

Jesus In Search of Christians

This past Easter season numerous articles in several national news magazines surfaced on the subject of searching for and redefining the “historical Jesus.” U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT featured “In Search of Jesus”; TIME featured “The Search for Jesus” and NEWSWEEK, “Rethinking the Resurrection” also in Christianity Today, “Who Do Scholars Say That I Am?” Can a traditional view of Jesus hold up to the scrutiny of such modern investigation as the Jesus Seminar and publications of dozens of books which today challenge the faith of Christians?

The challengers ask, Was Jesus divine? Did he walk on water? Was he resurrected? The controversial, California-based “Jesus Seminar” with its 50 religion professors “concluded that no more than 20 percent of the sayings and even fewer of the deeds attributed to Jesus are authentic.”¹ In a debate this year conducted by the Jesus Seminar at Oregon State University, the dispute was presented that “belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus is a burden to the Christian faith and deflects attention from his role as social reformer.”² Scholars are contending the Gospel accounts were written long after Jesus' death and that “his body was probably eaten by wild dogs.”³

Some Christians might respond, “It's in the Bible and that's it!” But honest questions regarding Christian faith deserve to be addressed. “Always have your answer ready, when anyone asks you to give an account of the hope all Christians share...” (I Peter 3:15). Actually, the Christian faith has *never* been unchallenged in every time, in every way, in every age.

Challenges to Christianity

Even in the apostles' day, Gnosticism a philosophy of intuitive “knowing” apart from divine revelation confronted the first Christians. Gnosticism of the second century claimed Jesus was an ordinary man.⁴ By the fourth century the response of “orthodoxy” was that Jesus was not only the Son of God, but that he was God himself. The Reformation placed the Bible in the hands of the common people, but unfortunately for about 150 years, skeptics of the Bible have felt at liberty to write off portions of the Bible as mythical. Today using the recently discovered texts, such as Gnostic Gospels, “critics fashion rather different biographies of Jesus than those found in the Gospels...”⁵ So we have come full circle back to the old Gnostic notions! The challenge to the Biblical account of Jesus' life, teachings, death and resurrection has been popularly revived in “appearances on talk shows, interviews, and appeals to tabloid media.”⁶

In an effort to make Jesus more palatable to modern Christians, proponents would like to redefine what Jesus said and who he was when he walked on this earth. Tired of the conflicting dogmas of Christianity, they search for a contemporary Jesus who is not too

demanding. “Believing in Jesus does not mean believing doctrines about him.”⁷ So the self-appointed committee of the “Jesus Seminar” voted on each phrase that Jesus spoke in the Gospel accounts.⁸ Phrases like, “If any will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me” or “My kingdom is not of this world else would my servants fight” were voted out. Long passages were eliminated because who could have remembered what Jesus said so long afterwards? What is not taken into account is that back then as members of an “oral culture,” people were accustomed to memorizing long epics. Also what should be taken into account is the sending of the holy Spirit which will “bring all things to your remembrance whatsoever I have said unto you” (John 14:26). Also what was not appreciated was that the Gospel accounts were not written in the second century, but by eyewitnesses in the first century.

Archeology Confirms the Gospel

Recent archaeological discoveries have demolished the theories of 19th century scholars who claim the gospel accounts were written 100 to 200 years after Jesus. “One fragment from John, the Rylands Papyrus, dates around A.D. 130, meaning John (the last gospel written) was penned no later than A.D. 90-100...Last year the discovery of several fragments of Matthew was announced...they most likely date around A.D. 50. Fragments of Mark have been found among the Dead Sea scrolls, which were hidden during the A.D. 60s.”⁹ And no, Jesus was not an Essene himself only contemporary to this reclusive community is the conclusion of most recent scholarship.¹⁰ Neither was he a zealot or a revolutionary attempting to undermine the Roman government. “The early Christians...followed in the footprints of the Master. For at the time when the Jewish War broke out, they did not join together with the Zealots, but fled to the other side of the Jordan.”¹¹

The Whole Bible

To pick and choose what passages are authentic quotations of the Gospel accounts is to undermine the integrity of the whole Bible. The problem of sin and the plan of redemption introduced in the Old Testament would never come to a fulfillment without a suffering, dying and risen Messiah. Was Adam in the Garden of Eden only an allegory? What about Abraham? Shall we throw out Genesis too? Then the promise to Abraham that in his seed would “all the families of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 12:2,3, etc.) would be missing!

Perhaps the importance of this repeated promise is not understood by the “committee.” Perhaps that is why their Jesus is only a “social reformer.” But Jesus was not trying to patch up an old society (Matthew 9:17). Instead, Jesus was first calling followers to be Christians to walk in his footsteps. Later, after the root cause of evil and all injustice is eradicated, Jesus with the faithful Christians will inaugurate a brand new social order.

Are Miracles Possible?

When skeptics discredit the miracles of Jesus, many Christians counter by saying the Man Jesus was divine. He could do anything. *Is either side true?* To discredit “miracles” in the first place is very prejudicial. It assumes without proof that our world contains no dimensions of reality not perceived by our senses or calculations. Scientists cannot explain all the “whys” or “hows” of the laws of nature. Moses and Elijah performed miracles by the power of God. Surely God who created the laws of the universe could manipulate them for His purposes at any given time! In any case, when Jesus was a man, he used the power of God too. In the raising the Lazarus, Jesus prayed to his Father, “I know that thou hearest me always.” Jesus was not praying to himself. Jesus was not God. Jesus was not divine.¹² But since as a man he was faithful to death, divinity was his reward. “The word was made flesh and dwelt among us...For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit” (I Peter 3:18). If he was divine, he could not die.

Other critics say he did not die on the cross. But in his Gospel account John (19:34), without realizing its implication reports, “But one of the soldiers with a spear, pierced his side and immediately came there out blood and water.” The significance of this comment is incalculable from a medical point of view.¹³ Ordinarily when a dead man is cut, no blood flows and that's why John added, “the witness is true” (19:35). Instead of dying by exhaustion and asphyxiation from crucifixion, Jesus who earlier had probably fallen flat on his chest with his arms strapped to the crossbeam, sustained myocardial injury to his heart. Then the tremendous workload on the heart of the crucifixion process caused an external rupture of the myocardium which characteristically would account for the presence of clear pericardial fluid as well as volume of blood.¹⁴ The reporting of this phenomenon stamps the Gospel record as a truthful report based on modern medical knowledge unavailable to anyone at that time who would attempt to fabricate a legend.

“But we see Jesus who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor: that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man” (Hebrews 2:9). The “committee” would have to vote Apostle Peter's writings out, not to mention Apostle Paul's, “And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins” (I Corinthians 15:17).

Jesus Resurrected

How do we know Jesus was resurrected from the dead? God anticipated this question. That is why He overruled that Roman soldiers would guard the tomb on pain of death for losing the corpse. If the resurrection of Jesus were a fabrication, why were the followers of Jesus so slow to believe and be convinced? Why were women the first witnesses? The testimony of women in society at that time carried far less authority than that of men.

The whole point of Jesus' post resurrection appearances was to convince his followers that he, indeed, was alive and risen but not that he experienced a bodily resurrection. Jesus had said, "My flesh I *give* for the life of the world." He was not going to take that flesh back. The body he assumed to appear in was not the body of the *man* Christ Jesus. His intimate followers did not even recognize him when they would first speak with him. For Thomas' slow-to-comprehend faith, Jesus appeared in a scared body. Surely, for all eternity Jesus will not have a body disfigured by holes! Besides, "flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God." During the whole forty days before his ascension, he only appeared briefly less than a dozen times. The message was always, Yes, it is me, but I am different. If he were flesh and blood, the world could see him again. But Jesus said, "Henceforth the world seeth me no more" (John 14:19). If John saw what the risen Christ looked like, he would *know* what Christians would be like in heaven (I John 3:2). The best proof of Jesus' resurrection is what he promised would happen in the world when he would *return*. He would have to give signs because he would be invisible to human sight. One sign would be unprecedented world *trouble* and simultaneously the other sign would be the *restoration* of the nation of Israel (Daniel 12:1-4; Matthew 24:32). The logic is simple: the old order of society would be concluding while Jesus would be preparing Israel to be an instrument of blessing in his Kingdom to bless all the nations of the earth (Isaiah 2:1-4).

Let men search for Jesus as they will but Jesus is searching for true Christians who have followed in his footsteps and are eager to bless all the families of the earth with their risen Lord.

End Notes

1. U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT, April 8, 1996.
2. NEWSWEEK, April 8, 1996.
3. THE OREGONIAN, February 10, 1996.
4. McClintock & Strong's Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature, Vol. III.
5. NEWSWEEK, April 8, 1996.
6. CHRISTIANITY TODAY, March 4, 1996.
7. Marcus J. Borg, MEETING JESUS AGAIN FOR THE FIRST TIME (San Francisco: Harper, 1994).
8. CHRISTIANITY TODAY, "Five Gospels, No Account," April 25, 1994.
9. THE OREGONIAN.
10. James H. Charlesworth, JESUS AND THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS (New York:Doubleday, 1992).
11. Oscar Cullmann, JESUS AND THE REVOLUTIONARIES (New York: Harper & Row, 1817), p. 50.
12. "The Lord Our God Is One Lord" [Available upon request].
13. David A. Ball, M.D., JOURNAL MSMA(Mississippi State Medical Association), March 1989, p. 81.
14. IBID.