that the lancing of Jesus was *“observed only by a mysterious anonymous witness which appears only in John’s gospel (and) was the author’s initiative to correct the previously written three gospels which did not document any such lancing”* (“Cruci-fiction”).

Each of the gospel writers had different interests: Matthew

was a tax-collector; Mark was the son of Mary and close to the Apostles; Luke was a physician; and John was a fisherman. Each of these men likewise had a different perspective in their Gospel narrative. Luke, although he was a physician, wrote his Gospel as a historical account. John offers the reader no account of the birth of Jesus, His baptism, or His temptations; it tells us nothing of the Last Supper, nothing of Gethsemane, and nothing of the Ascension, to name just a few omissions.

However, if we are to use Daniel's logic we would have to discount all these facts because they were not mentioned in all four Gospels that "survived the editing of Paul."

Genealogies of Christ

Problem #6

"When Matthew and Luke were independently editing the earlier Mark's gospel, they knew that its contemporary critics pointed out that the Messiah must come from David's line and Mark did not mention Jesus' genealogy. So each made up his own list of names" ("Cruci-fiction").

Here, Daniel seems to be a bit lazy. Instead of doing a little research to gain an understanding of Jesus' lineage, he simply makes the comment that each writer just made it up to suit his own wishes.

In Judaism a man's lineage was his pedigree. It was a matter of high regard for a Jew to have direct lineage from Abraham, thereby proving his Jewishness. The Gospel writers had different reasons for including Jesus' pedigree.

As Daniel points out, the genealogies given by Matthew and Luke are quite different. There are several possibilities for this occurrence.

Luke includes the genealogy between Adam and Abraham. The

section between Abraham and David is the same in both Matthew and Luke. However, the genealogies between David and Joseph are almost completely different. Why is this?

One school of thought is that both genealogies are symbolic and that Matthew gives us the line of royal descent of Jesus and Luke gives us the line of priestly descent.

Another school of thought is that one genealogy (Matthew's) gives Christ's ancestral line from Abraham through Joseph (Jesus' legal father, though not His natural one) establishing Jesus' legal right to the throne of David. This fits the Jewishness of the Gospel of Matthew. The second part of this approach is that the genealogy in Luke traces Jesus' ancestry from Mary (Jesus' physical mother) back to Adam (physical father of the human race). (There are some minor concerns about the spelling of some names in this genealogy, but this seems to be the best answer.) It is also very compatible with the universal character of the book of Luke.

The fact is that we do not fully know which genealogical approach is more correct. However, we do know that genealogies were extremely important to the Jews and the idea of making them up is preposterous and would have been exposed.

Our next discussion will center on the claim that Jesus did not die on the cross, but only swooned.

Burial of Christ

Problem #7

"Thus Jesus was taken off the cross after approximately three hours by Joseph of Arimathea and was buried on his property in his new tomb that he (Joseph) had hewn in the rock.' Why there? Why didn't Joseph bury Jesus in the ground as most people were buried, but instead he put him into his own tomb? Because in the ground Jesus would have certainly suffocated. Moreover, Joseph knew that he would be able to reuse the tomb

in the future” (“Cruci-fiction”).

It is true that the Romans normally buried those who were crucified in a pit unless the body was claimed. The body of Jesus was not claimed by a family member or by one of the disciples. They were evidently too scared and feared the possible outcome of doing so. It was Joseph of Arimathea who desired a more appropriate resting place for the body of the Lord.

Joseph realized that he had to move quickly in order to accomplish his goal of burial because the Sabbath was close. There was no time for elaborate preparations, and Joseph did what any other believer would have done he made his newly hewn sepulcher available to our Lord.

The tomb was in close proximity to Golgotha and spared Joseph and Nicodemus the trouble of preparing a burial site along with the need to prepare the body.

Problem #8

“What would you do in Joseph’s place knowing Jesus had only been on the cross three hours and had not had his legs broken? Exactly what Joseph did. Once dark settled, he took several of his servants and unrolled the stone to get Jesus out. According to all expectations, Jesus was alive, so Joseph got him out and rolled the stone back. Only the next day did the Pharisees realize their mistake and asked Pilate to guard the tomb, by which time Jesus was resting in Joseph’s house” (“Cruci-fiction”).

On the surface this argument sounds plausible. However, it does not take into account the fact that Joseph fully believed and recognized that Jesus was indeed dead. If he were to follow through, as Daniel suggests, by removing the stone and taking Jesus to his home for recuperation, he would have been directly disobeying Jewish law.

Jewish law prohibited a Jew from working on the Sabbath. They had very strict ideas about what comprised work. It is highly unlikely that Joseph would have risked the penalty for breaking the Sabbath for removing a body that he believed was dead. For what purpose? To risk the penalty of death for breaking the Sabbath?

According to scholars, the stone that was placed at the entrance of the tomb was not only larger than what would normally be used, but one that would take twenty men to move. Beyond the above, if Joseph did return with twenty men to remove the stone and release Jesus, it would be most unlikely that it could have been kept secret. It is untenable to think that such a conspiracy would have succeeded.

Likewise, it is ludicrous to suggest that after the Roman guard was posted and the tomb sealed, that evidence of tampering—should someone be so foolhardy as to try it—would have escaped the notice of the highly trained Roman soldiers. They knew the penalty for failure was death.

Problem #9

"Next we are told that after Sabbath was over women came to the tomb. Why? To anoint the body with spices as Mark 16:1 says? No! It is not a Jewish custom to open graves and anoint corpses which have already been buried and which have been fermenting for two days!" ("Cruci-fiction").

Here Daniel is correct. However he does not take into account the special circumstances under which Jesus was interred.

Under normal conditions a body would have been properly prepared with ample time in which to complete the task. Joseph and Nicodemus had very little time to accomplish their duty before the Sabbath restrictions were imposed. The women sitting at the preparation site saw that the process was incomplete according to their custom and subsequently desired to prepare the body in the proper way. Therefore, they made

plans to return after the Sabbath and finish the process by anointing the body with sweet spices, nard, or some costly unguent.

Perhaps the most damaging piece of information to Daniel's hypothesis is the fact that the grave clothes were left undisturbed in the place where the body was laid. The body of Jesus was wrapped from the armpits to the ankles with strips of linen twelve inches wide. The linen wraps were then wound around the body placing spices, aloes, and other fine ointments between the wraps. It is believed that a minimum of seventy pounds of spices were used in the process and as much as a hundred pounds were used for someone of Jesus' position.

The grave clothes constituted quite a mass encasing the body. If we are to assume Daniel's position that Joseph and several of his servants took the body, we would expect that they were concerned about being detected. Therefore, they would have likely been in a great hurry, and we should expect that the grave clothes would have been left in great disarray with spices trailing out the doorway, not to mention that it would have been difficult to have placed the grave clothes neatly back on the resting place in the dark while being in a great hurry to do so.

However, the observers did not find spices and wrappings trailing out of the doorway. The grave clothes were intact, undisturbed with the exception of the head napkin that was placed slightly above where it should have been found.

John R. W. Stott in his book, *Basic Christianity*, makes this observation: "The body had disappeared. It would have vaporized, being transmuted into something new and different and wonderful. It would have passed through the grave clothes, as it was later to pass through closed doors, leaving them untouched and almost undisturbed. For the body clothes, under the weight of one hundred pounds of spices, once support of the body had been removed, would have subsided or collapsed,

and would now be lying flat."

The grave clothes represent an undeniable fact: Jesus was not bodily or physically removed from their bondage, but He was indeed raised, transmuted from them in the glorious act of the Resurrection.

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The Historical Christ

Introduction

Can we trust what our New Testaments tell us about Jesus? Or must we look elsewhere and possibly conclude that Jesus was just a man like all others whose teachings became the basis of a religion largely created by his followers?

Over the past fifteen years or so, New Testament scholars have been involved in what has been called the Third Quest for the historical Jesus. The television program "From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians,"{1} which aired on Public Broadcasting System (PBS) stations April 7th and 8th, 1998, was intended to bring the public up-to-date with the latest "new and controversial historical evidence" about Jesus and the establishment of the church.

If you watched the program you might have been surprised by some of the things you heard. The narrator said that "archaeologists must sift clues and scholars decode the stories told by the first followers of Jesus" in order to find the truth. It was suggested that the differences between Mark's and John's reports about Jesus' arrest is evidence that they aren't historically accurate accounts. One participant

said that the Gospel writers were only giving their own theology using Jesus as a spokesman.

For the scholars on “From Jesus to Christ,” Jesus was just a man who preached about the coming kingdom of God. He was not the incarnate Son of God. But he had enough charisma that he was able to gather about himself a group of people who were attracted to his ideas, and who sought to keep his memory and teachings alive after he died. As time went by, legends began to develop as words and actions were attributed to Jesus which weren’t really his. The new Christians needed Jesus to speak to their own difficulties, so they put words in his mouth or invented miracles to address whatever the difficulty was.

The views aired on “From Jesus to Christ” are widespread among mainline scholars, and they are the views typically heard on college campuses and in the media. Two assumptions are made about the life of Jesus, and they are considered such common knowledge that they typically aren’t defended. They are: first, that the Gospels aren’t reliable historical documents; and second, that there was no real supernatural element in Jesus’ life and ministry. In fact, the belief that Jesus really didn’t perform miracles or rise from the dead is part of the reason many scholars reject the Gospels as historical documents. One of the participants in the program, John Dominic Crossan, wrote in one of his books, “I do not think that anyone, anywhere, at any time brings dead people back to life.” {2} If one begins with anti-supernatural assumptions, that will affect how one reads historical accounts such as those in the New Testament.

The question of the historical reliability of the Gospels is critical, because Christianity rests upon historical events. If the possibility of having true knowledge of these is gone, we have nothing upon which to base our beliefs. Without the historical events, Christianity becomes just another set of beliefs.

Since the PBS program focused on historical issues, we'll concentrate our attention there and leave the matter of the supernatural for another time. But before making a case for the historicity of the Gospels, we should have some background information on the project of searching for the historical Jesus.

A Brief History of the Quest

The first indication that "From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians" might not be presenting historically orthodox views of Jesus is the title of the program itself. The viewer might have thought that "From Jesus to Christ" referred to what Peter said in Acts 2:36: "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ this Jesus whom you crucified." The scholars on "From Jesus to Christ," however, weren't thinking of the position to which Jesus was exalted by God the Father; they were thinking about the position Jesus' *followers* gave him through the development of the Christian religion. In other words, Jesus the man from Nazareth was transformed *by his followers* to Jesus the Christ, the Son of God. The result was a break between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.

So, where did this idea come from?

In the last century and a half there have been three so-called "quests" for the historical Jesus. The first quest began in the 19th century when David Strauss published a book titled *The Life of Jesus*. Believing "that the Gospels could no longer be read straightforwardly as unvarnished historical records of what Jesus actually said and did,"{3} Strauss said that "unbiased historical research" needed to be done to find out who Jesus really was. Why did Strauss think we could no longer accept the Gospel narratives at face value? As philosopher Stephen Evans says, "The quick answer is simply 'modernity.'" In the era of the Enlightenment, optimism about the power of human reason quickly led to the renunciation of the

supernatural, so that reports of miracles and resurrections were now to be considered pre-scientific and mythological.{4} Since so much of the Gospels deals with the supernatural, the documents were no longer to be trusted historically.

In the 1940s a second quest began with students of German theologian Rudolf Bultmann. According to Bultmann, very little could be known about the historical Jesus, not much more than that he lived and died on a cross. Some of his students began a new effort to find the historical Jesus. This second quest continued until the early 70s.{5}

In the early 80s the Third Quest for the historical Jesus began with the rise of a new enthusiasm about the prospects of historical study.{6} New archaeological and manuscript data have greatly increased our knowledge of Jesus' world. This quest seeks to know who Jesus was by understanding the world in which he lived.

These three quests have been based upon the idea that the Gospels are deficient in giving us a true picture of Jesus of Nazareth. Now, it's tempting to just brush all this aside as liberal balderdash, but we should be careful not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Some good information is coming out of current studies.{7} However, not everything is to be accepted simply on the academic merits of participating scholars. In fact, the work of the Jesus Seminar, a splinter group that was represented in the program by at least three of the scholars, has drawn conclusions that even most liberal scholars reject. What we need to do is to look at the arguments presented and see if they hold water historically.

What follows, then, is a brief defense of the historical reliability of the Gospels.

Dating the Gospels

The assumption in "From Jesus to Christ" that the Gospels are

not historically reliable records was very clear. Historian Paula Fredriksen said, “What [the Gospels] do is proclaim their individual author’s interpretation of the Christian message through the device of using Jesus of Nazareth as a spokesperson for the evangelist’s position” (FJTC, Pt. 2). Thus, these documents aren’t to be taken literally as historically true. There are at least three reasons many scholars believe this: a late date for writing; biased writers; and differences between the Gospels. Let’s look first at the question of dating.

Mainline New Testament scholars believe that the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—were written after the fall of Jerusalem to Rome in A.D. 70. Mark was written first, drawing on earlier written and oral traditions. Matthew and Luke drew from Mark and still other traditions. Even conservative scholars recognize an interdependency in the Synoptics. The crucial issue here is *when* the documents were written. A late date would give more time for legends to develop. Late dates for the Synoptics would also suggest that they weren’t really written by Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

However, although the dates aren’t firmly established, good arguments have been given for earlier dating which would strengthen the case for the historicity of the Gospels.

Craig Blomberg, a professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary, provides several arguments for early dates. For one thing, the early church fathers said that Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written by the biblical characters we’re familiar with. “No competing traditions assigning these books to any other authors have survived,” he says, “if any ever existed.”{8} For example, in the late second century, one of the church fathers said Matthew composed his gospel before Paul was martyred under Nero in the 60s A.D. Blomberg wonders why the early believers would have attributed these writings to such unlikely candidates as Matthew, Mark and Luke if they were written by others. Mark and Luke weren’t apostles. And

Matthew didn't have an especially good reputation. "The apocryphal Gospels," Blomberg continues, "consistently picked more well-known and exemplary figures for their fictitious authors—for example, Philip, Peter, James, Bartholomew or Mary."{9}

Another argument Blomberg presents is built upon the date of the book of Acts. Acts ends abruptly with no record of what happened to Paul. Why would Luke have left out that important information if he wrote the book a decade or more after Paul's death? And why would he make no mention of the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70? The likely explanation for the abrupt ending of Acts is that it was written as the events unfolded—in other words, while Paul was still alive (Paul died in the mid-60s). If so, then Luke's Gospel—as the first part of his two-part history—must have been written earlier. Since Luke drew from Mark, Mark must have been written earlier still.

A case can be made, then, that the Synoptic Gospels were written within about 30 years of Jesus' death. This puts them close enough to the events that the facts they report could be corrected if wrong.{10}

The Gospel Writers and Historical Truth

Assuming that we have presented a plausible argument for early dates for the Synoptics, this still leaves unanswered the question whether the writers *intended* to write factual history.

On the program, Prof. Dominic Crossan suggested that we are mistaken in taking the Gospels factually because the writers didn't intend us to do so. He says that the issue "is whether the people who told us the stories in the ancient world took them all literally, and now we're so smart that we know to take them symbolically, or they all intended them symbolically and we're so dumb that we've been taking them literally."

Crossan takes the second option. He says, “I think we have been misinterpreting these stories because the people who write [sic] them don’t seem the least bit worried about their diversity. We see the problem and then we want to insist that they’re literal. I think that we have misread the Scriptures, not that they have miswritten them” (FJTC, Pt. 2).

Thus, it is thought that Matthew inflated the importance of the Pharisees in his Gospel because they were so influential later in the first century when the book was written. Mark, they say, presented Jesus as the persecuted one because Mark’s community was suffering. And Luke embellished his narrative with “shipwrecks and exotic animals and exotic vegetation” (FJTC, Pt. 2) to make it more in keeping with the novelistic literature of his time.

While it’s surely true that each writer chose the events and sayings of Jesus that he thought were significant and which would be meaningful to his audience, this doesn’t mean the stories were made up.

Craig Blomberg offers some help here. First, he points to the opening statement in Luke’s Gospel where Luke declared his intent to “write an orderly account” of the things he had “carefully investigated . . . from the beginning” (Lu. 1:1-4).{11} Luke wanted to convey the truth.

But were Luke’s sources *themselves* concerned with accurately passing on what Jesus said and did? Some believe that, since the church thought Jesus was returning soon, they wouldn’t worry about accurate reporting. But first, it isn’t certain that Jesus’ followers thought he would return right away. And second, the Israelites before them had kept accurate records of the things prophets said, even though they were expecting at any time the coming Day of the Lord (Joel 2:1; Obad. 15; Hab. 2:3). The words of Jesus, who was considered greater than a prophet, would have held even greater value to early believers. They had a good reason for accurately remembering

and reporting.

Prof. Blomberg also says that if the Gospel writers devised the words and works of Jesus to suit the needs of the early church, one might expect that they would have addressed the controversies that arose after Jesus ascended to heaven. The writers could have put in Jesus' mouth answers to these issues. But this didn't happen. Jesus didn't answer the controversy over circumcision; he didn't say whether Christians could divorce non-Christian spouses; he didn't settle the matter of speaking in tongues. It seems that "the first Christians *were* interested in preserving the distinction between what happened during Jesus' life and what was debated later in the churches."

Thus, contrary to what Prof. Crossan said, we are not "dumb" to believe the Gospel writers intended to give us factual history.

Differences Between the Gospels

A crucial piece of evidence for the view taken by the scholars of "From Jesus to Christ" is that of the differences between what the Gospel writers report. The sequence of some events, and some of the things Jesus said, are recorded differently. This is said to indicate that the Gospels aren't accurate historical documents.

Dominic Crossan gives as an example the accounts in Mark and John of the night before Jesus' death. Mark has Jesus in agony over his coming death, while John shows a more victorious Jesus standing up against the troops which came to arrest him. Crossan concludes, "You have a Jesus out of control, almost, in Mark; a Jesus totally in control in John. . . . Neither of them are historical," he says. "I don't think either of them know [sic] exactly what happened" (FJTC, Pt. 2). Prof. Crossan didn't mention the possibility that, while both writers told the truth, they only told part of the truth. The events

recorded in the four Gospels can be put together to form a coherent account of what happened in the Garden of Gethsemane.{12}

Blomberg argues that the Gospel writers were capable of remembering what Jesus said and did, but they weren't concerned to record it all word for word.

On the one hand, the written word was at a premium in the ancient world, so oral transmission was the primary means of passing on knowledge. Thus, people learned to memorize a great deal of information. To illustrate, Blomberg notes that rote memorization was the method of education for Jewish boys, and rabbis were encouraged to memorize the entire Old Testament.{13}

On the other hand, as another conservative New Testament scholar, Darrell Bock, points out, the tradition for reporting history in the Greco-Roman world involved a "concern for accuracy in reporting the gist of what had been said, even if the exact words were not remembered or recorded." Ancient historians didn't take it upon themselves to simply make up speeches and put them in others' mouths.{14} They saw it as their duty to record what really happened or was said. As Craig Blomberg says, certain details could be omitted and the sequence of events could be changed "*so long as the major events of the narratives and their significance were not altered*" (italics his).{15}

This shouldn't be alarming for those of us who accept the Gospels as God's inspired Word. Even in our *own* experience we don't, for example, question the word of an attentive and trustworthy person who summarizes a speech he heard. Likewise, if I tell you that our *Mind Games* director asked me today to participate in an upcoming conference, I'm telling you the truth of what he said, even if I'm not quoting him verbatim. We can't avoid the fact that Jesus' words and deeds are reported differently in the Gospels. Understanding the method

of ancient historians, however, assures us that we have been given the truth about Jesus. Accepting Paul's testimony that "all Scripture is inspired by God" (2 Tim. 3:16) assures us that the Gospel writers gave us the truth exactly as God wanted it presented.

We have attempted in this essay to show that the Gospel writers *could* have written historical truth because they wrote soon enough after the events to insure against legend; that they *intended* to report what really happened; and that the *differences between the Gospels* do not make for a valid case against their historical truthfulness. There is no reason, then, short of theological bias, to reject what is in the Gospels, and instead search for the real historical Jesus elsewhere.

While those involved in the program "From Jesus to Christ" have benefited the church by their archeological finds and new information about the world in which Jesus lived, they have erred in rejecting the clear message of Jesus in the Gospels. The Christ of faith *is* the Jesus of history.

Notes

1. "From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians," April 7 (Part 1) and April 8 (Part 2), 1998, PBS (hereafter cited in text as FJTC). Transcript obtained from PBS web site: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/.

2. John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), 95.

3. Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 9.

4. C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford:

Clarendon Press, 1996), 13.

5. Witherington, *The Jesus Quest*, 11.

6. Ibid., 12.

7. Darrell L. Bock, New Testament professor, Dallas Theological Seminary. Telephone conversation with the author, April 15, 1998.

8. Craig L. Blomberg, "Where Do We Start Studying Jesus?" in Wilkins and Moreland, Jesus Under Fire, 28.

9. Ibid., 28-29.

10. Ibid., 29.

11. Ibid., 30. Material for the remainder of this section was drawn from Blomberg, 30-32.

12. See for example A. T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels for Students of the Life of Christ* (New York: Harper and Row, 1950), 201-208.

14. Darrell L. Bock, "The Words of Jesus: Live, Jive, or Memorex?" in Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire*, 79.

15. Blomberg, "Where Do We Start?" 32.

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The Deity of Christ

The belief that Jesus was and is God has always been a non-negotiable for Christianity. Don Closson explains that this belief is based on Jesus' own words as well as the teachings of the early church.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

I recently received a letter from someone who argues that there is only one God, and that He is called many names and worshiped by many different people who hold to many different faiths. This kind of thinking about God is common today, but its popularity does not reduce the intellectual problems that may accompany it. For instance, does this notion of god include the god of the Aztecs who required child sacrifice? What about the warrior gods of Norse mythology: Odin, Thor, and Loki? How does the Mormon belief that we can all become Gods if we join their organization and conform to their system of good works fit into this theological framework? Even John Hick, an influential religious pluralist, believes that only some of the world's great religions qualify as having a valid view of God. Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism are valid, but Satanism and the religions of the Waco, Texas, variety are not. Belief that all religious systems worship one God raises difficult questions when we see how different groups portray God and seek to describe how we are to relate to Him.

The issue becomes even more acute when one religious tradition claims that God took on flesh becoming a man and walked on the earth. The Christian tradition has claimed for almost two thousand years that God did just that. The Gospel of John proclaims that, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." John is, of course, talking about Jesus, and this claim presents an interesting challenge for a religious pluralist. If what John and the rest of the New Testament writers claim about Jesus is true, then we literally have God in the flesh walking with and teaching a small band of disciples. If Jesus was God incarnate as He walked the earth, we have a first hand account of what God is like in the biblical record. Truth claims about God that counter those given in the Bible must then be discounted.

In other words, if Jesus was God in the flesh during His time on earth, other religious texts or traditions are wrong when they teach about God or about knowing God in ways that contradict the biblical record.

In this essay we will consider the evidence for the deity of Christ. Christianity's truth claims are dependent on this central teaching, and once accepted, this claim reduces greatly the viability of religious pluralism, of treating all religious beliefs as equally true. For if God truly became flesh and spoke directly to His disciples about such things as sin, redemption, a final judgment, false religions and true worship, then we have the God of the universe expressing intolerance towards other religious claims- -specifically claims that discount the reality of sin and remove the need for redemption or the reality of a final judgment. Some might not agree with God's religious intolerance, but then again, disagreeing with God is what the Bible calls sin.

Rather than begin with a response to attacks on Christ's deity by modern critics like the Jesus Seminar or New Age gnostics, our discussion will begin with Jesus' own self-consciousness, in other words, what did Jesus say and think about himself. From there we will consider the teachings of the Apostles and the early church. My goal is to establish that from its inception, Christianity has taught and believed that Jesus was God in the flesh, and that this belief was the result of the very words that Jesus spoke concerning His own essence.

Christ's Self-Perception

As we begin to examine evidence that supports the claim that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh or God incarnate, a good starting point is Jesus' own self concept. It must first be admitted that Jesus never defines His place in the Trinity in theological language. However, He made many statements about himself that would be not only inappropriate, but blasphemous if He was not God in the flesh. It is important to remember

that Jesus' life was not spent doing theology or thinking and writing about theological issues. Instead, His life was focused on relationships, first with His disciples, and then with the Jewish people. The purpose of these relationships was to engender in these people a belief in Jesus as their savior or Messiah, as their only source of salvation. Jesus told the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders of His day, that they would die in their sins if they did not believe that He was who He claimed to be (John 8:24). And to one Pharisee, Nicodemus, Jesus said, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Millard Erickson, in his book *Christian Theology*, does a nice job of laying out evidence that Jesus considered himself equal in essence with God.(1) Unless He was God, it would have been highly inappropriate for Jesus to say, as He does in Matthew 13:41, that both the angels and the kingdom are His. Elsewhere, angels are called "the angels of God" (Luke 12:8 9; 15:10) and the phrase Kingdom of God is found throughout the Scriptures. But Jesus says, "The Son of man will send **His** angels, and they will gather out of **His** kingdom all causes of sin and evildoers" (Matt. 13:41).

When the paralytic in Mark 2:5 was lowered through the roof by his friends, Jesus' first response was to say that the man's sins were forgiven. The scribes knew the implications of this statement, for only God could forgive sin. Their remarks clearly show that they understood Jesus to be exercising a divine privilege. Jesus had a wonderful opportunity to set the record straight here by denying that He had the authority to do what only God can do. Instead, His response only reinforces His claim to divinity. Jesus says, "Why do you question thus in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, Rise, take up your pallet and walk'?" To confirm His authority to forgive sins, Jesus enabled the man to pick up his pallet and go home.

Two other areas that Jesus claimed authority over was the judging of sin and the observance of the Sabbath. Both were considered God's prerogative by the Jews. In John 5:22-23 Jesus says, "The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father." Jesus also claimed authority to change man's relationship to the Sabbath. Honoring the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments, and the Jews had been given strict instructions on how to observe it. In the book of Numbers, Moses is told by God to stone to death a man who collects wood on the Sabbath. However, in Matthew 12:8 Jesus says that "the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

These examples show that Jesus made claims and performed miracles that reveal a self awareness of His own divinity. In our next section, we will continue in this vein.

Christ's Self-Perception, Part 2

At this point in our discussion we will offer even more examples of Jesus' self knowledge of His essential equality with God.

A number of comments that Jesus made about His relationship with the Father would be unusual if Jesus did not consider himself equal in essence with God. In John 10:30 He says that to see Him is to see the Father. Later in John 14:7-9 He adds that to know Him is to know the Father. Jesus also claimed to have existed prior to His incarnation on earth. In John 8:58 He says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." Some believe that the words used here by Jesus constitute His strongest claim to deity. According to the *Expositors Bible Commentary* this passage might more literally be translated, "Before Abraham came into being, I continuously existed." The Jews recognized the phrase "I am" as one referring to God because God used it (1) to describe himself when He commissioned Moses to demand the release of His people from Pharaoh (Exodus 3:14), and (2) to identifyhimself in the

theistic proclamations in the second half of Isaiah. Jesus also declares that His work is coterminous with the Father. He proclaims that “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23). The Jews hearing Jesus understood the nature of these claims. After His comment about pre-existing Abraham, they immediately picked up stones to kill Him for blasphemy because they understood that He had declared himself God.

In Jesus’ trial He makes a clear declaration of who He is. The Jews argued before Pilate in John 19:7, “We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.” Matthew 26 records that at Jesus’ trial, the high priest tells Jesus, “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.”Jesus replies, “You have said it yourself, . . . But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” This would have been a wonderful opportunity for Jesus to save himself by clearing up any misconceptions concerning His relationship with the Father. Instead, He places himself in a position of equality and of unique power and authority. Again, the Jews understand what Jesus is saying. The high priest proclaims, “He has uttered blasphemy. Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy.” He calls for a vote of the council, and they demand His death (Matt. 26:65-66).

Another indicator of how Jesus perceived himself is in His use of Old Testament Scripture and the way He made His own proclamations of truth. In a number of cases, Jesus began a sentence with “You have heard that it was said, . . . but I say to you. . . .” (Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28). Jesus was giving His words the same authority as the Scriptures. Even the prophets, when speaking for God, would begin their statements with: “The word of the Lord came to me,” but Jesus begins

with: “I say to you.”

There are other indications of how Jesus saw himself. For example, Christ’s claim to have authority over life itself in John 5:21 and 11:25, and His use of the self referential “Son of God” title point to unique power and authority and His essential equality with God.

The Apostles’ Teaching

We will turn now to look at what Jesus’ followers said of Him. The Gospel of John begins with a remarkable declaration of both Christ’s deity and full humanity. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.” Later in verse fourteen John remarks that this “Word” became flesh and walked among them and points to Jesus as this “Word” become flesh. What did John mean by this remarkable passage?

The first phrase might literally be translated: “When the beginning began, the Word was already there.” In other words, the “Word” co- existed with God and predates time and creation. The second phrase “The Word was with God” indicates both equality and distinction of identity. A more literal translation might be “face to face with God,” implying personality and relational coexistence. Some groups, like the Jehovah’s Witnesses, make a great deal of the fact that the word “God” in the third phrase “The Word was God” lacks an article. This, they argue, allows the noun God to be translated as an indefinite noun, perhaps referring to “a God” but not “the” almighty God. Actually, the lack of an article for the noun makes the case for the deity of the “Word” more clearly. The Greek phrase, *theos en ho logos* describes the nature of the “Word,” not the nature of God. The article *ho* before the word *logos* shows that the sentence describes the nature of the Word; He is of the same nature and essence as the noun in the predicate; that is, the Word is divine. It is interesting to note that verses 6, 12, 13, and 18 of the same

chapter refer unambiguously to God the Father and use an anarthrous noun, i.e., a noun without the article.(2) Yet strangely the Jehovah's Witnesses do not dispute the meaning of these passages.

The author of Hebrews writes plainly of Christ's deity. The first chapter states that, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word." The passage also states that Jesus is not an angel nor is He just a priest. In Colossians 1:15 Paul adds that, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together." Although Paul clearly attributes godlike qualities to Jesus, the use of the word firstborn often causes confusion. The word can be a reference to priority in time or supremacy in rank. Since Jesus is described as the Creator of all things, the notion of supremacy seems more appropriate. Philippians 2:5-11 also talks of Jesus existing in the form of God. The Greek term used for form is *morphe*, denoting an outward manifestation of an inner essence.

Mention should also be made of the use by New Testament writers of the word *Lord* for Jesus. The same Greek word was used in the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, as the translated word for the Hebrew words Yahweh and Adonai, two special names given to God the Father. The Apostles meant to apply the highest sense of this term when referring to Jesus.

The Early Church

Thus far we have been examining the Christian claim of Christ's divinity, first considering Jesus' own self-concept and then the thoughts of those who wrote the New Testament. It is not within the scope of this essay to argue that the words

attributed to Jesus by the writers of the New Testament are indeed His. Instead, we have argued that the words attributed to Jesus do claim an essential equality with God the Father. The traditional view of the Christian faith has been that God has revealed himself to us as three separate persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who shared a common essence.

Belief in Jesus' essential equality with God the Father was communicated by the Apostles to the church fathers to whom they handed the task of leading the church. Even though these early leaders often struggled with how to describe the notion of the Trinity with theological accuracy, they knew that their faith was in a person who was both man and God.

Clement of Rome is a good example of this faith. Writing to the church at Corinth Clement implies Jesus' equality with God the Father when he says "Have we not one God, and one Christ and one Spirit of grace poured upon us." Later, in his second letter, Clement tells his readers to "think of Jesus as of God , as the judge of the living and dead." Clement also wrote of Jesus as the preexistent Son of God; in other words, Christ existed before He took on human flesh. Ignatius of Antioch spoke of Christ's nature in his letter to the Ephesians, "There is only one physician, of flesh and of spirit, generate and ingenerate, God in man, life in death, Son of Mary and Son of God." A little later, Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. A.D. 140-202.) had to stress the humanity of Christ because of Gnostic heresy that argued that Jesus was only a divine emanation. Irenaeus wrote, "There is therefore . . . one God the Father, and one Christ Jesus our Lord, who . . . gathered together all things in himself. But in every respect, too, he is man, the formation of God: and thus he took up man into himself, the invisible becoming visible, the incomprehensible being made comprehensible, the impassible becoming capable of suffering, and the Word being made man, thus summing up all things in himself" (*Against Heresies III*, 16). During the same time period, Tertullian of Carthage (ca. A.D. 155-240) wrote of

Christ's nature that "what is born in the flesh is flesh and what is born in the Spirit is spirit. Flesh does not become spirit nor spirit flesh. Evidently they can (both) be in one (person). Of these Jesus is composed, of flesh as man and of spirit as God" (*Against Praxeas*, 14). Later he added, "We see His double state, not intermixed but conjoined in one person, Jesus, God and man" (*Against Praxeas*, 27).

By A.D. 325 the church had begun to systematize Christianity's response to various heretical views of Christ. The Nicene Creed stated, "We believe in God the Father All-sovereign, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all the ages, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not created, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into being."(3)

The belief in Jesus Christ being of the same essence as God the Father began with Jesus himself, was taught to His Apostles, who in turn handed down this belief to the early church Fathers and apologists. Christ's deity is the foundation upon which the Christian faith rests.

Notes

1. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1985), pp. 684-90.

2. Merrill C. Tenney, *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), pp. 28-29.

3. Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 26.

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The Jesus Seminar

Jimmy Williams provides analysis of the Jesus Seminar findings in light of five critical areas: Identify purpose of the Jesus Fellows, Presuppositisms, Canonical Gospels, Chronology and Christological differences.

Introduction

- *"Jesus did not ask us to believe that his death was a blood sacrifice, that he was going to die for our sins."*
- *"Jesus did not ask us to believe that he was the messiah. He certainly never suggested that he was the second person of the trinity. In fact, he rarely referred to himself at all."*
- *"Jesus did not call upon people to repent, or fast, or observe the sabbath. He did not threaten with hell or promise heaven."*
- *"Jesus did not ask us to believe that he would be raised from the dead."*
- *"Jesus did not ask us to believe that he was born of a virgin."*
- *"Jesus did not regard scripture as infallible or even inspired."*

So says Robert W. Funk, Architect and Founder of the Jesus Seminar, in a Keynote Address to the Jesus Seminar Fellows in the spring of 1994.(1) The Jesus Seminar has been receiving extensive coverage lately in such periodicals as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report*, as well as on network

television.

Biographical

The Jesus Seminar Fellows

The Jesus Seminar is a group of New Testament scholars who have been meeting periodically since 1985. The initial two hundred has now dwindled to about seventy-four active members. They initially focused on the sayings of Jesus within the four Gospels to determine the probability of His actually having said the things attributed to Him in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each scholar offered his/her opinion on each "Jesus" statement by voting with different colored beads:

- *Red: Jesus undoubtedly said this or something very like it.*
- *Pink: Jesus probably or might have said something like this.*
- *Gray: Jesus did not say this, but the ideas are close to His own.*
- *Black: Jesus did not say this; it represents a later tradition.*

Their voting conclusions: Over 80% of the statements attributed to Jesus in the Gospels are, by voting consensus, either gray or black. This means that only 20% of Jesus' statements are likely to have been spoken by Him. The other 80% are most assuredly, they say, unlikely to have ever been uttered by Jesus.

Their conclusions were published in 1993 in a book entitled *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. The primary author of the book, Robert W. Funk, also the Founder and Chair of the Jesus Seminar, crafted the results of their deliberations in a slick, color-coded format with charts, graphics, appendices, and copious footnotes. (The

Gospel of Thomas is to be included with the traditional four gospels, they say.)

Who are these scholars, and what are their credentials? Robert W. Funk, former professor of the New Testament at the University of Montana is the most prominent leader. He is joined by two other major contributors, John Dominic Crossan, of DePaul University, Chicago, who has authored several books including *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, *The Essential Jesus*, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, and Marcus Borg of Oregon State University, also the author of several books including: Jesus: A New Vision and Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith.

Of the remaining active participants, only fourteen are well-known scholars in New Testament studies. Another twenty are recognizable within the narrow confines of the discipline, but they are not widely published beyond a few journal articles or dissertations. The remaining forty are virtually unknowns, and most of them are either at Harvard, Vanderbilt, or Claremont College, three universities widely considered among the most liberal in the field.

The public, exposed by the mass of publicity and attention given to the Jesus Seminar by the media has been inclined to assume that the theories of these scholars represent the "cutting edge," the mainstream of current New Testament thought. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Nearly all of these scholars are American. European scholarship is nearly non-existent and, that being the case, it would be inaccurate, if not deceiving for the Jesus Seminar participants to present themselves, their work, and their conclusions as a broad, representative consensus of worldwide New Testament scholarship.

While the media and the general public may tend to be gullible

and naive about the authority and findings of the Jesus Seminar, Christians need not be intimidated.

Philosophical

Why is this movement important? Should Christians be concerned with this? Haven't the gospel traditions had their skeptics and critics for centuries? What is different about the Jesus Seminar?

Scholars since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century have questioned such things as the miracles, the prophecies, and the extraordinary claims of Christ in the Gospels.

Beginning in Germany, a separation began to occur between the "Jesus of History" and the "Christ of Faith"; that is, it came to be popularly believed that a man named Jesus really lived, but that fantastic myths grew up around Him and about His powers and claims, and thus He became for many the "Christ of Faith" in story, symbol, and worship. Scholars promoting this separation conclude that biblical history is not what is important; but rather, one's personal experience, one's search for meaning and timeless truths. Those are of primary importance to an individual.

The Jesus Seminar stands in this tradition. But what is most significant about their work is that it has widened the circle of awareness (i.e., the general public) to New Testament studies and criticism, and a focus upon issues which up until now have been primarily restricted to academic discussions among New Testament scholars.

This group has brought into question the very authenticity and validity of the gospels which lie at the center of Christianity's credibility. If what the Jesus Seminar espouses is historically accurate, the sooner the naive Christian community can be educated to these facts the better, according to these scholars.

A major presupposition of the Jesus Seminar, therefore, is philosophical naturalistic worldview which categorically denies the supernatural. Therefore they say one must be wary of the following in the Gospels:

> • ***Prophetic statements.*** *Predictions by Jesus of such things as the destruction of the Temple, or of Jerusalem, or His own resurrection are later literary additions or interpolations. How do we know this? Because no one can predict the future. So they MUST have been added later by zealous followers.*
>
> • ***Miracles****. Since miracles are not possible, every recorded miracle in the Gospels must be a later elaboration by an admiring disciple or follower, or must be explained on the basis of some physical or natural cause (i.e., the Feeding of the 5,000: Jesus gave the signal, and all those present reached beneath their cloaks, pulled out their own "sack lunches," and ate together!).*
>
> • ***Claims of Jesus****. Christ claimed to be God, Savior, Messiah, Judge, Forgiver of sin, sacrificial Lamb of God, etc. All of these, say the Jesus Fellows, are the later work of His devoted followers. The historical Jesus never claimed these things for Himself, as Funk infers in his above-mentioned statements. Reality isn't like this. It couldn't be true.*

Therefore the Jesus Fellows assert that the Gospels could not have been written by eyewitnesses in the mid-first century. On the basis of this philosophical presupposition, the Jesus Seminar considers itself personally and collectively free to select or discard any statement of the Gospels which is philosophically repugnant.

There is nothing new about this approach in New Testament scholarship. Thomas Jefferson, a great American patriot and president did the same thing in the late 1700s with almost identical results. He admired Jesus as a moral man, but like the Jesus Fellows, he assumed all supernatural and

extraordinary elements in the Gospels were unreliable and could not be true. With scissors and paste, Jefferson cut out of the Gospels any and everything which contravened the laws of nature and his own reason.

When he had finished his project, only 82 columns of the four Gospels out of his King James Bible remained from an original 700. The other nine-tenths lay on the cutting room floor. Jefferson entitled his creation *The Life and Morals of Jesus*, and his book ended with the words, "There laid they Jesus . . . and rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulcher and departed."(2)

Jefferson and the Jesus Fellows, like all skeptics, prefer their own reason and biases over the possibility that the Gospels are accurate in what they say about miracles, prophecy, and the claims of Christ. They are like the man who visited the psychiatrist and informed him of a grave problem: "I think I'm dead!" The psychiatrist said, "That is a serious problem. May I ask you a question? Do you believe that dead men bleed?" The man quickly answered, "Of course not. Dead men don't bleed." The psychiatrist reached forward, and taking a hat pin, he pricked the man's finger. The man looked down at his bleeding finger and exclaimed, "Well, what do you know! Dead men bleed after all!"

Canonical

The Jesus Fellows, on the basis of their naturalistic bias, conclude that at least the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) could not have been written at the time tradition and many New Testament scholars assume they were. The "Priority of Mark" as the earliest gospel written has strong (but not universal) support. And yet Mark 13 records Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple, something that did not actually occur until A.D. 70.

Since the Jesus Fellows do not believe prophecy is possible,

they judge Mark, the “earliest” of the Gospels, to have been written after the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in A.D. 70 by the Romans. If Mark was written in the early 70s, still later dates are then required for Matthew and Luke, to say nothing of the Book of Acts which must follow them with an even later date.

Now, this gives the Jesus Scholars a “window” of about 40 years from the time of Jesus’ death (a A.D. 32.) to the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) to look for earlier sources devoid of miracles and extraordinary claims. They think they have found two such primary sources which fit their assumptions. The first of these is the “Q” source, or “Quelle.”

Synoptics/Quelle

It has long been observed that Matthew, Mark, and Luke must have had some kind of symbiotic relationship, as if they were aware of one another, or used the same sources, or some of the same sources. The prevailing theory is that Mark (the shortest of the three) was written first, and was later substantially incorporated into both Matthew and Luke. There is a high, but not total agreement, in the parallel accounts of Matthew and Luke where the two reflect the book of Mark.

But Matthew and Luke have additional material, some 250 verses (i.e., the Christmas stories, greater elaboration on the resurrection events, etc.). And there are some verses which are common to both Matthew and Luke, but not found in Mark. Thus many scholars conclude there was some other document or source available to Matthew and Luke which explains why they contain these additional 250 verses along with the corpus of Mark. The scholars have designated this material as “Q,” or “Quelle,” which is the German word for “Source.” Outside of the Synoptic gospels, there is no written documentary evidence to substantiate Quelle.

A number of New Testament scholars thus claim that Quelle must

have been an early, written document which preceded the writing of the Synoptic gospels and was incorporated into them. And they claim that in these 250 verses we only find a very “normal, human” Jesus who is more likely to have been the historical man.

The Gospel of Thomas

The second source given high priority and preference by the Jesus Seminar Fellows is the Gospel of Thomas. In fact, they value it so highly they have placed it alongside the four traditional ones, giving it equal, if not superior, value and historical authenticity.

A complete copy of The Gospel of Thomas was discovered in the 1940s at an Egyptian site called Nag Hammadi, where archaeologists found an entire library of ancient texts including the Gospel of Thomas. It was dated around A.D. 400 and written in Coptic, the language of the ancient Egyptian church. This astonishing cache consisted of early Christian and Gnostic texts.

This Gospel of Thomas has now been studied for forty years, and the overwhelming conclusion of scholars worldwide has been that the document carries many of the identifying marks of a Gnostic literary genre, from a sect prominent in Egypt and the Nile Valley during the second, third, and fourth centuries.

It has been almost universally assumed that the parallels in Thomas to the New Testament Gospels and epistles were copied or paraphrased (not the reverse, as the Jesus Fellows claim) to suit Gnostic purposes, teachings which were opposed to all ideas about a supernatural God in the flesh Who could perform miracles, forgive sin, and rise from the dead. The Jesus Seminar Scholars have fit Thomas nicely together with “Q” to frame an historical portrait of Jesus based primarily upon these two sources.

The Jesus Scholars have declared that the Gospel of Thomas and the Q Source were written within the forty years between Jesus' death and the fall of Jerusalem, pushing forward the writing of the four canonical gospels (a necessity on their part to uphold their theory) to very late in the first century.

Chronological

Apart from completely ignoring Paul's epistles which were written between A.D. 45 and his martyrdom at the hands of Nero in A.D. 68, the Jesus Fellows have a critical problem in fitting their theory into first century chronology.

In the last chapter of the Book of Acts (28), Luke leaves us with the impression that Paul is in Rome, and still alive. Tradition tells us he died in A.D. 68. In Acts, Luke shows keen awareness of people, places and contemporary events, both within and without the church. And he records the martyrdoms of both Stephen and James. It is highly unlikely, if the deaths of Paul and Peter and the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) had already occurred when Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles, that he would have failed to record these most important events.

New Testament scholars are in strong agreement that whoever wrote Acts also wrote the Gospel of Luke two volumes by one author, both addressed to a man named "Theophilus." And since Luke is supposed to have incorporated Mark and the Q Source material into the writing of his own Gospel, and Acts was written after Luke, but before Paul's death (A.D. 68) and the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70), then Mark and Quelle must have been written by the mid 60s. The same difficulty in Luke exists with Mark, who is said to have written his gospel with Peter as his source, Peter having been martyred in Rome about the same time as Paul.

It is highly unlikely that these two obscure sources, Quelle

and the Gospel of Thomas, could have been circulating throughout the Christian community and having such impact that they overshadowed what Paul was at the very same time saying about Jesus in all of his epistles.

Real church history is not kind to the Jesus Fellows at this point. The church did not first flourish in the Nile Valley and spread elsewhere. The clear pattern of expansion from both biblical and the earliest patristic writings is from Jerusalem to Antioch, Asia Minor, Greece, and finally Rome. Ironically, the earliest of the Church Fathers, Clement of Rome (ca. A.D. 30 to ca. A.D. 100) writes from Rome at the end of the first century an epistle to the Corinthians (1 Clement) which is considered to be the oldest extant letter after the writings of the Apostles. It had such stature in the early church that it was initially considered by some to be a part of the Canon. All the other early church fathers (2nd century) are scattered around in cities within the areas mentioned above, with the exception of Clement of Alexandria (c. A.D. 150 to c. A.D. 215) who reflects some Gnostic ideas in his teachings.

The more traditional and accepted chronology for the documents under consideration is as follows:

Dating/chronology of First Century Authorship

(All dates are A.D.)

Uncontested:
End of First Century: 100
Fall of Jerusalem: 70
Martyrdom of Paul and Peter: 68
Epistles of Paul: 45-68
Some Oral Tradition: 32-70
Crucifixion of Jesus: 32

Traditional:(3)
Clement of Rome: 96
Revelation (John): 96

Epistles of John: 90-94
Gospel of John: 85-90
Acts of Apostles: 66-68
Matthew & Luke: 64-66
Gospel of Mark: 64-65

Jesus Seminar:(4)
Gospel of John: 85-90
Acts of Apostles: 80-100
Gospel of Luke: 80-100
Gospel of Matthew: 80-90
Gospel of Mark: 70-80
Gospel of Thomas: 70-100

In comparing the two chronologies, it appears there simply is not enough time for the simple Jesus of history to evolve into the Christ of faith. Myths and legends need time to develop. There is none available in the first century to accommodate the Jesus Seminar's theory.

Christological

On the basis of the Gospel of Thomas and Quelle, the Jesus Fellows believe the historical Jesus was simply a sage, a spinner of one- liners, a teller of parables, an effective preacher. This is what He was historically according to these scholars. The "high Christology" (supernatural phenomena, the messianic claims, the miracles, the substitutionary atonement, the resurrection) all came as a result of a persecuted church community which needed a more powerful God for encouragement and worship. His suffering, ardent followers are responsible for these embellishments which created the "Christ of Faith." The real Jesus was a winsome, bright, articulate peasant, sort of like Will Rogers.

Various other portraits of Jesus have proliferated among the Jesus Fellows, suggesting that he was a religious genius, a social revolutionary, an eschatological prophet. He was all of

these things, we would say, but offer that He was something more.

The Jesus Seminar assumes a “low christology” (Jesus as a peasant sage) preceded the “high christology” created later by the church. Is there anything that would suggest otherwise?

The Epistles of Paul

The Apostle Paul conducted his church-planting ministry between approximately 40 to the time of his death, A.D. 68. It was also during this time that he wrote all of his epistles. While some New Testament scholars question the authenticity of Paul’s authorship of a number of these epistles, virtually all, even the most liberal, will accept Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians as genuinely Pauline.

What kind of “Christology” do we find in these epistles? A high christology. The Jesus Seminar is asking us to believe that at the very same time the Gospel of Thomas and the Q source were alleged to have been written portraying Jesus as a wise, peasant sage, Paul was planting churches across the Mediterranean world and ascribing to Jesus the same high christology found later in the four gospels!

The Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15 clearly indicates that Paul was aware of and connected to Jerusalem and its church leadership (Peter and James). After the Council Paul and Barnabas were given the express task of taking and distributing to the churches a written document of the Council’s instructions about how Gentiles were to be incorporated into the church.

The Jesus Seminar simply chooses to ignore this mass of clear, Pauline evidence almost universally accepted by New Testament scholars. The notion that a high christology (the Gospels and the epistles) evolved from a low christology (the Gospel of Thomas, Quelle) is unsupportable.

Jesus the Sage

If we accept the Jesus Seminar notion that the historical Jesus was a simple peasant later revered and deified, with what are we left? Jesus is so stripped down that He becomes the "Christian dummy" of the first century church! The community is more brilliant than the leader! Even Renan, the French skeptic said, "It would take a Jesus to forge a Jesus." Further, if Jesus was such a "regular guy," why was He crucified? Crucifixion by the Romans was used only for deviants, malcontents, and political revolutionaries (like Barabbas). What did this simple peasant do to create such a stir that He would suffer such a death?

The Jesus Seminar portrayal of Jesus simply cannot explain the explosion of Christianity in the first and second centuries. With their view of Christ, they cannot create a cause monumental enough to explain the documented, historical effects that even they must accept.

Notes

1. Robert W. Funk, "The Gospel of Jesus and the Jesus of the Gospels," *The Fourth R* (November/December, 1993), p. 8.
2. Smithsonian.
3. Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Handbook* (Chicago: Moody, 1967), Matthew, 470ff (Mt), 493 (Mk), 511 (Lk), 543 (Jn), 567 (Acts).
4. Robert J. Miller, Editor. *The Complete Gospels* (Harper SanFrancisco, a division of Harper Collins Publishers, 1994). pp. 10 (Mk), 56 (Mt), 198 (Jn). Note: a date for Luke-Acts is not provided, but on the basis of the book's date for Mark, we would assume 80 to 100 A.D.
5. James R. Edwards, "Who Do Scholars Say That I Am?" *Christianity Today*: March 4, 1996, p. 17.

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Jesus' Claims to be God – Yes, Jesus Said He is God

Sue Bohlin answers the question about Jesus claims to be God by reviewing the major scripture passages where Jesus did so. This study clearly shows that Jesus was God and openly claimed to be so. Bottom line: Jesus clearly communicated that He and the Father are one and are God.

[Note: The following essay was written in response to a friend's request: "Can you tell me where in the Bible Jesus claimed to be God?"]

This article is not an exhaustive list of Christ's claims to be God, but it does cover the major ones. I suggest you read this with a Bible open, as I have not posted all the scriptures listed.

1. Mark 2:1-12—Jesus heals a paralytic. He had authority to forgive sins, which is something only God Himself can do. Then, to authenticate His claim, He demonstrated His power by healing the paralytic.

2. The miracles Jesus performed are a very strong indication of His divinity (because no mere human can work actual miracles by his own power). Jesus referred to the miracles in John 10:24-39 as proof that he was telling the truth. This passage is Christ's own response to the unbelieving Jews' charge of blasphemy (dishonoring God by claiming to be God). Incidentally, this section also includes a beautiful promise that once you are saved/born again/become a Christian, you can never lose your salvation. Verses 28-29 say we will "never perish; no one can snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch

them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one." (Here is another strong statement that He is God.) We can have the assurance of eternal security because we didn't earn salvation in the first place; it is a free gift (Ephesians 2:8,9).

3. During Christ's trial, the chief priests asked Him point blank, "Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." And He said,

- "I am." (Mark 14:60-62)
- "Yes, it is as you say." (Matthew 26: 63-65)
- "You are right in saying I am." (Luke 22:67-70)

These are all ways of saying the same thing, written by different authors.

In John's gospel, he recounts Jesus' interview with Pontius Pilate (John 18:33-37). Pilate wanted to know if He were the King of the Jews. Jesus then talked about how His kingdom was not of this world. Pilate said, "You *are* a king, then!" Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king…" The truth is, he is King of the whole universe.

4. Jesus says in John 10:11-18 that he is the Good Shepherd. When you read this passage along with Ezekiel 34:1-16, you can see that Jesus was identifying Himself with God, who pronounced Himself Shepherd over Israel. The Jewish people, being an agrarian and shepherding society, knew and dearly loved this section of the Old Testament because God was using a metaphor they *lived* every day. So when Jesus said, "**I** am the Good Shepherd," and that whole John passage so clearly parallels the Ezekiel passage, there was no doubt that He was claiming to be God.

5. John 4:25-26. This is where the Samaritan woman, whom Jesus went to meet at the well, gets into a discussion of "living water" with Jesus. He pinpoints her sinful lifestyle (knowledge He would not have had as a mere human passerby), then He admits that He is the long-awaited Messiah: "I who

speak to you am He."

6. John 5:1-18. Jesus heals a lame man on the Sabbath, which the unbelieving Jews gave Him a hard time about. His answer was, "My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I too am working." It was a well-known Jewish line of thought that, although God rested on the seventh day after Creation week, He continued to "work" in being loving, compassionate, and just, as well as keeping the earth producing, keeping the sun moving, etc. In other words, although the creating had stopped, the maintenance went on—even on the Sabbath, and that was the only "work" allowed on that day. So Jesus is putting Himself on the same level as his Father in working on the Sabbath. And by calling God "My Father" (instead of "Our Father"), He was claiming an intimate relationship with God that far exceeded anyone else's. So in these two ways, He was making Himself equal with God.

7. John 16:28. "I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father." What Christ is saying here is that He existed along with the Father before being born. He "entered the world" by wrapping Himself in human flesh and being born as a baby. He grew up, fulfilled His mission/ministry, was crucified and raised from the dead (all part of the "mission") and then left the world to go back to the Father in heaven, where He is now seated at the right hand of God (the place of honor). He is the only person who **ever** existed before conception. That Christ was in a "pre-incarnate state" means that He is God.

8. (This is many people's favorite argument for the deity of Christ, including mine.)

First, turn to Exodus 3, where Moses encounters God in the burning bush. God tells Moses that he is the one He has chosen to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses says to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me 'What is His

name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” God replies to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.'” God has said that His own name, His personal name, is “I AM.”

Now…

a) Turn to John 8:56-58. Jesus is talking to the unbelieving Jews. “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing My day; he saw it and was glad.” “You are not yet 50 years old,” they said to Him, “and *you* have seen Abraham?” “I tell you the truth,” Jesus announced, “before Abraham was, I AM!” Jesus was the great I AM from before the beginning of time; He existed before Abraham ever was. He is claiming here to be the I AM of the Old Testament. Verse 59 says the Jews picked up stones to stone Him, but the Lord Jesus slipped away. The reason they wanted to stone Him was because stoning was the death penalty for blasphemy. He was claiming to be Yahweh—Jehovah—Almighty God—I AM. (Of course, it wasn’t blasphemy when Christ claimed to be who He truly was!)

b) John 8:24. “I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I AM, you will indeed die in your sins.” In your Bible, it may read “if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be….” The extra words are supplied by the editors; they’re not in the original text. If you’re familiar with Exodus 3 you don’t need the extra words for it to make grammatical sense. The Lord Jesus is again claiming to be God.

c) John 18:4. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas and some priests and soldiers are about to take Jesus prisoner. “Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to Him, went out and asked them, ‘Who is it that you want?’ ‘Jesus of Nazareth,’ they replied. ‘I AM,’ Jesus said. When He said, ‘I AM,’ they drew back and fell to the ground.” (Again, in your Bible the editors may have supplied “I am [he]” to make it grammatically correct. The Greek just says, “I AM.”)

The force of Jesus' claim to be Yahweh (I AM) was so powerful that it literally knocked the arresting officers and the Jewish priests off their feet!

The above points are by no means exhaustive, and are given to contribute to the reader's understanding that Jesus Christ is Lord because He is God. In this vein, I would like to close with one of the most powerful quotes ever written on the subject, by noted author C.S. Lewis in his classic, *Mere Christianity*:

> I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon, or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come away with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

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Jesus: The Divine Xerox –

Reasons to Believe

Probe's founder Jimmy Williams provides a compelling set of reasons to believe that Jesus is in fact the Son of God. By asking questions one would expect of God on this earth, we see that Jesus is the only one who fulfills them all. Jesus' characteristics are His own apologetic.

You know, today when you walk across the campus and begin to talk about the New Testament, the claims of Christ, and how He is relevant to high school or college life, often you get this expression of amazement, as if you have committed intellectual suicide, because you actually believe His claims. Some tell us that becoming a Christian involves a blind leap with little or no evidence to support it. In fact, the blinder the leap and the more lacking the evidence, the more noble the faith. It is certainly true that any philosophy or belief cannot be proved; I would not try and insult anyone's intellect by saying I could *prove* to him that Jesus Christ is God. However, I think when we look into the history of this unique person, we see some things that have to grasp the mind of any thinking man and impress upon him the strong consideration that Jesus may be who He claimed to be…namely, God incarnate in human flesh.

Now whatever we may say about Jesus Christ, most everyone would agree that in the person of Christ we view one of the most unique personalities of all the centuries—whether He is God or not. The unbeliever, atheist, Moslem, Hindu and Buddhist alike all generally agree on this one central fact, that Jesus Christ is indeed a unique personality.

> "Here was a man born of a peasant woman in an obscure village. He grew up in another obscure military camp town where He worked as a carpenter's son. He never wrote a book; He possessed neither wealth nor influence. He never ran for political office; He never went more than 200 miles from His home town; He never even entered a big city. In infancy He

startled a king; in childhood He puzzled doctors; in manhood He ruled the course of nature and hushed the sea to sleep. During the last three years of His life He became an itinerant preacher, roaming the land of His birth, healing the sick and comforting the poor. At the end of this three years of ministry the tide of public opinion began to turn against Him. He was betrayed by one of His closest friends and arrested for disturbing the status quo. All of His followers deserted Him; one denied Him three times. He went through six trials, each of which was a mockery of jurisprudence. Prior to one of the trials He was beaten to the point of death with leather strips imbedded with studs of iron. A crown of thorns was then rammed down upon His head, tearing the flesh so that blood poured down the side of His face. The Roman procurator officiating at His trial was nervous. The uniqueness of this man made Pilate want to wash his hands of the whole affair. But the crowds cried for His death.

“As the Roman procurator brought this insignificant, now mutilated and beaten carpenter’s son before the crowds, he hurled a challenge to them which has resounded across twenty centuries: he said, “Behold the man.” Pilate was impressed. He had never before seen such quiet dignity, intrepid courage, noble majesty. Never had any other who had stood before his bar carried himself as this One. The Roman was deeply impressed, and avowed his captor’s uniqueness. But the mob shouted, ‘Crucify Him.’ So He was taken outside the gates of the city and nailed to a cross to die the death of a common criminal.

“Yet the story doesn’t end here. For something happened after that strange, dark day that has changed the entire course of human history. He came forth from the tomb in resurrection power. His greatness has never been paralleled. He never wrote a book, yet all the libraries of the country could not hold the books that have been written about Him.

> He never wrote a song, and yet He has furnished the theme for more songs that all the songwriters combined. He never founded a college, but all the schools put together cannot boast of having as many students. Every seventh day the wheels of commerce cease their turning and multitudes wind their way to worshiping assemblies to pay homage and respect to Him. The names of the past proud statesmen of Greece and Rome have come and gone. The names of the past scientists, philosophers, and theologians have come and gone, but the name of this man abounds more and more. Though over 1900 years lie between the people of this generation and the time of His crucifixion, He still lives. Herod could not destroy Him, and the grave could not hold Him. He stands forth upon the highest pinnacle of heavenly glory.
>
> "Never had any other who had stood before his bar carried himself as this One. The Roman was deeply impressed, and avowed his captor's uniqueness. But the mob shouted, 'Crucify Him.' So He was taken outside the gates of the city and nailed to a cross to die the death of a common criminal. Still today He is the cornerstone of history, the center of human progress. I would be well within the mark when I say that all the armies that have ever marched, all the navies that have ever sailed, all the parliaments that have ever sat, and all of the kings that have ever reigned, put together, have not influenced the course of man's life on this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life, Jesus of Nazareth. History has been called His story. He split time: B.C., before Christ; A.D., *Anno Domini*, in the year of our Lord.{1}

When, some 20 centuries ago, Pontius Pilate said, "Behold the man," I doubt that he had any idea of who it was that stood before him. He certainly wouldn't have dreamed that this humble peasant would launch a movement (indeed, already had) that would change the course of Western civilization. In view of the claims that He made and the impact He had upon history,

it behooves us to “Behold the man.” Who was He? Those who knew Him best were convinced that He was God. What do you say? I am convinced that the only reasonable conclusion that can be drawn from a fair examination of the evidence is that He was and is, indeed, God, the Saviour of the world. Let’s consider some of these evidences together.

I would like to consider several lines of historical evidence that suggest that Jesus Christ is God. The first line of evidence is:

Because the Hypothesis Fits the Facts.

Now what I would like to do in terms of presenting the first line of evidence for His claim that He is God is to ask the question, “What would God be like, if God became a man?” If the facts about Jesus Christ fit the answers to the above question—pre-eminently so, uniquely so, we will have offered evidence, that He may be who He claimed to be. So I would like to suggest four things that I think we would all agree would characterize God if God became a man.

If God were a man, we would expect His words to be the greatest words ever spoken.

What is great literature or great oratory? The masterpieces of one generation often appear stilted and artificial to another. The words which endure are the words which have something to say about that which is universal in human experience, that which doesn’t change with time.

Statistically speaking, the Gospels are the greatest literature ever written. They are read by more people, quoted by more authors, translated into more tongues, represented in more art, set to more music, than any other book or books written by any man in any century in any land. But the words of Christ are not great on the grounds that they have such a statistical edge over anybody else’s words. They are read

more, quoted more, loved more, believed more, and translated more because they are the greatest words ever spoken. And where is their greatness? Their greatness lies in the pure, lucid spirituality in dealing clearly, definitively, and authoritatively with the greatest problems that throb in the human breast; namely, Who is God? Does history have meaning? Does He love me? Does He care for me? What should I do to please Him? How does He look at my sin? How can I be forgiven? Where will I go when I die? How must I treat others?

This amazing purity of the words of Christ became more real to me in a forceful way while I was studying the Greek language in graduate school. The New Testament is written in Greek. I was taking a course called Rapid Greek Reading in which we did nothing but read the Greek New Testament and recite in class. We read about eight pages of Greek a week or about the equivalent timewise of 600 pages of English. We struggled night and day while reading the Gospels in order to be able to read them out loud in class directly from the Greek text to our professor. It was sometimes humorous to hear one another struggle with the text of Matthew or Luke. The interesting thing was that when reading one of the Gospels aloud, we would stumble and toil with the sections where Matthew was simply recounting narrative, but as soon as Matthew began to quote the words of Christ the struggle ceased. His words were the easiest to translate. They were so simple and yet profound. To labor with the narrative portions and then come to the words of Christ was like moving from the intensity of the hurricane to the calm serenity of the eye of the storm. It was the difference between sailing on rough tempestuous seas and on a glassy lake at eventide.

Certainly, no mere man could impregnate such simple words with such sublime thoughts. Consider the volumes of truth stored up in the phrase, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”{2}, and “Whosoever would find his life, must lose it”{3}. Libraries could be filled with works which simply develop

those concepts.

No other man's words have the appeal of Jesus' words. They are the kind of words we would expect God to utter if God were a man.

The second line of evidence is:

If God were a man, we would expect Him to exert a profound power over human personality.

One of the greatest impacts among human beings is the impact of personality upon personality. Most human beings are rather ordinary in their impact upon other human beings. I can't think of anyone in my life whose personality has made an impact upon me; strong influence, yes, but impact, no. Periodically in history a Churchill, Hitler, or a Caesar comes along and impact is made. Certainly, if God were a man, His personality would be so dynamic it would have unprecedented impact on His contemporaries. Is this the case with Jesus of Nazareth? We find most emphatically that it is. Whether Jesus be man or God, whether the Gospels be mainly fiction or fancy, certainly a historic person named Jesus made such an impact on a small band of men as to be unequaled by far in the entire annals of the human race. Consider for a moment the historic nucleus from which Christianity sprang: Peter, a weak-willed fisherman; John, a gentle dreamer; Thomas, who had a question mark for a brain; Matthew, a tax collector; a few peasants and a small cluster of emotional women. Now I don't want to minimize the character of these men, but seriously, does this rather heterogeneous group of simple folk look like the driving force that could turn the Roman Empire upside down, so that by 312 A.D., Christianity was the official religion of the Empire? Frankly they do not. The impact of the personality of Christ upon these people turned them into flaming revolutionaries who launched a movement that has changed the history of Western Civilization.

The amazing thing is that these men were the very ones who ate with Him, slept with Him, and lived with Him for over three years and still concluded that He was God. How could a person live with someone for that period of time and come to that conclusion unless it were a valid conclusion? You could spend less than an hour with the greatest saint mankind has ever produced and be thoroughly convinced that he was not God. How could you spend three years with a mere man and become absolutely convinced that He was God, in fact, be so convinced that you would be willing to die a martyr's death to punctuate your belief? Listen for a moment to the traditional deaths of the apostles: Matthew, martyred by the sword in Ethiopia; Mark, dragged through the streets of Alexandria until dead; Luke, hanged on an olive tree in Greece; John, put in a caldron of boiling oil but escaped death and died in exile on the island of Patmos; Peter, crucified upside down (he said he wasn't worthy to be crucified in the same manner as His Lord); James, beheaded in Jerusalem; Philip, hanged against a pillar in Phrygia; James the Less, thrown from the pinnacle of the temple and beaten to death down below; Bartholomew, flayed alive; Andrew, bound to a cross where he preached to his persecutors till he died; Thomas, run through by a spear in India; Jude, shot to death with arrows; Barnabas, stoned to death by Jews in Salonica; and Paul, beheaded at Rome by Nero. Even more incredible is the fact that James and Jude, our Lord's own brothers, believed that He was God. You may for a time, be able to pull the wool over the eyes of those outside your own family, but certainly your own brothers would not swallow such an unbelievable claim unless there were unimpeachable reasons to do so.

Christ's personality had a tremendous impact upon these men. And after nearly two thousand years the impact is not at all spent. Daily there are people who have tremendous revolutionary experiences which they attribute to personal encounters with Jesus Christ.

The personality of Jesus, then, is without parallel. It is unique and incomparable. Wherever He is, He is the Master. When surrounded by hungry multitudes or by hating Pharisees, when questioned by clever theologians or besought by stricken sinners, whether examined by stupid disciples or by a Roman governor, He is the Master.

If God were robed in human flesh, then He would possess a personality that would have revolutionary impact, indeed, unique impact, upon His contemporaries. Like no other man in history, Jesus made that kind of unique and revolutionary impact.

If God were a man, we would expect supernatural acts.

If God were a man, not only would we expect His words to be the greatest ever spoken, and the impact of His personality to be unique, but we would also expect that His life would be characterized by wonderful deeds. We would expect Him to do the things that only God could do. Now obviously the very act of God becoming a man involves something supernatural. But if God became a man, it makes sense that He was going to convince men that He was indeed who He claimed to be, that men deserved to see Him do things that only God could do—namely miracles, suspensions of natural law. Everything about the life of Jesus Christ confronts us with the miraculous. At the outset of His ministry He appeared at a wedding feast and turned water into wine. He demonstrated His power over disease by healing the nobleman's son and the lame man at the pool of Bethsaida and many more. He fed 5000 people and said, "I am the bread of life." He walked on the water. He claimed to be the light of the world; then He healed a man who had been blind since birth. Once of His most startling claims was made to the despondent sister of Lazarus (Lazarus had been dead for four days) when He said, "I am the resurrection and the life." Then He said, "Lazarus, come forth," and the dead man came out of the tomb. Someone has noted it was a good thing Jesus called Lazarus by name or all the dead since the dawn of time would

have come forth. When Christ made these astounding claims, more than ordinary means were necessary to impress men with their truthfulness.

Now there's a funny kind of thinking going on today concerning miracles. It all started with a fellow by the name of Hume. Paradoxically, this may surprise you, Hume was an orthodox Christian. But, Hume said some things about miracles that have been used as an attack on miracles. Hume argued that miracles are the most improbable of all events. Ever since Hume's essay, it has been believed that historical statements about miracles are the most intrinsically improbable of all historical statements. Now, what then is the basis of probability? What makes a miracle a more probable or a less probable event? Hume says, and so do other secular critics today, that *probability rests upon what may be called the majority vote of our past experiences.* The more often a thing is known to happen, the more probable it is that it should happen again; and the less often, the less probable. He goes on to say, the majority vote of our past experience is firmly against miracles. There is in fact, "uniform experience" against miracles. A miracle is, therefore, the most improbable of all events. It is always more probable that the witnesses were lying or mistaken than that a miracle occurred.

Now here is the foolishness in Hume's whole argument. We must agree with Hume that if there is absolutely "uniform experience" against miracles, if they have *never* occurred, then there is no such thing as a miracle. But, that is exactly the point in question. Is there absolute uniform experience against miracles? We only know that the majority vote of past experience is against miracles if we know that all reports of miracles are false. And, we can know all the reports to be false *only* if we know already that miracles have never occurred. This is a circular argument. Let me repeat it again. The critic of miracles today says with Hume, "We know that all historical reports of miracles are false because miracles

never happen, and we know that miracles never happen because all historical reports of them are false." Get that? We know that miracles have never happened, because all reported instances of them are false, and we know that all reported instances of them are false (such as the Bible) because we know that miracles never happen.

Very frequently today we hear or get the impression that brilliant scholars, after examining all the evidence, have scientifically proven that miracles never happen. This is totally untrue. The rejection of the miraculous is not their conclusion; it is their starting point, their presupposition. It's interesting to note that as you study the literature of the first and second century, even some of the literature of the critics of Christianity grant the miracles. In fact, it was not until the 19th century that the major attacks against the miracles began when the omniscient modern critics got on the scene and began to look back 2,000 years and say miracles never happened. But, the attackers of the first century generally grant them. In *Jesus and His Story* by Ethelbert Stauffer, a professor of New Testament at the University of Erlangen—and not an evangelical scholar—cites the following: "In 95 A.D. Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus of Lydda speaks of Jesus' magic arts."{4} "In 100 A.D.—Jewish ritual denunciation—'Jesus practiced magic and led Israel astray.'"{5}

In the second century (according to F. F. Bruce) Celsus, a philosophic critic of Christianity, acknowledged his miracles but attributed them to sorcery.{6}

Josephus, a first century Jewish historian, also acknowledges the fact that Jesus performed miracles in his *Antiquities of the Jews.* A basic principle of evaluation of evidence states that when enemies agree on a common point, it may be regarded as certain that the point is commonly accepted. Stauffer states this with clarity in *Jesus and His Story*:

> The sharper the clash, the wider the gulf, the more vital does this alteration of testimony and counter-testimony become to the historical investigator. For if a confrontation of witnesses yields statements that agree on some points, then these points must represent facts accepted by both sides.{7}

In addition to the testimony of the secular historians, we have in the four gospel documents themselves, the personal testimony of hundreds of eyewitnesses that the miracles of Christ are true events. All of the evidence we have indicates that He is indeed God manifest in the flesh.

If God were a man, we would expect Him to be sinless and incomparably holy and divine.

Here lies, perhaps, one of the most convincing evidences for the deity of Christ. No man has ever lived such a noble, pure, and sinless life. Those who knew Him for three years, said "He was without sin."{8} The Roman centurion commented as Christ hung on the cross, "Surely, this was the Son of God."{9} Paul, the brilliant intellect of the first century, perceived, "He knew no sin."{10} Pilate called Him, "that just man," and said, "I find no fault in Him."{11} He Himself claimed to be sinless and challenged the religious leaders of His day to find fault in Him.{12}

There is no comparison between the person of Christ and the most saintly of the saints of the human race. To them confession of sin and painfully laborious efforts toward saintliness were daily fare. In fact, the closer they came to God, the more vivid became their consciousness of their sinfulness.

But Jesus never appears to us as One who struggled to obtain saintliness. He never felt the need to confess a sin, and yet He pointed out the sin in others and urged them to confess. Christ never admitted a need of repentance. We can't even

imagine Him dying the death of saintly Augustine of daily confession and repentance. Jesus possessed perfect sinlessness and purity, not by struggle, privation, asceticism, or pilgrimage. It was by His birth and nature.

The greatest saints of other religions are not even in the same category as Christ. Mohammed, for instance, was apparently a neurotic. Gandhi, whom many have acclaimed as the most saintly man of the century, does not even compare with Jesus Christ. Gandhi himself claimed that he didn't even know God and that the reason for it was his own sinfulness. He said, "It is a constant source of sorrow to me that I am so far separated from the one whom I know to be my very life and being; and it is my own wretchedness and sin that separates me from him."{13} How different this is from the words of Jesus, "I and the Father are one,"{14} or "He who has seen me has seen the Father,"{15} or even more direct, "All men should honour me, even as they honour the Father. He that does not honour me does not honour the Father which sent me."{16} Can you even imagine Calvin, Luther, Paul, or any other great saint making a claim such as this? Frankly, I cannot.

Jesus Christ is not a great man among great men. He is uniquely the greatest man of all history. His divine quality of life can be verified from the mouth of the atheist, infidel, and unbeliever, not to mention the enormous testimony from the Christian Church. Thinking men the world over who have examined the evidence will all agree that Jesus of Nazareth is the greatest personality of the centuries. He is the greatest teacher, leader, and influence for good in the history of the human race.

Rousseau, the French Deist said of him,

> If the life and death of Socrates were those of a sage, the life and death of Jesus were those of a God. Shall we say the Gospel history is mere invention. My friend, it is not such that men invent. And the facts concerning Socrates, of

> which no one entertains any doubt, are less attested than those concerning Jesus Christ.{17}

He goes on to say a little later that “the facts concerning Jesus of Nazareth are so striking, so amazing, so utterly inimitable, that the invention of them would be more astonishing than the hero.”{18}

Byron, the profligate poet, whose philosophy of life was eat, drink, and be merry said, “If ever a man were God, or God were man, Jesus was both.”{19}

Renan, the skeptic, Who wrote a classic life of Christ in which he tried to prove the myth of the Gospels, nevertheless concluded with this last line: “Whatever surprises the future may bring, one thing is certain, Jesus will never be surpassed.”{20}

When exiled on the lonely isle of St. Helena, the emperor Napoleon was once discussing Christ with General Bertrand, a faithful officer who had followed him into banishment and who did not believe in the deity of Jesus. Napoleon said,

> I know men, and I tell you that Jesus Christ is not a man. Superficial minds see a resemblance between Christ and the founders of empires and the gods of other religions. That resemblance does not exist. There is between Christianity and whatever other religions, the distance of infinity. Everything in Christ astonishes me. His spirit overawes me, and His will confounds me. Between Him and whoever else in the world, there is no possible term of comparison. He is truly a being by Himself.{21}

If God were a man, we would expect Him to be sinless and incomparably Holy and Divine. We see that the hypothesis fits the facts of the life of Jesus Christ. Should we now conclude something other than Jesus is God? The Apostle John said, “No man has ever seen God, but the only begotten Son, who is at the Father’s side, has made Him known.”{22} Jesus is the

Divine Xerox of the invisible God. The Original is invisible, but His earthly Reproduction is visible for all to behold in the unprecedented life of Jesus of Nazareth.

Notes

1. Author unknown, although a portion of this essay is attributed to Dr. James Allan Francis.
2. Matt. 7:12.
3. Luke 9:24.
4. Ethelbert Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story* (New York: Alfred P. Knopf, 1959), p. 9.
5. Ibid., p. 10.
6. F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents; Are They Reliable?* (5th ed. rev.; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960), p. 68.
7. Stauffer, p.x.
8. 1 Pet. 2:22.
9. Matt. 27:54.
10. 2 Cor. 5:21.
11. Luke 23:14.
12. John 8:45-47; 10:37-39.
13. Fritz Ridenour, *So What's the Difference?* (Glendale, California: G.L. Publications, 1967).
14. John 10:30.
15. John 14:9.
16. John 5:23.
17. John Ballard, *The Miracles of Unbelief* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1908), p. 251.
18. Ibid.
19. Lord Byron.
20. Renan, *The Life of Jesus* (New York: Carolton Publishers, 1863).
21. Frank Mead, *Encyclopedia of Religious Quotations* (Westwood: Fleming H. Revelle, 1965), p. 56.
22. John 1:18.

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