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 They are: first, that the Gospels aren’t reliable historical documents; and second, that there was no real supernatural element in Jesus’ life and ministry.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Jesus really didn’t perform miracles or rise from the dead is part of the reason many scholars reject the Gospels as historical documents.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.

©1998 Probe Ministries.