

Who Is Jesus?

Why ongoing debates surrounding the claims of Christ shouldn't shake your faith.

Who is Jesus? This is the question people have been asking for 20 centuries. While He was alive the askers were religious leaders, political leaders, even His own disciples. Who are you, they wanted to know. Where do you get your authority and power?

In the last two centuries, scholars and skeptics have added new questions. How historically accurate is the portrayal of Jesus in the first four books of the New Testament?

How reliable were the writers? Do the Gospel accounts contradict one another? Do they contradict other historical sources?

Jesus had questions, too. Matthew records Him asking His disciples, "'Who do you say that I am?'" (Matt. 16:15, NKJV).

Why has a laborer from an insignificant nation in a far corner of the Roman empire become the central figure in Western civilization? Why did His death and stories of a miraculous resurrection launch one of the world's major religions? What does it all mean to us today?

Interest in Jesus is at an all-time high in the United States because spiritual things have become trendy entertainment, evidenced by the mainstream popularity of everything from Oprah's "Remembering Your Spirit" segments to the best-selling Left Behind novels.

Television networks and news magazines have responded with original Jesus films, cover stories and documentaries.

Last June, ABC News aired “The Search for Jesus,” a two-hour special hosted by news anchor Peter Jennings, who spent three years researching Jesus, interviewing scholars and touring modern-day Israel.

But the special was not just a recapping of Bible stories. It brought mainstream attention to a debate about the true nature of the “historical Jesus” that has been brewing for decades in the academic community.

Beginning in 1985, a large group of scholars began to gather to debate these questions. They called themselves the “Jesus Seminar.” But the debate quickly turned into something quite different.

The seminar members decided to try to figure out which of the things Jesus said in the Bible were really things that Jesus said. They also took a high profile, spending massive amounts of time drawing public attention to their pursuit.

The strategy worked. Jennings leaned heavily on their findings as he researched for his news special.

The process was simple. The seminar members voted on each Jesus saying in the four Gospels plus an ancient gnostic text called the Gospel of Thomas, deciding which was historically accurate.

They tallied the votes and gave each verse a color code: red for things Jesus really said, pink for sayings close to what Jesus really said, gray for passages with echoes of Jesus’ teachings and black for sayings that didn’t come from Him at all.

The Jesus Seminar published the results in a book titled *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?* Their verdict?

Only 18 percent of the Jesus sayings made the cut as red or pink. In other words, these scholars were saying, the Jesus

pictured in the New Testament is a highly distorted version of the real thing.

Of the 200 or so original members of the seminar, only 74 remain. Thirty-six of the remaining 74 are affiliated with one of three influential universities: Harvard, Vanderbilt and Claremont. The rest dropped out for various reasons, including displeasure with the presuppositions of the leaders of the seminar or with the way that the leaders were interacting with the media.

Many respected scholars dispute not just the findings of the Jesus Seminar, but also its methods and the attempt of its members to position themselves as the leading experts on the subject.

Asbury Seminary professor Ben Witherington, who has also taught at Duke Divinity School and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, is one of the foremost experts on the historical Jesus and a respected scholar even among the nation's more liberal seminaries and divinity schools.

"The Jesus Seminar is not representative of the majority of [New Testament scholars]," Witherington says. "Rather, they are part of the radical left fringe that is typical of some forms of the North American discussion of Jesus."

Denver Seminary New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg agrees and identifies some of the faulty presuppositions of the seminar:

****The oral tradition of Jesus' sayings that was handed down to the gospel writers was quite fluid. Simple teachings were often greatly expanded, embellished and distorted in the process.**

But Blomberg points out that the ancient Middle Eastern cultures took great care with their oral traditions, which they considered to be sacred.

"The New Testament world was an oral culture, producing prodigious feats of memory," Blomberg writes in a 1994 essay.

"Rabbis at times had memorized the entire Scriptures [our Old Testament]. Such abilities did not preclude the freedom to retell stories with all kinds of minor variation in detail so long as the point of each story or teaching was left intact."

****The Gospel writers felt free to invent sayings of Jesus that had little or no basis in what He actually taught.**

Not so, says Blomberg, who notes that the seminar scholars have been unable to unearth a single piece of hard data demonstrating that early Christians felt free to create new Jesus sayings.

****If a saying can be demonstrated to promote later Christian causes, it could not have originated with Jesus.**

"If sayings of Jesus relevant to the later church must be discounted," Blomberg says, "Then so must the words of the Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius, and the Jewish historian Josephus, when they help to promote Roman or Jewish causes."

"In such cases, we would be left with almost total agnosticism about ancient history, a conclusion few scholars are prepared to promote."

In other words, the Jesus Seminar is holding Jesus' sayings to a more stringent standard for establishing authenticity than historians hold any other document.

Witherington points out that the Jesus Seminar even neglects the evidence of non-Christian writers like Josephus, Tacitus and Suetonius, who were contemporaries of the writers of the Gospels.

Their writings do nothing to refute the image of Jesus in the New Testament, and in some ways they even support the Gospel

portrait, even though they belong to groups prone to skepticism about Jesus.

****John's Gospel is extremely suspect as a historical document because its differences from Matthew, Mark and Luke.**

But John actually has more references to time and place than the other Gospels, including details about first-century Palestine that have been strikingly corroborated by archeology.

Examining different aspects of the same life, Blomberg points out, doesn't make one account less historical than another.

****Jesus never directly declared who He was, so anything self-referencing must be inauthentic.**

For Blomberg, it is an easily refutable idea, but he can only speculate about why the seminar tends to reject any of Jesus' self-referencing language.

"It is inherently improbable that Jesus or any other sage would never talk about Himself in the first person," Blomberg explains. "The real reason behind this claim is that many modern scholars are reluctant to believe that Jesus made the specific claims for Himself which the Gospels say He did."

****The burden of proof rests on any particular scholar who would claim authenticity for a particular saying of Jesus and not on the skeptic.**

But the traditional test of the historical integrity of an ancient writer goes something like this: If the writer proves trustworthy where he can be tested, he is given the benefit of the doubt where he cannot be tested.

The Jesus Seminar turns this scholarly formula on its head, assuming that any Jesus saying unverified by an outside source

is of dubious origin.

****The supernatural is not a good explanation for an event. Thus, Jesus' words after His resurrection cannot be considered authentic.**

And this is perhaps the most crucial presupposition underlying the work of the Jesus Seminar because it directly undermines the core teaching of Christianity—that Jesus died, was buried, and rose again from the dead, breaking the curse of sin and death and giving humanity an opportunity to once again have a relationship with the God of the universe through the redemptive power of Christ.

And, oddly enough, it is an outdated presupposition in an American culture that has become more aware of a reality that transcends this physical existence.

Perhaps the most compelling argument for the resurrection was the one raised by Anglican scholar N.T. Wright, the lone dissenter from the Jesus Seminar crowd on the ABC special, an argument that Jennings recounted with admiration in a interview.

“I was very impressed by Tom Wright’s notion that something must have happened,” Jennings said. “That something must have happened by which in less than 300 years Christianity was the official religion of the Roman Empire. Something must have happened.”

But the whole issue, Jennings concluded, is a matter of faith. Baptist theologian Richard Land agrees but adds, “faith with a lot of compelling and corroborating evidence, but still faith.”

“No book in human history has been subjected to anywhere near the critical investigation and scrutiny that the Bible has,” says James Edwards, theologian and professor at Whitfield College.

“It is still standing, and it still commands the assent and belief of vast numbers of critical and well-informed people, scholars included.”

Which leaves one last question for every reader, the one asked by Jesus Himself: “‘Who do you say that I am?’” NM

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WHO IS THIS JESUS?

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 the level with a man who says he is a poached egg—or he would be the devil of hell. You must take your choice. Either this was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. — C.S. Lewis, from *Mere Christianity*