

# Jesus and Liberal New Testament Scholarship

By Gregory A. Boyd

## 1. Naturalism and the Historical Jesus

### Quotations

"Miracles, for me, are changes in the social world, not the physical world ... I don't believe God entered daily life in the 1st Century and turned physics upside down, and then stopped. In fact, I'd find it incredible and obscene to say that now and then God does intervene to do this or that little thing."

*J. D. Crossan, Chicago Tribune Magazine, July 17, 1994*

"While Jesus may have been a carpenter ... [h]e did not preach salvation from sin ... he probably never delivered the Sermon on the Mount ... [a]nd he never cured any diseases. As for the other miracles? No loaves and fishes, no water into wine, no raising of Lazarus. And certainly no resurrection."

*TIME, January 10, 1994*

### The Quest for a "Merely Human" Jesus

The various radical views of Jesus now being advocated by certain scholars and propagated through the press are buttressed by a number of different historical arguments. Some argue, for example, that the evidence from the first century suggests that Jesus was not unique in his healing ministry. Or, it is frequently argued, evidence from a number of extra-canonical sources such as "Q," the "Gospel of Thomas," or "Secret Mark," proves the real historical Jesus was simply a wise sage.

But behind all such particular historical arguments there lies an all important assumption that we need to critically investigate -- for its not the kind of thing your newspaper is likely to tell you. At the very foundation of what is called "historical critical scholarship" is the assumption of naturalism.

"Naturalism" is the belief that everything in the world, including history, operates strictly by natural laws. As Crossan says in the Chicago Tribune Magazine, " ... I think the laws of physics, whether in the 1st Century or today, have always been the same." [ 1 ] And he means by this, they are never violated! Every

event in history, therefore, is to be explained by referring to natural causes and effects. In other words, the supernatural is ruled out of court as a possible "historical explanation" from the start.

This naturalistic presupposition permeates liberal New Testament scholarship, and, while liberal scholars may differ somewhat in the degree to which they hold to it (depending on how broadly or narrowly they define the "natural" world), its importance in determining the conclusions more radical scholars arrive at can hardly be overstated. If a person begins his or her research with the assumption that supernatural events never occur, then obviously the only Jesus he or she can possibly "discover" through their research is a non-supernatural Jesus, a Jesus, in other words, that is radically different than the Jesus portrayed in the Bible. Thus, the conclusion that the Bible's portrait of a supernatural savior is inaccurate is assumed at the start!

### Starting at the Conclusion

What these liberal scholars in the media today are about, then, is not so much deciding on the basis of the evidence whether or not Jesus was who the Bible says he was. This, as I said, was decided at the outset. What they are rather about is figuring out how the (assumed) mythological portrait of Jesus in the Bible came into being. They need to somehow explain how an ordinary human being was transformed in the minds of his followers into a divine Son of God who supposedly made divine claims and did miracles and even rose from the dead.

This is not at all easy to explain, as we shall see. Indeed, I shall argue that it is virtually impossible. But the point that needs to be presently made is that the only reason these scholars need to work so hard to come up with an explanation in the first place is because they assume at the outset that the Gospel story cannot be true! Since they assume that such things as virgin births, divine healings, and people rising from the dead cannot happen, they have to explain why the early followers of Jesus thought they happened. The simple and straight forward explanation that the followers of Jesus thought these things happened because they in fact happened is not allowed to count as a valid "explanation."

This is what these liberal New Testament scholars are all about. They seek to find a merely human Jesus behind the New Testament records, and then try to explain how this ordinary human got "supernaturalized" in the mind of his followers. But the all important question of whether or not the Gospel story is mythological in the first place is rarely seriously discussed. That matter was settled before the research ever got off the ground, and before their conclusions ever reached the newspaper.

### The 'Quest' Is Really a 'Guess'

The assumption that divinely inspired miracles never occur, and thus that the supernatural Jesus of the Bible is not historical, creates an interesting dilemma for liberal New Testament scholars. They want their view of Jesus to be rooted in concrete historical evidence, on the one hand, and yet their naturalistic assumption leads them to distrust most of the evidence in the New Testament, on the other. And since we have very little other evidence to go on, this means that whatever view of Jesus these scholars arrive at, it's necessarily going to be arrived at more in spite of what the New Testament says than because of what the New Testament says. And this means that whatever view of Jesus these scholars take, its going to have to be based more on guess work than it is on concrete data.

In some respects, this liberal scholarship has created a problem for itself that it cannot solve, except by guessing. In undermining so much of the only concrete data we have on Jesus with their naturalistic starting point, these scholars have shrouded the historical Jesus in a veil of impenetrable darkness. All of our earliest records of Jesus found in the Bible portray him as the miracle working Son of God, but this these scholars will not allow. So, the only business left to do is to guess at who is behind this veil of myth and guess at how this veil of myth got there in the first place. In other words, they create a problem for themselves and then guess at how to solve it.

This is the primary reason why there are so many differing opinions about who Jesus was among contemporary liberal New Testament scholars. Since there is so little concrete data left for these scholars to go on, the veritable smorgasbord of scholarly opinions about who Jesus was that now bombard us through the media is to be expected. Indeed, this lack of unanimity has always characterized liberal New Testament scholarship, for just this reason.

#### An Overview of the Guessey Quest

One of the first scholars to embark upon "the quest for the historical Jesus" was Hermann Remeirus (1694-1768). Starting from a naturalistic presupposition, and therefore believing that the New Testament portrait of Jesus was largely unreliable, he conjectured that the person who lay behind the New Testament records was a political revolutionary. Shortly thereafter, a large number of "Jesus biographers," starting from this same naturalistic starting point, would conjecture in various ways that the historical Jesus was a teacher of high morals and lofty ideals. His followers, however, perhaps got over-enthusiastic in piling accolades on him.

Others, such as Venturini, would speculate that Jesus was an Essene involved in a complex messianic conspiracy. David Strauss, however, argued that the Gospels are too thoroughly mythological to ever penetrate behind them with certainty. Weiss and Schweitzer would not be deterred, though, and penetrated through these myths to find a wild-eyed apocalyptic visionary whose outlook was to foreign to be understood by modern people.

More recently, various scholars have tried to portray the "real" Jesus as preacher calling for authentic living (R. Bultmann), a Jewish zealot (S. Brandon), a fairly orthodox Jew (J. Klausner), a political radical (R. Eisler, J. Carmichael), an ingenious messianic pretender (H. Schofield), or as a total figment of peoples' imagination (J. M. Robinson). And the guesses are by no means becoming less diverse at the present time. Indeed, it is worsening to the point where even Crossan confesses that "[h]istorical Jesus research is becoming something of a scholarly bad joke." [ 2 ]

So, for example, there are an increasing number of scholars, such as John Dominic Crossan and Burton Mack, who are now arguing that the historical Jesus was a Cynic philosopher. Others, such as John Kloppenborg and James Robinson, agree that Jesus was a wise sage, but not necessary that he was of a Cynic orientation. Ben Meyer and John Meier, however, argue that the historical Jesus was more of a Jewish reformer. But Susan Haskins thinks he was a feminist. Anthony Harvey, on the other hand, argues that he was a prophet-teacher, Richard Horsley that he was a radical social prophet, while E. P. Sanders sees him as an eschatological prophet (a prophet who preached the coming judgment of God). The list could easily go on.

All of these scholars have their own particular reasons for postulating the particular view of Jesus they postulate. And each has their own explanation for how the "merely human" Jesus they find got mythologically transformed into the Son of God we find in the Gospels. But the sheer variety of opinions we find throughout the quest for the historical Jesus is enough to tell us that their views are based more on guesswork than they are on concrete historical facts. Given the fact that they begin with the assumption that the supernatural Jesus that all the evidence points to cannot be the historical Jesus, this diversity is just what we should expect.

What is more, while each of these various theories have their particular strong points as well as their weak points, it is this naturalistic assumption that lies behind each of them that constitutes their main "selling point." That is, the only reason their particular ways of explaining how the "merely human" Jesus got transformed into the supernatural Son of God are plausible is because they assume at the start that Jesus was not the supernatural Son of God that the Gospels say he was. For people who need to explain away the Gospels portrait of Jesus, these various theories are appealing. But for a person who does not share this presupposition, they are seen as extremely conjectural and quite unnecessary.

### The Problem of Circularity

This overview of the smorgasbord of scholarly guesses also reveals just how circular the business of liberal New Testament scholarship can be. As we said in the previous chapter, scholars tend to find what they expect to find in their quest to "get behind" the New Testament data. In their attempts to "get behind" the New Testament view of Jesus, scholars must set up criteria for what will and will not "count" as evidence for the historical Jesus. But no one agrees what these criteria are! It is largely a subjective matter.

And so it is not surprising that these scholars end up with such a wide variety of views on Jesus. What they find is built into how they find him! Scholars today who think that Jesus was simply a wise sage, for example, argue that all of the apocalyptic sayings of Jesus (e.g. sayings that speak of the second coming) are "inauthentic": they do not go back to the historical Jesus. Others, however, think such sayings do go back to the historical Jesus, and for this reason conclude that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet, not a wise sage. How can an issue like this be settled?

It can't! Everything depends on what one at the start thinks Jesus is going to look like when they "discover" him "behind" the New Testament. Their expectations drive their criteria, and their criteria determine what they discover. And so, as we noted in the previous chapter, it is hardly surprising that some scholars "discover" a radical feminist, others a prophet, others a rabbi, others a magician, others a Cynic, and still others a political revolutionary. And all of this is ultimately the result of assuming at the start that the Gospel portrait of the Son of God who died and rose again cannot be true. If this isn't true, it's anyone's guess as to what is.

### A Presumptuous Assumption

The obvious question that you've got to be asking yourself through all of this is, why do these scholars assume that God could not have become incarnate in a human being and that divinely inspired miracles cannot occur? On what basis can they be so confident about what can and cannot happen in history? By what means do they come to know so much about God and the nature of the world that they can confidently pronounce, prior to any investigation of the evidence, that God has never intervened into the world!? Wouldn't you have to be God himself to know this?

The most likely response to this line of questioning, one that is found in various ways throughout the history of the quest for the historical Jesus, is that the assumption of naturalism is simply part of our cultural world view. Since the scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the response goes, this has just been the way western intellectuals look at things. It's what lies behind science. It's what has fueled progress in western society. And, therefore, it's what grounds our investigations into history. We simply assume that the natural regularity of the world we experience has been true for all time in all places.

Thus, the response goes, when we read in some ancient documents (the Gospels) that a man rose from the grave after being dead for three days, for example, we all naturally assume that there must be a naturalistic explanation for this. Perhaps the man hadn't really died. Perhaps those who gave this report were lying. Or perhaps it's all simply innocent legend. But, we assume, he didn't actually come back to life, and the records that say he did are simply not historical. That would violate the laws of nature!

### *Is Naturalism True?*

There are two objections that can be raised against this response. First, even if we grant for the moment that our present western world view is naturalistic, this doesn't mean that naturalism is true. World views are often wrong. Indeed, holding that naturalism is true itself requires seeing all other world views that allow for the supernatural as being wrong. So, the naturalistic world view may be right, or it may be wrong.

Now if, as they claim, scholars are interested in truth, and not just in reiterating what they already believe, shouldn't this mean that they should be open to the possibility of discovering things that actually challenge, and perhaps even overthrow, their own naturalistic world view? Isn't being open to the possibility of being wrong what academic scholarship is all about? And, therefore, should we not see the refusal to entertain the possibility of miracles as a presumptuous, very prejudiced, and quite unscholarly dogmatism?

The implication of all of this for historical research into who Jesus was is this: the matter should be settled on the basis of evidence, not on the basis of one's own world view assumptions. It means that we should be open to the possibility that the Gospels are telling us the truth, rather than simply working to come up with explanations for why they are not telling us the truth. It means that if the evidence suggests that Jesus actually made the divine claims and performed the divine feats that the Gospels attribute to him, we should be willing to accept this, however inconvenient it may be to our own world view.

### *Is the Western World View Really Naturalistic?*

A second objection to the above reply that can be raised is that it does not seem that even the assumption that our western world view is thoroughly naturalistic is correct. While a host of intellectuals have been insisting on this for more than a century, the majority of people in western culture have continued to believe that miracles can occur. Certainly the majority of westerners today, Christians and non-Christians alike, are having no problem believing in the supernatural.

Indeed, our culture is presently witnessing a veritable explosion of interest in (if not an obsession with) such things as miracles, angels, channeling, and other supernatural experiences, as any casual visit to the New Age section of your local book store will tell you. Whatever we make of this phenomenon, it is enough to

prove that the naturalistic assumption that governs so much of liberal New Testament scholarship is not simply part of western culture. Indeed, it is increasingly out of sync with western culture.

#### Trying To Make a Naturalistic Jesus 'Relevant'

This observation also exposes the misguidedness of yet another aspect of the liberal New Testament enterprise. Since the time of Rudolf Bultmann with his famous attempt to "demythologize" the New Testament, many liberal scholars have been trying to make Jesus more "relevant" to modern people by "discovering" a non-supernatural Jesus behind the myth that modern people could believe in. Much of the present liberal agenda, we saw in the last chapter, was about just this: finding a "new" Jesus that could be relevant to modern people. The assumption, of course, is that modern people can no longer, and should no longer, believe in a supernatural savior. It is a refrain we hear frequently from modern liberal scholars in the media.

Beside the point that there is little left of Jesus worth believing in once you've stripped him of all his supernatural features, and beside the point that we can only guess at who Jesus might be after we've stripped away the supernatural features of the New Testament, the endeavors of these liberal scholars, we now see, are completely unnecessary. They may have trouble finding relevance in a supernatural savior, but the majority of people do not. What is truly irrelevant to modern western people is the conjectural naturalized Jesus that is left over after the liberal scholars have undermined all of his supernatural features!

Hence, we may conclude that the naturalistic assumption that has driven the liberal New Testament enterprise for some two hundred years is as unnecessary as it presumptuous, and leads to views of Christ that are as circular as they are conjectural.

#### Endnotes

1. J. D. Crossan, *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, July 17, 1994, p. 8.
2. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), xxvii.

## 2. The Uniqueness of Jesus

#### Quotations

"Jesus was only one of many rabbis who traveled through the country side preaching and healing, and his life and death were scarcely noticed in secular records of the time."  
*Minneapolis Star Tribune, September 19, 1993*

"There is little doubt that Jesus performed exorcisms as they were understood in his time ... It was just a natural thing to do for an itinerant charismatic healer and teacher ... and he was not the only one to do it."  
*John Rousseau, U.S. News & World Report, Dec. 20, 1993*

"What if the notion of a single, miraculous, point of origin [of Christianity] was acknowledged for what it was, not a category of critical scholarship at all, but an article of faith derived from Christian mythology?"

*Burton Mack, A Myth of Innocence*

### The Search for a Non-Unique Jesus

Built into the naturalistic assumption that drives the liberal New Testament search for the "man behind the myth" is the notion that, whoever Jesus was, he cannot have been utterly unique. The laws that operate in the world today, including the laws of human behavior, have always operated. And thus, when we are trying to understand who Jesus was, they argue, we must assume that he was in principle like the rest of us.

The major obstacle to this, of course, is that the New Testament unequivocally speaks of Jesus in radically unique terms. It is reported that he made unprecedented claims for himself, lived a truly extraordinary life, performed miraculous deeds, drove out demons, and was raised from the dead. How is this radical uniqueness to be explained if the "real" Jesus was, in fact, in principle no different from other people?

One major "discovery" that helps explain this, in the eyes of many liberal scholars, is that such claims, and such deeds, were not all that uncommon in the ancient world. The Gospel portrayal of Jesus as a miracle working "divine man," it is argued, has many parallels. Thus, for example, we sometimes read in the media or in popular books certain scholars claiming that stories about virgin births were also told about Alexander the Great; stories about people being raised from the dead were also told about a man named Apollonius; stories about resurrected deities were also told in ancient "mystery religions"; stories about healings and exorcisms were also told about a host of magicians in the ancient world; and stories about stupendous miracles were also told about certain Jewish holy men.

The Bible's supernatural stories of Jesus, then, are not all that unique after all. To people who have always assumed that Jesus was unique, these reports can obviously be most disturbing. But, in the interest of being truly "religiously literate," you need to know that there is another side to this story.

### Jesus the Psychosomatic Healer

The observation that there were others in the ancient world who purportedly performed miracles just as Jesus did can be pushed in one of two directions. Some liberal scholars, following a tactic used by the skeptical philosopher David Hume two centuries ago, argue that the miracle stories in the ancient world cancel each other out. That is, if we're not willing to believe the other stories of healings, exorcism, and divination found in other ancient literature, then we shouldn't feel compelled to believe the miraculous stories about Jesus either. All such stories are on the same par. They are legendary.

An increasing number of other scholars, however, find the historical evidence that Jesus actually performed something like healings and exorcisms too strong to be rejected, and thus hold that Jesus must have possessed some sort of extraordinary power. But, they continue, this extraordinary power was not necessarily unique to Jesus. While it is perhaps foreign to modern westerners, it was not uncommon in the ancient world. Nor is it yet uncommon, some would add, in other parts of the world today. So, while many of the ancient stories about healers and exorcists may be legendary -- including some of the stories in the Gospels -- some may in fact contain an element of historical truth. But this, they argue, does not make Jesus altogether unique.

Thus, to mention a few of the most noteworthy examples of this view, Geza Vermes, Marcus Borg, and Sean Freyne see Jesus as an example of certain Jewish charismatic healers and/or wonder-workers that we know of in ancient Judaism. Scholars like John Hull, Morton Smith, and Otto Böcher, however, see Jesus as one more example of the various magicians and/or exorcists that roamed the ancient world and that can be found in some primordial cultures today. In both cases, something extraordinary and perhaps even inexplicable about Jesus' ministry is admitted.

This position is better than the view that writes off all of Jesus' "miraculous" ministry as legendary in that these scholars at least see that the Gospels' stories about Jesus working miracles couldn't have been conjured up from nothing. And, while these scholars don't usually embrace anything like a traditional Christian "supernatural" explanation for Jesus' ministry -- it wasn't necessarily God the Father who worked through Jesus -- they are at least willing to stretch their understanding of the natural world far enough to encompass the radically "extraordinary." This is a small step in the right direction.

Nevertheless, this view does little by way of coming to grips with the New Testament proclamation that Jesus was the unique Son of God and that it was God the Father (not merely an extraordinary ability) who was working through him in a miraculous way to confirm his unique Sonship. While admitting that Jesus performed extraordinary feats, these scholars nevertheless usually explain this as a natural ability, howbeit an ability that is foreign to most western people (hence it is called "extraordinary").

The most prevalent explanation of this extraordinary ability among scholars today is that Jesus was a "faith healer" correcting "psychosomatic disorders." He probably used some sort of "trancelike therapy," Crossan speculates, such as is used by shamans today in primordial cultures. [ 1 ] Many within the Jesus Seminar embrace something like this explanation. But, in any case, the central controversial point made by such explanations as this is that Jesus was not unique.

What is one to make of such explanations? Is there really historical evidence that indicates that there were others who did what Jesus did? Is the portrait of Jesus as "divine" in the New Testament shared by others in the ancient world? And are such stories as the virgin birth and the resurrection found outside the Bible and attributed to other figures? In the minds of many scholars -- those usually not given much press time -- these parallels between Jesus and other ancient "wonder workers" are not very impressive.

#### The Uniqueness of Jesus' Claims and Deeds

For starters, the Bible never questions the fact that healings, exorcisms, and other miraculous acts can be done, by whatever means, by a wide variety of people. Nowhere does it assume that such feats are the exclusive domain of Jesus, or of his followers. Nor has such a claim ever been part of the Christian Church's official teaching. In principle, therefore, a person who believed in Scripture should have little difficulty also accepting that certain ancient wonder-workers performed feats that to some degree parallel Jesus' own ministry -- if the evidence indicates this (more on this below). For it is not Jesus' supernatural power that, in and of itself, makes Jesus unique.

What makes Jesus radically unique, according to the New Testament, is not so much that he performed supernatural deeds, but why he performed them! For Jesus, such feats were never just random exhibitions of a curious ability he possessed. Such feats rather expressed and demonstrated the truth that he embodied the Kingdom of God. "If I drive out demons by the finger of God," Jesus says, "then the kingdom of God has come to you" (Lk. 11:20).

Such "signs," as John calls them (Jn. 4:54), expressed God's unconditional love and amazing concern for the needs of people, and they were demonstrations of the truth that Jesus Christ was the Son of God who had come to save the world. They expressed and demonstrated the truth that God himself was graciously present in, and working through, this one unique historical person to set up his kingdom on earth. It is, then, the total picture of who Jesus is that is radically unique. This uniqueness includes, is expressed by, and is verified by, his supernatural deeds. But it is not reducible to these supernatural deeds.

Whatever we make of the supposed parallels to the deeds of Jesus, we can conclusively say that there is not, and never has been, anything remotely parallel to the total picture of Jesus we find in the New Testament.

### Greek Heroes and Wonder-Workers

We see, then, that even if there were people in the ancient world who, either by Godly, demonic, or parapsychological power, did deeds that somewhat parallel Jesus' miraculous deeds, the uniqueness of Jesus which the New Testament speaks of is not thereby compromised. But, many scholars would argue, we do not have any good reason to admit such parallels in the first place. When the supposed parallels are taken on a case by case basis, they do not stand up to scrutiny.

### *Legendary "Divine Men"*

Perhaps the most frequently cited parallels for Jesus' ministry come from various stories that circulated in the Greco-Roman world about certain legendary "divine men." Many emperors were spoken of as being "a god" by the common people, and stories would sometimes spring up about them that attributed supernatural deeds to them.

The most frequently cited example of this is Alexander the Great. Alexander was said to have been born to a virgin, to have done wondrous deeds, and to have accepted accolades as being a god. Do these facts undermine the uniqueness of the Gospels story that Jesus was born to a virgin, did miraculous deeds, and was worshipped as God? On the basis of the following considerations, many scholars would answer this in the negative.

- The earliest accounts of Alexander we possess contain none of the features of later legends about him. But, despite the best efforts of certain scholars, no "pre-supernatural" stage of the Jesus tradition can be found.
- The stories of Alexander's supernatural life developed gradually over a thousand year period of time. This hardly parallels the Gospel accounts which are written within thirty or forty years of Jesus' life and which demonstrably contain material that is even earlier.
- The legendary accounts of Alexander arise after Christianity -- indeed, after Christianity has spread throughout the entire Roman world. Hence, it is likely that the stories of Alexander have been influenced by stories about Christ.
- The Gospel's were written in the context of a Jewish world view which held, as a central feature of its theology, that human beings could not be God. The accounts of Alexander were circulated in pagan environments where the concept of "divinized men" (men being transformed into a god) was common. Thus, when the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament portray Jesus in divine

terms, it has a much more profound significance than when Alexander, or any pagan person, is called "a god."

For these reasons, many scholars judge all attempts to reduce Jesus to a anything like a Greek "divinized man" to be completely misguided.

#### *Apollonius the Wonder-Worker*

Slightly more compelling, however, are the supposed parallels between Jesus and a certain Apollonius of Tyana, and for this reason he is the most frequently cited Greek parallel to the New Testaments portrait of Jesus. Like Jesus, Apollonius is said to have lived in the first century, was said to have healed people, to have exorcised demons, to have perhaps raised a young girl from the dead, and to have appeared to some of his followers after his death. These parallels with Christianity initially look impressive. But on closer inspection, their impressiveness diminishes considerably. Consider the following:

- We have only one account of Apollonius, written about one and a half centuries after his life. This is much less impressive than the four accounts of Jesus we have that are written within one generation of his life.
- We have no way of assessing the historical accuracy of this one report, whereas (as we shall see in chapter VI) we have a number of ways of assessing the accuracy of the Gospels.
- We have some reason to suspect that Philostratus, the biographer of Apollonius, had financial motives for embellishing his account. He had been commissioned by empress Julia Damna, a follower of Apollonius, to write an account for the expressed purpose of glorifying Apollonius on the occasion of a Temple being constructed in his honor (funded by Julia's son, Caracalla). The Gospel accounts, of course, were also written to glorify Jesus Christ -- though, in the interest of truth, they also contain features that appear counter-productive to this intention, as we shall see. But, more importantly, it is also clear that the authors of the Gospels had nothing personal to gain, and everything to lose, by publishing their works. One can not therefore suspect them of possessing ulterior motives.
- The account of Apollonius is composed in the early third century in Cappadocia where Christianity had been present for a long while. This greatly increases the likelihood that stories about Apollonius had been influenced by earlier stories about Christ. Discovering parallels between the two, then, is not surprising.
- The account of Apollonius is filled with overt sensationalism centered on Apollonius' use of charms, omens, incantations, etc. The Gospel accounts, however, are remarkable sober in their telling of Jesus' deeds. They read like straight forward reports, and altogether lack the sensationalism and superstition found in Philostratus' account.
- Finally, even though he had been commissioned to write a biography glorifying Apollonius, Philostratus' account is often quite tentative. He reports what has been said about Apollonius, whereas the Gospels write from the perspective of eyewitnesses. In the account of Apollonius raising the young girl from the dead, for example, Philostratus reports that some say that the girl

"seemed to have died," but others say that Apollonius had detected "some spark of life in her which those who were nursing her had not noticed."

This tentative resuscitation is hardly parallel to (say) the story of Jesus raising Lazareth from the dead after he'd already been decomposing for four days (Jn. 11:38-44). And it can in no wise stand next to the four Gospel accounts of Jesus himself rising from the dead! Whoever the real Apollonius was, therefore, he provides, at best, a very shaky parallel to Jesus.

### Christianity and the Mystery Religions

There were, throughout the Greco-Roman world, numerous secret religious societies that have come to be called "mystery religions." While they frequently had features in common with one another, they each had their own deity, their own mythological stories, their own initiation rites, and their own esoteric religious practices. Liberal scholars early in this century frequently argued that Christianity borrowed many of its ideas from these mystery religions. They argued, for example, that the notion of a "dying and rising god," of "being cleansed by the blood," and even of baptism and communion were inherited from these mystery religions.

By the second world war, however, this theory had universally been abandoned by scholars because the evidence for it was so scanty. Recently, however, a few of the scholars that are getting media attention, such as Burton Mack, have attempted to resurrect it. In his popular book, *The Lost Gospel*, for example, Mack argues that the apostle Paul formed "a spirited cult ... on the model of the mystery religions, complete with entrance baptisms ... rites of recognition ... [and] ritualized meals (the lord's supper) ... " [ 2 ] And so, in the interest of getting "the rest" of the story, a brief rebuttal is in order. Five basic points can be made against it.

- We have no concrete evidence of what mystery religions believed or practiced before the second century A.D., and most of the evidence from which supposed parallels are drawn is much later than this. There is, therefore, simply no basis for arguing that Christianity borrowed from these religions. If there was any borrowing, it was in the other direction.
- Some mystery religions did speak about a "dying and rising god," but this bears absolutely no resemblance to the Gospel's proclamation that Jesus died and rose from the dead. As most scholars now realize, the deities of these mystery religions were simply symbols of the cycles of the seasons. Vegetation dies in the fall and winter but is "resurrected" in the spring. Ancient people frequently created myths to express the mystery of this on-going occurrence. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as its portrayed in the Gospels, has absolutely nothing to do with this.
- The deities of the mystery religions are completely divorced from history, whereas the Jesus of the Gospel is completely rooted in history. What these mythological deities did, including their dying and rising, happened "once upon a time." The Jesus that the Gospel's speak of, however, lived just prior to the writing of the Gospels. People were still around who knew him, his mother, his brother (James), and Pontius Pilot under whom he was crucified, when they were written. In this light, the attempt to draw any parallel between the resurrected Christ of the Gospels and vegetation deities has to be judged as desperate.

- The attempt to draw parallels between the mystery religions practice of baptism and communion is no better. First, all of the evidence for such supposed parallels comes after the third century. So, if there is in fact any commonality between these and Christianity, it must be attributed to the mystery religion borrowing from Christianity, not the other way around. But, even more fundamentally, the supposed points of commonality simply do not exist if you examine them on a case by case basis. We know, for example, that devotees of the god Mithra would stand under a bull while it was gutted and would be bathed in its blood. They would, with the other devotees, then eat the bull. This was part of their initiation into the inner circle of the Mithra cult. One could call this "baptism" and a "communion meal" if they wished. But trying to argue that it actually parallels Christian baptism and communion is outlandish.
- Finally, it is important to remember that Christianity was born within a Jewish, not a pagan, culture. While the religions of the Greco-Roman world were very eclectic, borrowing freely from various religions and philosophy in their environment, orthodox Jews always resisted such a practice. They knew that they had been called by God to be "a separate people." They therefore looked on pagan ideas and practices with disdain. This was carried over into Christianity. It is reflected, for example, in the apostle Paul's warning to steer clear of pagan philosophy and mythology, for it might corrupt the Gospel (Col. 2:6-8; I Tim. 6:20). To suggest that the early Jewish followers of Jesus would have, or could have, modeled their religion after their pagan neighbors flies in the face of this.

#### Jesus and Ancient Magicians

A third area from which certain scholars have tried to construe parallels between Jesus and others in the ancient world concerns the widespread practice of magic. Unlike the evidence for mystery religions, there is a wealth of evidence that a good many people in the ancient world believed in the effective power of such things as protective charms, love potions, spells, and incantations. And many times this magic was used to effect physical healing in people's lives or to deliver them from evil spirits.

It is not surprising, then, that some scholars such as Morton Smith and John Hull have tried to make the case that the historical Jesus was simply an ancient magician. There are a number of considerations, however, that put this theory quickly to rest. I shall briefly outline the three that are the most forceful.

- The Jesus of the Gospels never bases his healings or his exorcisms on magic. All of his miracles are based on a) God's concern for the individual, and b) the individual's faith. "According to your faith," Jesus repeatedly says, "be it unto you" (e.g. Mt. 9:2, 22, 29). This approach has nothing in common with the magical practices of his day in which people invested objects, formulas, or rituals with power. If one is going to argue that the "real" Jesus was a magician, one is going to have to dismiss all the evidence we have of him to do so. And this doesn't enhance the credibility of any theory.
- Relatedly, Jesus never employed anything like magical practices in his healings or exorcisms. He twice applied spit on a blind man's eyes, and once on a mute person's tongue, while performing healings (Jn. 9:6, Mk. 7:33, 8:23), and some have found parallels to this in extant magical literature. But the similarity is only apparent, for it is nowhere suggested that this practice somehow contributed to the healing process. The fact remains that we never find Jesus using

spells, incantations, or magical objects such as amulets, ashes, dog's hair, or incense such as we find throughout the ancient magical literature. And this renders the thesis that Jesus was anything like the magicians of his age most unlikely.

- While we have a wealth of literature on the belief in magic in the ancient world, we possess no reliable literature which suggests that the practitioners of this magic were actually successful. Many, of course, claimed that their magic worked, just as practitioners of magic today claim that their crystals, mini-pyramids, incantations, etc. work. They "feel" luckier, healthier, more protected, and so on. But such convictions can hardly be said to parallel the kind of thing we find in the Gospels. Here we do not find formula's that someone thinks will work: here we find four reliable accounts of how an extraordinary man did work.

For reasons such as this, the attempt to argue that the historical Jesus was just another magician must be judged as being misguided. How Jesus healed and casts out demons was as unique as why he healed and performed exorcisms. And, most certainly, it had nothing to do with magic.

#### Jewish Miracle-Workers

The final, and most compelling, area from which some recent scholars attempt to draw parallels which call into question the uniqueness of Jesus' ministry is found in what certain scholars have called "charismatic Judaism." There were, according to Geza Vermes and others, certain Jewish "holy men" about whom miraculous stories are told which look similar to the stories told about Jesus. We have, then, good reason to see Jesus as one more example of these holy men, the only difference being that Jesus' followers eventually formed a religion that broke away from Judaism while the followers of other holy men did nothing of the sort.

This approach has the distinct advantage over the others of locating Jesus within his Jewish environment. It sees that Jesus was first and foremost a first century Jew, and thus that he would not likely have been inclined to borrow elements of pagan religions around him. But, I argue, on closer inspection the supposed parallels are not much more compelling than those looked at in the first three areas. Three things can be said against this theory.

- The accounts of "holy men" performing miracles are really about God answering the prayers of these holy men. In the available accounts we have, these men pray to God for rain, and it rains. They pray for someone to be healed, and they are healed. As impressive as this is ( some accounts are undoubtedly historical), this is not at all parallel to the kind of authority Jesus displays throughout the Gospels. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus himself is portrayed as commanding sicknesses, demons, and death to leave, and they "obey." This was in part why the crowds, along with his disciples, marveled that his authority was like none they had ever seen (e.g. Lk. 8:24-25). Even when Jesus does pray to the Father before raising Lazareth, he notes that it is only for the crowds sake that he does so (Jn. 11:42). There are no known parallels to this kind of authority.
- The occasional miraculous answers to prayer that are attributed to certain holy men in the extant Jewish literature are just that -- occasional. In no instance do these "feats" (if you can call them that) take center stage to what these men were all about. Such is not the case with Jesus, however. While Jesus was certainly about more than his miracles, his miracles were nevertheless

central to who he was. Almost every page of the Gospels contains them. Take away the answered prayer of the holy men, and little about them is changed. Take away the miracles from Jesus, and little is the same.

- This leads directly to a third major difference between the miracles of Jesus and the answered prayers of ancient Jewish holy men. The reasons behind the miracles are fundamentally different. As one would expect, the Jewish writings which allude to the answered prayers of certain holy men see these answered prayers as helping people and glorifying Yaweh. For Jesus, however, the purpose for the miracles was not only to help people and to glorify God, but even more fundamentally, to do so by glorifying himself!

The Father has given him authority, the Jesus of John's Gospel claims, "that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father" (Jn. 5:23). For Jesus, in other words, glorifying God and glorifying himself were intrinsically bound up with one another. So much so that he could add, "He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him"(Jn. 5:24). So also he tells Lazarus' sisters that Lazarus' sickness "is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it" (Jn. 11:4).

This is unprecedented! There is no parallel to a man, within orthodox Judaism, making such stupendous claims. And there certainly is no parallel to anyone performing miracles, on his own authority, to substantiate such claims! Whatever commonalties Jesus may have with other Jewish "charismatics," they are dwarfed in significance by this monumental difference. Indeed, so different was Jesus from other Jewish holy men that Jesus was (understandably) accused of blasphemy -- claiming to be God. And his miraculous powers were therefore attributed to Satan (Mt. 12:24; Mk. 3:22). And in the light of this, all attempts to make Jesus simply one of the holy men whose prayers God answered must be judged as extremely weak.

#### The Miracle of all Miracles

There are, we see, no clear parallels to the radically unique ministry of Jesus. With few exceptions, his miraculous ministry is the only one we have any reliable information about. But, even beyond this, the amount of miracles he performed, the way he performed them, and the reasons he performed them were all radically unique. Jesus is, pure and simple, one of a kind.

But we have not yet addressed the chief thing that sets Jesus apart not only from all other supposed ancient miracle workers, but from all other people period: this miracle worked was raised from the dead and never again died! This proclamation lies at the foundation of everything the New Testament says about Jesus is the claim that Jesus Christ. While the character, teachings, and wondrous deeds of Jesus had already impressed the multitudes that he was more than just a teacher and prophet, it was the resurrection more than anything else that finally convinced them that this man was indeed the Son of God!

This event sets Jesus miles apart from any other historical figure, but for just this reason it cannot be admitted as historical by those scholars who work with naturalistic presuppositions. It must, therefore, somehow be explained away.

#### Endnotes

1. TIME, January 10, 1994.
2. B. Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), p.220.

### 3. Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?

#### Quotations

"Jesus lived on in the hearts of followers... but he did not physically rise from the dead. Taken down from the cross, his body was probably buried in a shallow grave — and may have been eaten by dogs."

*Newsweek, April 4, 1999*

#### Trying To Get Around The Resurrection

We have seen that, while Jesus' life, claims, and miraculous ministry set him far apart from all other human beings, it is his resurrection more than anything else that stamps him as the one and only Son of God. But, precisely because it sets Jesus apart as unique and requires an affirmation of the supernatural within history, it cannot be allowed by scholars with a commitment to naturalism. It must, therefore, be explained away.

For the last two hundred years naturalistic scholars have attempted to accomplish this by proposing a number of theories. Some have argued that Jesus never really died. He simply looked dead and then revived while in the tomb. Others have argued that the disciples stole Jesus' body and made the story of his resurrection up. Others have argued that the disciples were simply hallucinating when they thought they saw Jesus. While still others have argued that the idea of the resurrection was simply a myth that evolved over time among Jesus' followers.

Variations on these theories, especially the last one, are still advocated by various naturalistic scholars today. But no theory, past or present, has received anything like the attention J. D. Crossan's theory is now receiving. According to Crossan, Jesus died by crucifixion as a common criminal and his corpse received the treatment common criminals received in the ancient Roman world. If it was buried at all, Crossan argues, it would have been in a shallow mass grave. And, in all probability, it was then quickly dug up and eaten by the wild dogs that hovered around such burial sites.

According to Crossan, the original followers of Jesus "knew almost nothing whatsoever about the details of his crucifixion, death, or burial." [ 1 ] The Gospel accounts of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, therefore, are entirely fabricated. Jesus' followers simply could not accept that their master had gone the way of common criminals, and thus they began to recreate history in their own minds.

For example, the story of Jesus being buried in the wealthy tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the powerful council of the Sanhedrin, is entirely a figment of Mark's imagination, according to Crossan. Mark had to invent someone who would have a) wanted to see Jesus buried properly (hence he is portrayed as a believer); and b) had access to Pilate to make a special request for how a crucified body would be disposed of (hence he is portrayed as an influential member of the Sanhedrin).

The stories of Jesus' resurrection appearances, according to Crossan, are equally fictitious. As Crossan says in TIME, they are the result of "latter-day wishful thinking" on the part of Christians. [ 2 ] Christians made up history the way they wished it had gone, instead of the way it actually occurred.

Could The Early Christians Have Made This Story Up?

Now there are a number of serious problems with Crossan's theory, and all theories like it. For starters, the very idea that any group of people (let alone first century Jews) could so thoroughly recreate recent history out of thin air and then make themselves believe it, is extremely difficult to accept. On Crossan's theory, none of the initial followers of Jesus believed he rose from the dead. Then, a few decades later, all of his followers believe it. Is this really credible? Ask yourself, are large groups of people ever prone to this sort of intense, self-delusional fabricating -- to the extent that they'd completely recreate recent history? Insane individuals, maybe. But large groups of ordinary people? Impossible!

And are we really to believe that there were not at least some psychologically balanced people within this first century group who would have protested against this novel fabrication? Wouldn't someone have pointed out that their group never used to talk about Jesus' supposed resurrection? Wouldn't someone have pointed out that this story simply was not true? Indeed, wouldn't all of the original disciples have done this, if in fact the resurrection hadn't occurred?

And even if (for the sake of argument) no one within the movement would have done this, wouldn't there be many outside this group who would have been more than happy to point this out? We know, after all, that there were a great many people in high places who were strongly opposed to the Christian movement from the start. Couldn't these opponents have very easily blown apart the whole thing -- which they wanted to do -- by simply exposing the fact that this message about the resurrection is a tall tale that even the Christians themselves hadn't believed until recently? But this objection was never raised!

What is more, couldn't these opponents have easily falsified this "new" Christian story? Consider that these Christians were talking about events that transpired only a few decades ago (many of their opponents were around then), and not so very far away (Jerusalem). Consider further that these authors were dropping some pretty heavyweight names in their (supposedly) fictitious accounts like Pilate, a governor, Caiaphas, a high priest, and Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin. Couldn't these opponents, therefore, have easily disproved these accounts?

Of course they could have, and would have, if the story had been made up, as Crossan argues. But it clearly wasn't, so they obviously couldn't.

Finally, Crossan's proposal becomes even less plausible when we consider that the Gospels weren't the first documents to claim that Jesus rose. We find the apostle Paul saying the same thing -- and talking about it as though it were an already established Christian teaching -- some ten to twenty years before the Gospels were even written (I Cor. 15:1-8)! If maintaining that a significant group of Jews rewrote history and believed it forty years after the fact is difficult, holding that they did so well before 50 A.D. is virtually impossible.

Joseph of Arimathea

Many of the details of Crossan's conjecture are also problematic. For example, one has to seriously question the plausibility of the suggestion that Mark simply made up the figure of Joseph of Arimathea. Why this particular name? Why this particular insignificant village? And, as I intimated above, if Mark was going to fabricate a person, would he have him be such an overtly public figure as one of the seventy-one leaders who served on the Sanhedrin? This is altogether unlikely.

Knowledge about who served on the Sanhedrin was common in Jewish circles, so fabricating such a person would make exposing his narrative as a lie very easy to do. It would be no different than someone today trying to circulate an incredible story about a member of our Supreme Court a few decades ago. Such a story could easily be falsified.

### Looking At All The Evidence

As insurmountable as these difficulties are, these problems are not the main problem with Crossan's theory. The major problem with Crossan's conjecture, and all conjectures like it, is that it simply flies directly in the face of the evidence. The evidence for the historicity of the resurrection, if examined without foregone conclusions about what could and could not have happened, is extremely good. In other words, if you don't start with the assumption that the evidence is all lying, you find that the evidence is remarkably compelling. Indeed, many historians and New Testament scholars who are not committed to strictly naturalistic presuppositions (viz. who do not believe the resurrection is impossible) have argued that the historical evidence for the resurrection is at least as strong as what we have for any other documented event in ancient history.

Now, I personally have never found the case for the resurrection covered in the popular media, though I have found the views of scholars who deny it covered quite thoroughly. In the interest of being fully informed on the subject, then, we need to have at least an overview of this side of the story as well. [ 3 ] I shall, therefore, briefly review two groups of arguments that establish the historicity of the resurrection. The first is taken from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, the second from the four Gospel accounts.

### 1 Corinthians 15 And The Resurrection

In his letter to the Corinthian Church, Paul mentions that, after having been "buried" for three days, Christ appeared to Peter, the Twelve, to "more than five hundred of the brothers ... most of whom are still living," to James, then to all the apostles, and finally to Paul himself (I Cor. 15:3-8). There are four arguments that arise from this passage that render the conclusion that this report is based on historical fact -- the fact of the resurrection -- unavoidable.

### *Could the Resurrection be a Myth?*

This letter is written a mere twenty years after Jesus had died. That is, by customary historical standards, very close to the event. This itself rules out the possibility that the story of Jesus' resurrection was a complete myth, for myths take long periods of time to develop, even in environments which are conducive to them. But in this case we're dealing with an orthodox Jew (Paul) who is advocating something that is antithetical to his foundational Jewish beliefs. If Paul were to invent a myth, this would not have been it!

While most Jews believed there would be a general resurrection of the dead on the judgment day, they had no concept of one man rising all by himself. And they certainly were not predisposed towards seeing this,

or any other miracle, as verifying that this man was somehow the embodiment of God! But this is precisely what Paul is teaching! Hence, wherever Paul got the notion that Jesus Christ is proven to be the Son of God by rising from the dead (Rom. 1:3-4), he didn't get it as a myth that just naturally evolved in his orthodox Jewish mind.

### *The Antiquity of 1 Corinthians 15*

Paul incidentally mentions that he had "received" and "passed on" this information. These terms, all scholars recognize, were the standard terms used within Judaism for the handing down of sacred authoritative tradition. It was, therefore, not to be tampered with. Jews were very strict about this. (We'll discuss this point further in the next chapter).

Scholars are also in agreement that this passage has a rhythmic credal structure to it which confirms that this was authoritative sacred information Paul was passing on. Indeed, the Corinthians themselves had already previously received it, which is why Paul says "I passed on to you" rather than "I'm now passing onto you."

The point of all of this is that this material Paul is giving here is not only early -- within twenty years of the event -- it is very early! In twenty years it had already become part of the established creed of the Church! It has to therefore significantly pre-date Paul's writing. Paul himself doesn't tell us when he "received" this tradition, but it certainly must have been by the time he finished his fifteen day visit with Peter and James three years after his conversion (Gal. 1:18-19). And this pushes this credal material back to within a few years after Jesus death.

This forces on us a very interesting question. If this report of the empty tomb and resurrection appearances isn't rooted solidly in history, what explains this report? If, in fact, Jesus never rose from the dead and appeared to his disciples, how is one to explain the indisputable fact that, almost immediately after his death, his followers thought Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to them? There is no easy question to this answer.

### *Could Paul Have Made This Report Up?*

Some liberal scholars have attempted to avoid the historical implications of Paul's report here by arguing that Paul simply made up the report and perhaps intentionally structured to make it look like he was passing on traditional material. Paul, in other words, was simply being deceptive. Mack and Crossan argue along these lines.

In response, one has to first ask why Paul would do this. He has absolutely no motive to lie. Mack and Crossan try to maintain that Paul was here trying to establish his apostolic authority, but aside from the fact that Paul here looks like he's minimizing his authority -- he says he is "the least of all the apostles" and does "not even deserve to be called an apostle" (I Cor. 15:9) -- the presumed motive explains nothing about the actual content of the report.

What is more, Paul here says that if this report he's passing on is not true, he and the others who are preaching it are "false witnesses about God" (I Cor. 15:15), a sin which for Jews was equivalent to blasphemy. So, even if Paul had had a motive to lie, it's highly doubtful that he would have been capable of

lying about this. Certainly everything else we learn about Paul from his letters shows him to be a sincere, self-sacrificing, godly man, hardly the type who would go about intentionally blaspheming.

But most significantly, the fact that most of these eyewitnesses Paul mentions in this report were still alive and well known in the early Church when Paul passed on this report completely rules out the possibility that we are here dealing with deception. If, as Crossan, Mack, and several others suggest, Paul and his congregations were alone among the early Christians in thinking that Jesus rose from the dead, one wonders what on earth he was thinking when he started dropping names like Peter and James in his report. And one wonders why he would invite his audience to cross-check his report that more than five hundred saw Christ at the same time (which is what Paul is doing when he adds, "most of whom are still alive").

One also has to wonder how this supposed major difference between Paul and the other Church leaders was missed when Paul met with them on at least two occasions (Gal. 1:18-19, 2:1-10). On this latter occasion Paul went up to Jerusalem for the expressed purpose of making sure his teaching was the same as other Church leaders, and they end up giving him "the right hand of fellowship" (2:9). Such a situation is unthinkable if, as these scholars contend, these other church leaders didn't yet believe in the resurrection!

Not only this, but everything we know about the early Church indicates that it wasn't only Paul who traveled far and wide in his missionary endeavors. From both Paul's letters and from the book of Acts, we get the picture that most of the early Church leaders traveled far and wide among the various Christian congregations (e.g. I Cor. 1:12, 9:5). The early Church, in other words, was networked together in a rather tight fashion. Hence, the conjecture of Crossan, Mack, and others that Paul and his congregations held to a very different view of Jesus than the other followers of Jesus, and that they alone believed in the resurrection, must be judged as being utterly untenable.

This again poses an interesting, and very important, question for us: If the tomb of Jesus wasn't in fact empty, and if Jesus hadn't in fact risen from the dead, what explains the fact that right after his death we find all of his followers sincerely thinking his tomb was empty and believing that he rose from the dead -- and willing to lay their lives on the line for this conviction!?

#### *Could It All Be Mass Hallucination?*

One might, of course, argue that Paul's report is genuine: the people he reports seeing Jesus did see something they thought was Jesus. But, in fact, it was simply a case of mass hallucination. A number of liberal scholars today lean in this direction. Unfortunately for this theory, however, both I Corinthians 15 and the Gospel accounts completely rule out this avenue of escape.

The sheer diversity of witnesses that Paul mentions, and the diverse times Christ appeared to them, rules out the possibility that we are dealing here with some sort of mass hallucination. The fact that Paul mentions Christ "being buried" (which assumes he became "un-buried") also rules out hallucination, for it means that Jesus' tomb was empty. The hallucination theory doesn't even address this. Even if the disciples were hallucinating, wouldn't someone (at least their opponents!) have thought of checking out his tomb?

And, finally, the Gospel accounts portray the risen Lord in terms that render the hallucination theory impossible. Among other things, Jesus in these accounts is portrayed as being distinctly recognizable to his followers. He is seen as being, in some sense, physically present to his followers. And he is said to have

spent a good amount of time, on a number of occasions, fellowshiping with, and even eating with, his followers. This is hardly what you'd expect from a hallucination!

So the question that needs to again be asked is this: How do we explain the fact that all of these people who knew the real historical Jesus (Peter, James [his brother!], the apostles, and the five hundred) believed his tomb was empty and believed they repeatedly saw the resurrected Lord in a physical way? One explanation which easily accounts for all the evidence is to simply admit that, as a matter of fact, Jesus rose from the dead, left his tomb, and appeared to these people just as the report says.

If this explanation is thrown out, however, what other one explanation is one to embrace? It's all myth? Not enough time, and wrong culture.. Paul was deceptive? No motive, and totally out of character. Mass hallucination? Too many people, too many appearances, and an empty tomb. Eaten by wild dogs? How does this explain anything?!

The evidence for this miracle of all miracles, we see, is stubborn. It will not easily be explained away. This is not good news to the scholar committed to exclusively naturalistic explanations. And when we consider the evidence for the resurrection from the Gospels, the news for them gets significantly worse.

#### The Gospel Accounts of the Resurrection

We frequently read about contemporary scholars who dismiss out of hand the Gospels as legendary, and who therefore dismiss out of hand their accounts that Jesus rose from the dead. To be truly informed, however, you need to know that there is another side to this story. Many scholars find many reasons for maintaining, on a strictly historical basis, the integrity and accuracy of these accounts. While I shall address the issue of the over all trustworthiness of the Gospels in the next chapter, I will conclude this chapter by examining the reasons why many scholars find their resurrection accounts to be solidly rooted in actual history.

#### *The Independence of the Five Accounts*

In history, as in a court of law, the more witnesses you have for an event, the more certain can be your knowledge of that event. For most events in history we have to rely on single sources, and usually these sources are quite far removed from the event being reported. Most of our knowledge about Alexander the Great, for example, comes from a single source written some four hundred years after his life.

Still, since people do not usually systematically lie, historians are inclined to trust such sources. Did they not do this our ancient history books would be a great deal thinner. We'd have to claim to know very little about most of the major figures in ancient history. In those rare instances when we find more than one source of information, and in those even rarer instances when these various sources are close to the events they are reporting, historians generally have a field day.

Which makes the liberals' skepticism regarding the resurrection puzzling, or perhaps suspicious. For here we have an almost unparalleled collection of diverse witnesses writing very close to the event they are recording. We've already examined the testimony of Paul and found it forceful. But we need to now consider that, on top of this, we have the testimony of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They are, even on a liberal dating, writing relatively close to the event -- forty or fifty years at the outside. And they are all writing independent of one another.

Scholars, both liberal and conservative, frequently argue that Matthew and Luke used Mark's Gospel when they composed their own, for significant portions of their Gospels parallel Mark's in an almost verbatim fashion. This may or may not be correct. But what's important to realize is that this theory, even if it is correct, has absolutely no bearing on our estimation of their various resurrection accounts. For on this score, as all scholars recognize, the various authors have almost nothing in common!

Not only this, but each of these accounts differ significantly from Paul's account which we examined above. According to Crossan, Mack, and others, the followers of Jesus outside of Paul's congregations didn't believe in the resurrection until around the 70s A.D. when (according to their dating) the Gospel accounts begin to be written. And, they further argue, this reveals that the view of the resurrection held by Paul's congregations was influencing these other congregations. But if this were the case, wouldn't you expect the Gospel accounts to follow, at least in outline, Paul's account? But they don't! They are clearly not only independent of one another: they are quite independent from Paul as well.

What each of these accounts, including Paul's, do have in common is their claim that Jesus left his tomb after being dead for two nights and a day and then appeared to various disciples at various times and places. If we stick with standard historical criteria, this claim, coming from five accounts that obviously did not borrow from one another, and written this close to the event, must be taken very seriously.

#### *Do The Resurrection Accounts Contradict Each Other?*

In fact, so obvious are the differences between the resurrection accounts that at this point many liberal scholars seize upon a different tactic to discredit these accounts and argue that they can't be believed because they are contradictory. In his book, *The Case Against Christianity*, for example, Michael Martin says:

In Matthew, when Mary Magdalene and the other Mary arrived toward dawn at the tomb there is a rock in front of it ... In Mark, the women arrive at the tomb at sunrise and the stone had been rolled back ... In Matthew, an angel is sitting on the rock outside the tomb ... in Mark a youth is inside the tomb ... In Luke, two men are inside ... In Matthew, the women present at the tomb are Mary Magdalene and the other Mary ... In Mark, the women present at the tomb are the two Marys and Salome ... In Luke, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna, and other women are present ... According to John, only Mary Magdalene came to the tomb when it was still dark, thus contradicting the three other Gospels. [ 4 ]

For this reason, Martin concludes, the Gospel accounts of Jesus rising from the dead cannot be trusted.

Now these frequently cited discrepancies have been accounted for numerous times throughout Church history (which makes one wonder why they keep being put forth as if they were "new" discoveries). If you read Matthew closely, for example, you will see that he simply does not say that the tomb was still enclosed when the women arrived. He does not, therefore, contradict the other accounts which report that the stone was already rolled away when the women arrived. As to the supposedly different times the women went to the tomb, one is hard pressed to make a hard and fast distinction between the twilight of dawn and early sunrise. Trying to make a significant contradiction out of such a minor difference is a tactic of desperation.

As for the different locations and varying number of the angels reported, no author ever denies what another affirms. The accounts are different, but not contradictory. And, in fact, the differences between the accounts are exactly what one should expect from a story that is being retold from the different

perspectives of the people present. So too with the slightly different list of names of the women present at the tomb. No author denies what another affirms, and none of the authors claims to provide an exhaustive list. Indeed, John's account which mentions only Mary Magdalene visiting the tomb presupposes that there were other women present. For when she reports to the disciples what has occurred, she mistakenly conjectures, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and *we* don't know where they have put him" (Jn. 20:2, emphasis added)! The first person plural indicates that there were other women present with Mary, though John has chosen to focus his narrative only on her. In any case, Martin is simply wrong when he claims that "according to John only Mary Magdalene went to the tomb." John never says that.

These supposed discrepancies, then, are no greater than what you'd expect to find surrounding an event witnessed by a number of different people and reported from a number of different perspectives. Think of the numerous, apparently conflicting, eyewitness accounts we have on the assassination of John F. Kennedy -- and this event was recorded on camera! The accounts of this tragic event are perhaps difficult to harmonize, but no one thinks of conjecturing on this basis that perhaps J. F. K. wasn't assassinated at all!

Yet, this is exactly what certain liberal New Testament critics do to the Gospels' resurrection accounts. Because there are apparently conflicting reports (which, after all, aren't very difficult to harmonize), they want to assume that what they are reporting didn't happen. One suspects that if the reports didn't conflict with each other, these scholars would arrive at the exact same conclusion -- on the basis that the various testimonies aren't independent! In any case, this skeptical approach cannot be said to constitute unbiased historical investigation.

The most significant thing about the supposed discrepancies of the Gospels is what they tell us about these four accounts: namely, that they are all independent of one another. And this makes what they have in common all the more credible. For, as was said, each account agrees on the central facts that the tomb of Jesus was empty and, with the possible exception of Mark, that Jesus appeared to certain disciples at various times and places. [ 5 ] And all of this agreed upon material, we see, is in basic accord with what Paul reports about Jesus some ten to twenty years earlier.

It is not, then, just one story of Jesus' resurrection that has to be explain away as fabrication. It is five. And if, as we have already seen, it is difficult to believe that one version of this story could have been concocted and believed by a group of people who previously knew it wasn't true, what are we to make of any theory that would require us to believe that this happened on five occasions?

### *The Presence of Women*

There are many other considerations that lend credibility to the Bible's four Gospel accounts of the resurrection. Perhaps the most surprising of these is the fact that all the accounts agree that it was women who first found the tomb empty. This may mean little to us in our day, but in first century Jewish society women were, quite frankly, regarded as being incurable talebearers. They weren't in most circumstances even allowed to testify in court!

No wonder, then, that the male disciples didn't believe them when the women first brought them their report that the tomb was empty (Lk. 24: 11). No wonder, also, that Paul does not include women in his list of people the Lord appeared (I Cor. 15). Since this report was originally circulated in a Jewish environment before it was passed on to Paul, as we've seen, the women's testimony would have been seen

as being irrelevant, if not damaging, to the report. Hence they are deleted from the earliest church creed about the event.

This inculcated sexism may (and should) aggravate us today. But the effect it has on the Gospel accounts which do include women -- as playing a central role in the whole story -- is to greatly increase their credibility. If the Gospel stories were fabricated, as certain scholars in the media today suggest, the last thing these fabricators would want to put in their story would be that it was women who first discovered that the tomb of Jesus was empty, and (in the case of Matthew and John) that it was to women that Jesus first appeared! The fact that they did report it this way, therefore, strongly implies that these accounts are not fabrications. The only motive these various authors could have had for telling their story like they did is because that was how the story actually unfolded.

#### *Other Indications of Historical Reliability*

There are a host of other interesting features about the Gospels' resurrection accounts that, in the mind of many scholars, further substantiates their reliability. Some of these are the following:

- The Gospel accounts are full of incidental detail that does not contribute to the over all story line. Such detail is generally considered by historians (and lawyers) to be evidence of an eyewitness account (or at least an account that is informed by an eyewitness). John, for example, mentions that he outran Peter when they raced to the tomb and that he "bent over and looked in" and saw "strips of linen lying there" as well as a burial cloth "folded up by itself, separate from the linen," but he did not himself go in. Then, he adds, Peter arrived and went into the tomb (Jn. 20: 4-8). Now there is no clear reason why these details are added to the narrative: they add absolutely nothing to the point of the whole story. Indeed, they are rather unexpected. Who, after all, would have intentionally fabricated an account that suggested that Jesus was raised in the nude? Their presence in the account can only be because, as a matter of fact, that was just how the event occurred.
- John's incidental reference to having to "bend over" to look inside the tomb is interesting for another reason as well. The only kinds of tombs in the Greco-Roman world that required bending over to enter were acrosolia or bench tombs which were rare in the ancient world, being reserved for wealthy prominent people. This squares precisely with the Gospels' accounts that Jesus occupied a tomb purchased by a wealthy and prominent member of the Sanhedrin. It's also worth noting that archaeologists have discovered several other acrosolia tombs near the traditional site of Jesus' tomb.
- All of the Gospel accounts are remarkable restrained, sober, and realistic. One has only to compare them to legendary writings of the time -- including apocryphal accounts of the resurrection that would arise in the next few centuries -- to prove for themselves that these accounts are of a very different sort.
- There is no attempt in these accounts to "theologize" the resurrection event. That is to say, these accounts simply report what happened but do not take the time to try to explain much. For example, in John's account Mary Magdalene tries to embrace Jesus after the resurrection. Jesus, however, tells her, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father" (Jn. 20:17).

This is an unexpected and odd reaction on the part of Jesus that is simply left unexplained. Fabricated accounts, and later legendary accounts, leave nothing unexplained.

- Relatedly, these accounts lack many features that one would expect if they were simply legendary accounts. When legendary accounts are written, they customarily go out of their way to answer the question, "How do you know this is true?" For example, in the third century work entitled *The Protevangelium of James*, the author is concerned to portray Mary as a virgin after she gives birth to Christ. So, conveniently enough, there is a midwife present who delivers Christ and testifies to this fact. And, conveniently enough, there is another woman present who physically checks Mary and confirms the midwife's story! What's more, shortly thereafter, Joseph sees all of creation stand still momentarily -- birds freeze in mid-air, brooks stop flowing, etc. -- to further confirm the point of the story. Such is the stuff that legends are made out of.

But the Gospel's lack such obvious (and outrageous) apologetic motifs. If they were apologetic legends, we might perhaps expect some confirming word of Joseph of Arimathea, some mention of a thorough investigation of the tomb and the surrounding area, some story of the guards being converted, or some cosmic sign from heaven verifying the whole thing. Instead, our accounts have women (!) finding an empty tomb, and in a state of confusion and fear, telling this to Jesus' cowardly male followers who are just as puzzled by the whole thing. And then we have Matthew's totally unexpected admonition that some, even after seeing the resurrected Lord, still doubted (Matt. 28:17)! And (typically) he doesn't tell us why they doubted. This hardly helps "sell" the whole story, if "selling" a story they made up rather than reporting a story that actually occurred was what these authors were up to.

#### The Heart of the Issue

Getting around the historical evidence for the resurrection, we see, is no easy matter. The conjectural, complex, and highly improbable nature of those theories that try to do so simply confirms this fact. Were these five accounts about any other event that didn't require suspending our judgments about what can and cannot happen in the natural world, no historian would ever doubt them. Rarely, if ever, is the available data about an ancient historical event so numerous, so close to the event, and so replete with internal evidence of reliability.

And this simply confirms, once again, our previous point that the basis for denying the resurrection, and the uniqueness of Christ in general, is not historical evidence. It is, rather, a preconceived and highly arbitrary assumption about the nature of the world. If you rule out the possibility that the Paul and the Gospels are telling the truth from the start, then of course you have to come up with another explanation. But you must do so in spite of, not because of, the historical evidence. Get rid of this assumption, and the evidence can be allowed to speak for itself.

When an ordinary person first reads in their newspaper or learns from the T.V. of a chorus of reputable liberal scholars who have "discovered" that the resurrection is a fable, they can easily be impressed. "Surely there must be some new hard and fast evidence they are going on," they may think. Once all the facts are in, however, the chorus doesn't sound nearly as impressive.

#### Endnotes

1. J. D. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), p. 145.
2. J. D. Crossan, *Time*, January 10, 1994.
3. For more in depth treatments of the resurrection, see W. Craig, *The Son Rises* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), G. Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus: An Apologetic* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), G. Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975). And for a refutation of Crossan and Mack's explanation for the resurrection, see G. Boyd, *Cynic Sage or Son of God?* (Wheaton IL: Bridgepoint, 1995), ch. 13.
4. M. Martin, *The Case Against Christianity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), pp. 78-79.
5. The ending of the Gospel of Mark (16:9-20) which records Jesus' appearance to the disciples, is disputed.

#### 4. Are the Gospels Reliable?

##### Quotations

"The narrative Gospels have no claim as historical accounts. The Gospels are imaginative creations."

*Burton Mack, Time, January 10, 1994*

"[W]hat modern biblical research has demonstrated repeatedly is that the bible ... was written by human beings who made numerous mistakes and borrowed from each other and from the past ... If the bible can be taken down from its untouchable pedestal and be treated realistically, then the notion of adding to the Christian canon is not so anathema."

*M. Hamington, The Fourth R, July, 1992*

##### The Jesus Seminar

The primary driving force behind the popular media's present preoccupation with liberal views of Jesus has been the Jesus Seminar. This Seminar, first convened in 1985 by Robert Funk, is a gathering of 100 or so mostly liberal New Testament scholars who meet on a regular basis.

They have determined, by a process of voting with colored beads, that Jesus did not say 82% of what the Gospels attribute to him. Indeed, in their view, even the majority of the remaining 18% is somewhat doubtful. Only 2% of these sayings can confidently be said to be the actual words of Jesus. Their findings have been published in their work, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. The work includes a new (and sometimes controversial) translation of all the sayings of Jesus which they have decided to call the "Scholars Version."

##### A Consensus of Scholarly Opinions?

One of the facets of the Jesus Seminar that has most irked scholars outside the Seminar, evangelical and non-evangelical alike, is their tendency to equate their opinions with what "scholars" in general hold to. Thus, for example, they call their new translation of Jesus' sayings the "Scholars Version" of the Bible -- as though previous translations were unscholarly! In the Introduction to *The Five Gospels*, the Seminar

spells out what they call "the Seven Pillars of Scholarly Wisdom" -- as though anyone who disagreed with these "pillars" was thereby not scholarly! As a matter of fact, however, a great many scholars, from a wide variety of persuasions, disagree with elements of this highly controversial list of "pillars."

But what is most frustrating is the general way the participants sometimes represent themselves in their writings, and in the media. One sees this, for example, throughout *The Five Gospels* in which the words "scholar" and "scholarly" are always attached to the opinions of the Seminar, making it appear to the uninformed reader that they are representing what all New Testament scholars think on various issues. So also, in much of the media coverage we read phrases like "critical scholars have concluded," and "scholars now realize" etc., giving the impression that these liberal scholars are representative of what most people who specialize in the field think.

They aren't! Indeed, the conclusions of the Jesus Seminar participants, and of others getting the bulk of the media attention today, are usually representative only of the left-most fringe of New Testament scholarship. In the interest of getting the full story, you need to know this. And remember this next time you read about what "scholars are saying" in your newspaper.

### The Burden of Proof

Perhaps the most important of the controversial "Seven Pillars of Scholarly Wisdom" published in *The Five Gospels* is the assumption that the material in the Gospels is unreliable unless proven to be otherwise. [ 1 ] This has been a staple of liberal New Testament scholarship at least since the time of Rudolf Bultmann. It means that "scholarly wisdom" places the burden of proof on anyone who would want to say that Jesus actually said something the Gospels say he said. In other words, the starting assumption is that the Gospels are not historical unless proven otherwise. With such an approach, one is almost surprised to find that the Seminar didn't conclude that the historical Jesus said absolutely nothing!

Now a great deal of scholarly literature has been written on the issue of where the "burden of proof" should be placed as historians in general do their work. And, despite the presumptuous claims of the Jesus Seminar, the thrust of most of this literature is to argue that the "burden of proof" should generally lie on the part of the historian who wants to argue that what an ancient document is reporting is not true. [ 2 ] A historian, in other words, should generally have to prove that an ancient account is wrong, not that what an ancient document reports is right.

The basic reason for this is actually quite commonsensical. We generally assume that people are telling the truth unless we have good reasons to think otherwise, and there is simply no reason why this assumption should not be applied to ancient people as well. Indeed, as was said in the last chapter, were historians not willing to apply this common courtesy to ancient authors, most of our information about ancient history would have to be disqualified. If, for example, historians assumed that accounts in the writings of ancient historians like Josephus, Suetonius, Tacitus, or Livy could not be trusted until each account could be individually proven trustworthy, we'd have to conclude that we know next to nothing about ancient times!

Now there are times, of course, when historians do conclude that an ancient author's account is mistaken, distorted, legendary, or what not. But when they do so it is because they have found good reasons to think this. They do not start with this assumption. And even when they conclude that accounts are to some degree mistaken, biased, or legendary, they do not therefore throw out the entire account. They assume that

an ancient author's tendency to make certain kinds of mistakes, or to have certain kinds of biases, colors their record of history. But it does not usually entail that the author is not writing about history at all!

### The Gospels And History

Why, then, do liberal New Testament scholars not extend this common courtesy to the Gospels? There are two basic reasons.

#### *Are The Gospels Myth?*

First, the Gospels contain many supernatural elements, and as we have seen, many of these scholars simply equate the "supernatural" with "myth" and "legend." So, they assume, the Gospels are primarily "imaginative creations," and if there is anything historical about them, this has to be proven.

The mistake involved here is that the Gospels simply do not read like mythological and legendary accounts. As C. S. Lewis frequently argued, one has only to compare the Gospel accounts with ancient mythological literature to see this. The Gospels give us every reason to believe that they intend to write history, so if what they report is miraculous, this must be taken seriously.

#### *Are The Gospels Theological Rather Than Historical?*

Secondly, many liberal scholars dismiss the Gospels because they are theological in nature. Their purpose, as John tells us, is to bring people to a faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God (Jn. 20:31). They are written by people who already have a commitment to the cause for which they are writing. And this, for many scholars, means that they are not accurately reporting history.

It is obviously true that the Gospels are written by people who are not just reporting events in a "neutral," "objective," fashion. But why should this entail that what they are recording is not historically accurate? Why should a passionate commitment to the truth of what one is reporting imply that what one is reporting is not true? The survivors of Nazi concentration camps were certainly passionately committed to the truth of what they were reporting, but this did not distort the truth of their reports. If anything, it enhanced it. It's just that what they were reporting warranted being passionate about it.

So it is with the Gospels. If what they are reporting is true, one would expect them to be passionately committed to it. So the fact that they are committed to their cause can hardly be used against them to disqualify their reports. In fact, if you deny the truth of what they are reporting, their passionate commitment to Christ becomes utterly inexplicable. If they are making this story up, one wonders why they would be willing to put their lives on the line for it!

A second consideration that reveals the error of this liberal line of reasoning is that one cannot find an ancient historian who didn't write with a strong political and/or theological motivation in some direction or other. All ancient historical accounts -- and most modern ones as well! -- were written with the motivation of making some point, of teaching some lesson, or of buttressing up some political cause. No one recorded history simply for the purpose of "telling it like it was."

It is well known, for example, that Josephus' historical accounts -- upon which so much of our knowledge about the first century hangs -- was strongly motivated to get the blame for Jewish misfortune off the back

of the Romans and to place it squarely on the backs of Jewish revolutionaries. This certainly colors what Josephus reports. But no one uses this insight to argue that Josephus was not writing history! So why should we treat the Gospels any differently? There is no good reason.

#### Deciding What's True and What's Not

Yet, most liberal scholars do treat the Gospels differently, and so we should not be surprised to learn that most of the sayings of Jesus recorded in these Gospels are doubted by these scholars. Since for these scholars the Gospels are guilty until proven innocent, each saying of Jesus must prove that it is not created by the early Church if it is to be accepted. It must, therefore, pass several tests (usually called "authenticity criterion") in order to get a "red" vote among Jesus Seminar participants (signifying it goes back to the real Jesus).

While there is a good bit of disagreement among these scholars about the criteria that each saying must meet, two of the most important criteria are almost universally employed by these scholars. And in the interest of being fully informed, you should know about these criterion, and know about those scholars who think that the way the Jesus Seminar participants apply them is altogether misguided.

#### *Multiple Attestation*

Perhaps the test for authenticity most frequently mentioned in the media today is the criteria of multiple attestation. In this view, a saying (or deed) of Jesus in the Gospels can be believed to actually go back to the historical Jesus if it is found in more than one early church source. This doesn't, however, mean that it should be judged to be authentic if it is found in more than one Gospel, for as was said earlier, almost all of these scholars maintain that Matthew and Luke used Mark. If a saying of Jesus is found in material common to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, therefore, this counts as only one source. To be confidently accepted as authentic, therefore, it must also be found elsewhere (e.g. John, "Q," or the Gospel of Thomas).

Two basic considerations demonstrate the invalidity of applying this criteria in this manner. First, not all scholars agree that Matthew and Luke used Mark when they composed their Gospels. Indeed, an increasing number of scholars, both liberal and conservative, are expressing serious reservations about this hypothesis (called the theory of "Markan priority"). If this hypothesis is rejected, however, the way in which the criteria of multiple attestation is applied by liberal New Testament scholars completely falls apart.

Secondly, the manner in which this criteria is applied in liberal New Testament scholarship completely depends on their skeptical view of where the burden of proof lies. That is, while the appearance of a saying of Jesus in two or three sources can be seen as providing evidence for its authenticity, there is simply no good reason to hold that a saying's absence in two or more sources is evidence of its inauthenticity.

Given the amount of teaching that Jesus gave in a three year period of time, and given how selective our Gospels are, it should not surprise us that certain sayings of Jesus are only found in Matthew, or in Luke, or in John. And unless we have good reasons for thinking otherwise, these singular sayings of Jesus should be accepted.

#### *Criteria of Dissimilarity*

The second important criteria that is almost universally espoused by participants in the Jesus Seminar and by other scholars getting media attention today is the criteria of dissimilarity. This criteria states that a saying of Jesus can be judged as authentic if it could not have been created by the early church and, many scholars add, if it could not have been derived from ancient Judaism. In other words, only those teachings of Jesus that are unique in comparison to what ancient Judaism and the early church taught can be accepted -- and then, again, only if they're found in more than one source! If a reported saying of Jesus sounds too Jewish, or too Christian, it is out!

Three considerations demonstrate the invalidity of this criteria. First, since Jesus was a first century Jew, raised within the orthodox Judaism of his day, should we not find it surprising if he didn't incorporate significant elements of the Judaism of his day into his teaching? The Gospels, after all, tell us that Jesus came to fulfill, not to destroy, the law. With what justification, therefore, can anyone doubt any reported sayings of Jesus on the basis of their continuity with Judaism?

Secondly, since the early church was formed around the teachings of Jesus, why should we be inclined to judge any continuity between its teachings and the teachings of Jesus as being their creation? For example, The Five Gospels gives the boot to Jesus' statement, "Have some, this is my body" (Mk. 14:22 "Scholars Versions"), made at the last supper, because we know that early Christians viewed the last supper as in terms of Jesus' sacrificial death. Jesus' statement, therefore, sounds too "Christian" and thus is judged to be authentic!

But why shouldn't we rather suppose that the early church thought this way precisely because Jesus taught this way? Since the early church was foundationally centered on Christ, shouldn't we expect that their teachings and his teachings would significantly overlap? Shouldn't it surprise us if this were not the case?

Thirdly, the way that this criteria is applied in the Jesus Seminar and elsewhere again depends on their skeptical view of where the burden of proof lies. While it certainly is true that the presence of unexpected and novel elements of Jesus' teachings in the Gospel provides further confirmation of the authenticity of their material, there is simply no good reason to argue this point in a negative direction and contend that what is not unexpected and novel in the Gospels record of what Jesus taught is therefore not authentic.

One could, and should, rather argue this in the opposite direction. The fact that the Gospels preserve aspects of Jesus' teaching and ministry that are unexpected and unique -- if not at times outright offensive -- demonstrates their general reliability in reporting what Jesus taught and did. For example, Jesus' relations with women (especially those of ill-repute); his unusual cursing of the fig tree; his demand that allegiance to him come before allegiance to family; his cry of dereliction on the cross -- none of these things would have been easy for the later church to accept or understand. Yet, there they are, recorded in the Gospels.

Now if the Gospels were faithful in preserving difficult aspects of Jesus' teaching and ministry such as these, why think they were less faithful in preserving other less controversial aspects of his ministry? Far from undermining the reliability of the Gospels, then, a proper use of the criteria of dissimilarity is helpful in establishing their general reliability.

Jewish Oral Traditions and the Gospels

The approach of the Jesus Seminar participants and other liberal scholars in the media today presupposes that there was a rather large gulf between the Jesus of the history and the early church which wrote the Gospels. This gulf, they maintain, was filled in by the "creative imagination" of early Christians. Sayings were supposedly invented as needed, and retroactively put into the mouth of Jesus. Stories about Jesus were supposedly freely embellished with legendary features, or fabricated altogether from scratch. And so, when these sayings and stories were finally put on paper (the Gospels), scarcely more than an echo of the real historical Jesus remained.

Aside from the objections we have already raised against this view in the preceding sections, this view, according to many scholars, simply does not square with the fact that both Jesus and his earliest disciples were Jewish. A great deal of work has been done, especially by Scandinavian New Testament scholars, which argues that in the Jewish culture in which Jesus operated, the large gulf posited by liberal scholars between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of the Gospels could never have occurred! [ 3 ]

Among other things, this school of thought argues that the best model for understanding the relationship Jesus had with his disciples is found in the relationship certain Rabbis had with their students. We know that the teaching of renowned Rabbi's was held in the highest esteem by their students. Indeed, frequently their teachings were regarded as "sacred tradition" that was to be in detail memorized and passed on with little or no alteration. The early disciples certainly held Jesus in the highest regard (to say the least) and the New Testament displays this typically Jewish concern for faithfully passing on sacred tradition (e.g. I Cor. 15:3-8, Gal. 2:1-10; Col. 2:7; I Thess. 2:13).

More recent studies in ancient Jewish culture have added to this the further insight that memorization was a standard pedagogical method in most Jewish learning. Many ancient Jews, we are now finding, were capable of incredible feats of memorization. And a number of recent scholars have made a solid case that many of Jesus' teachings found in the Gospels have a clearly discernible mnemonic form (viz. a form suited for memorization).

All of this adds further plausibility to the view that Jesus' relationship to his disciples was that of a Rabbi to his students. And it therefore suggests that the view that the Gospels are largely "imaginative creations" of the early church is really an "imaginative creation" in the mind of certain liberal scholars! The last thing Jesus' Jewish disciples would have done is a) to forget who Jesus really was and what he really taught, and then b) to recreate who Jesus was and what he taught on the basis of their own needs!

At the very least, these studies require us to conclude that, if ever there were ancient documents we should be inclined to approach with the "burden of proof" on our shoulders to demonstrate error, these four ancient documents should be them!

#### Other Evidences of Reliability

To the thinking of many New Testament scholars -- usually those who do not get much media attention -- considerations such as these are sufficient to completely undermine the skeptical approach of liberal scholars to the Gospels. But we have not yet scratched the surface of the large mass of historical evidence which supports the view that the Jesus we find in the Gospels is the real historical Jesus. Time does not permit us to enter into the full details of this evidence, but in the interest of being fully informed on the issue, I shall conclude this chapter with a brief overview of some of this evidence.

### *Experiential Vividness*

Wolfgang Schadewaldt was one of our century's most reputable classical philologists. Indeed, on many accounts, he was the greatest Homer scholar ever. If ever there was a man who knew how to judge the value of ancient documents, it was he. In an lecture addressed to the theological faculty of Hamburg, and later to theologians at Tübingen, he says this about the Gospels:

As a philologist, someone who has acquired some knowledge of "literature," I am particularly concerned here to note that when we read the Synoptic Gospels, we cannot be other than captivated by the experiential vividness with which we are confronted ... I know of no other area of history-writing, biography or poetry where I encounter so great a wealth of material in such a small space. [ 4 ]

In this respect, as Schadewaldt recognizes, the Gospels are quite different than the kind of literature that arises from the "creative imaginations" of people. A wealth of graphic details about such things as people's emotions, Jesus' unusual gestures, geographical locations, and about the particular time and place of various events, fill the Gospel narratives.

Liberal scholars, of course, nevertheless attempt to write all this off as "literary invention." The Gospel authors, they hold, were intentionally trying to make their narrative "look" real. But, beyond attributing to the Gospel authors a most incredible combination of literary ability and deceptive motivation, such a suggestion is completely at odds with the standard way historians generally approach ancient texts. Unless we have good reason to think otherwise, such "experiential vividness" is usually judged to be evidence of an eyewitness influence. And it is nothing more than an arbitrary prejudice against what these documents record that prevents a similar assessment being made here.

### *Incidental Details*

One of the things that is most impressive about the wealth of detail in the Gospels is that much of it is completely unnecessary to make the point of the account it is found in. It is, in other words, incidental to the story being told. This is characteristic of eyewitness reports. We saw in the previous chapter that the details found in John's account of the empty tomb (Jn. 20:1-10) is an example of this. The manner in which Mark cryptically notes how Jesus would sometimes intently purview those around him before speaking is another (Mk. 3:5, 34; 5:32; 10:23; 11:11). This is just the sort of incidental thing eyewitnesses tend to remember, and fabricators tend to leave out.

### *Counter-Productive Details*

Even more forceful in terms of strengthening the reliability of the Gospel accounts, however, is the fact that very often the details the Gospels record not only serve no clear purpose, but actually seem to go against the purpose of their accounts. So, we again saw in the last chapter, the inclusion of questionable women at the very core of the resurrection narratives could only hinder the resurrection proclamation in first century Jewish culture. The fact that they are included, therefore, testifies to the integrity of those who recorded the event. This isn't the sort of thing they would make up!

In just the same way, there is absolutely no discernible motive -- aside from the motivation of "telling it like it really happened" -- for why the Gospels include the unusual detail that Jesus, while dying on the

cross, cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" If their driving purpose is to portray Christ as the Messiah ("anointed one") and as the Son of God, this is the last thing in the world they would ever want to include in their narrative, let alone make up on their own!

So also, if these Gospels are driven by theological agendas at the expense of recording reliable history, one wonders why Mark would include ("creatively imagine"?) a discourse in which Jesus seems to deny that he is even good (Mk. 10:18). One also wonders why these narratives would include such potentially embarrassing things as Jesus' (sometimes inexplicable) anger, Jesus' radical views against legalism and unusual laxity on fasting and other standard religious behaviors, his baptism, and his scandalous association with prostitutes and tax collectors.

One also wonders why these accounts would include a good deal of material that presents the disciples in embarrassing terms. They are, in all of these accounts, portrayed as unbelieving, cowardly, dull, and even perhaps satanically inspired (Mt. 16:23). And, in fact, the Gospels even admit that Jesus own family opposed him -- thinking he was crazy -- during his ministry (Mk 3:21). This is hardly the kind of thing which the supposed "creative imagination" of the early church would conjure up on its own!

#### *The Presence of Material Irrelevant to the Later Church*

If the Jesus of the Gospels was invented by the Church to meet her own needs, then we should, obviously, expect the Jesus of these works to always give teachings that are relevant to this Church. But we don't! For example, Jesus' exclusive attitude towards Israel during his ministry (Mt. 10:5-6) would be wholly irrelevant (and perhaps offensive) to the Church of the 50s and 60s. For the Church had by this time already become multiethnic. So too, Jesus' various debates with the Pharisees about keeping the Sabbath and about Corban practices would be wholly irrelevant by the 70s when, according to most liberal scholars, the Gospels first began to be written.

#### *Lack of Material Relevant to the Later Church*

Not only is much material present that ought not to be there if the early Church largely created the Jesus of the Gospels, but a good deal of material which ought to be there is absent. If the teachings of Jesus are largely the result of the "creative imagination" of the later Church to address its own issues, one would think we'd find Jesus authoritatively answering many, if not most, of the questions that we know the early Church wrestled with. But we don't!

A host of issues we know plagued the early Church are completely unaddressed in the Gospels. Do gentiles need to be circumcised? What role should charismatic gifts have in the church? How should congregations be organized? How far is the "liberty" of the Gospel to be taken, especially by women in Church? What role can women play in the Church? And what foods can and cannot be eaten by Christians? Yet we find the Jesus of the Gospels altogether silent on issues such as these. Which simply tells us that the Jesus of the Gospels wasn't manufactured to meet the needs of the early Church!

#### *Aramaisms and the Sayings of Jesus*

Whereas Jesus and his earliest disciples spoke in Aramaic, we know that from around 50 A. D. on the church became predominantly Greek speaking. A very compelling case can be made, however, that many

(if not all) of the sayings of Jesus in the Gospels are translations from an Aramaic original. For example, Jesus' statement that the Pharisees "strain at a gnat but swallow a camel" (Mt. 23:24) makes much more sense if it was originally an Aramaic pun, for in Aramaic "gnat" (galma) and "camel" (glama) sound nearly identical.

This provides yet further confirmation of the view that the sayings of Jesus in the Gospels derive from the historical Aramaic speaking person they credit them to, rather than from the creative imagination of the early Church.

### *Palestinian Background*

Along these same lines, some features of the Gospel accounts point unmistakably back to a Palestinian environment which also helps substantiate the case that the Gospels are conveying information that goes back to the historical Jesus. For example, Jesus' parable about the farmer sowing seed which falls on rocky, shallow, and good soil, only makes sense in a Palestinian environment where seed was sowed before the ground was plowed (Mk. 4:1-8, Lk. 8:5-8). Elsewhere throughout the Roman empire the practice was to plow the ground first. Such accuracy suggests that the teachings of Jesus were passed on in their original form, even in contexts in which the form of his teaching wouldn't have made immediate sense.

### *Archeological Accuracy*

Yet another category of evidence that further confirms the reliability of the Gospels concerns archeology. While there are, predictably, always points of tension between the findings of archeologists (or the interpretations certain people give to archeological findings) and the New Testament documents, by and large these findings have confirmed the reliability of the Gospels.

For example, it used to be frequently argued by liberal scholars that a town named Nazareth didn't exist at the time of Jesus. The fact that it was never mentioned in any ancient listings was enough to prove to them that it was a fabrication. (Why the Gospel authors would simply make up a town and say Jesus came from there was never explained). In the last several decades, however, archeologists have uncovered several references to this small, insignificant town.

Numerous other examples could be given. Mark's account of people digging a hole in the roof of a house to lower their crippled friend down to see Jesus (Mk. 2:1-4) fits exactly with what we've learned about housing construction in first century Capernaum. They had thrash, not stone, roofs. John's long doubted reference to the "pool of Bethesda" (Jn. 5:2f) as well as numerous other geographical details mentioned in the Gospels have similarly been confirmed, as have the Gospels portrayals of the temple, the details of Pilate's court, Jesus' crown of thorns and mode of execution. And the list could easily go on.

This sort of accuracy is simply not what one would expect were the Gospels "imaginative creations" of Christians who were removed from the time and the locale of Jesus' ministry and who had little concern for historical truth. It is, however, exactly what one would expect if the Gospels are what they purport to be: records of what Jesus Christ said and did.

### *The Authority of the Gospels*

One final series of considerations increases our confidence in the Gospels still further, and these all surround the authority which these Gospels immediately possessed in the early Church. To put the matter succinctly, if the Gospels we possess were simply created by imaginative anonymous Christians some forty or fifty years after Jesus lived, as liberal scholars contend, one has to explain why these documents were so readily believed, and accepted as authoritative, by the early Church. But this is not easy to do.

From the early second century on we find Church leaders claiming to "pass down" reliable traditions that these Gospels were composed by the people whose names they now bear. Indeed, there are no exceptions in the early Church to these received traditions -- a point that is utterly inexplicable if, in fact, these documents were written by anonymous authors. The depth of the early Church's conviction that these traditions were in fact true, and that the accounts of these Gospels were in fact true, is attested by the fact that these people were willing to lay their lives on the line for this belief.

How is this to be explained on the view that these documents were not written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? If ever anyone lived who was in a position to discern the accuracy of this information, it was these people who lived within fifty years of their composition and who had leaders (such as Papias) who personally knew some of the apostles. And if ever anyone would be motivated to discern the accuracy of this information, it was these people who were at this time often being put to death for their faith.

So, if someone is going to argue that this unanimous and intense conviction of the early Church was in fact mistaken, they are going to have to provide a good deal of evidence to this effect. They are going to have to explain why and how these supposedly fabricated documents were immediately accepted as authoritative and received the inscriptions they received. But this has never adequately been done.

The Jesus of the Gospels IS the 'Real' Jesus

At the very least, this last point is enough to argue that the burden of proof should rest on those who want to argue that the early unanimous Church tradition was wrong in thinking that these Gospels came from the authors whose names they now bear. And, at the very least, all of this above cited evidence is enough to argue that the Gospels deserve the same common courtesy which other ancient documents generally receive: namely, the courtesy of being trusted until they are proven wrong.

This, however, is precisely what the Jesus Seminar participants, and other liberal scholars in the media today, refuse to grant. Because the Gospels contain a radically unique Jesus and supernatural material which these scholars rule out of court at the start, the Gospels are judged to be unreliable unless proven otherwise. And because it's simply implausible to suggest that the real disciples of Jesus could be responsible for these "imaginative creations," the traditional authorship of these Gospels is assumed to be incorrect. With such working assumptions, it is small wonder that these scholars end up concluding that most of what the Gospels say Jesus said, he didn't say. They virtually started with just this conclusion!

In reporting such startling conclusions, however, the media rarely if ever exposes the arbitrary presuppositions that lie behind them. And for this reason, the radical opinions of these "experts" (usually just reported as "scholars maintain that ... ") can be intimidating, and confusing, to the average reader. When you uncover what's behind these conclusions, however, and when you learn that there are many other scholars who have many solid reasons for regarding this liberal scholarship as being fundamentally misguided, the force of this initially impressive array of "experts" diminishes considerably.

We have, in fact, every reason to believe that the Jesus of the Gospels is the real Jesus. If one doesn't rule out this possibility at the start, and simply lets their head follow the evidence in an objective fashion, one readily concludes this at the end. When all is said and done, it is not the Jesus of the Gospels that is the result of "creative imaginations": it is, rather, the Jesus of certain liberal scholars who is now filling the pages of popular magazines and newspapers.

#### Endnotes

1. Funk, et. al., *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (bib), pp. 4-5.
2. See my discussions in *Cynic Sage or Son of God*.
3. The two most renowned works to appear from this "Scandinavian School" are H. Riesenfeld's *The Gospel Tradition and Its Beginnings: A Study in the Limits of "Formgeschichte"* (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1957) and B. Gerhardsson's *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Lund: C. W. K Gleerup, 1961).
4. W. Schadewaldt, "The Reliability of the Synoptic Tradition," in M. Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, trans. J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), p.102.

## 5. Finding an Alternative Jesus

#### Quotations

"The remarkable thing about the people of Q is that they were not Christians. They did not think of Jesus as a messiah or the Christ ... They did not regard his death as a divine, tragic, or saving event. And they did not imagine that he had been raised from the dead...

"With Q in view, the entire landscape of early Christian history and literature has to be revised."  
*Burton Mack, The Lost Gospel*

#### The 'Newly Discovered' Jesus

One of the most common, and most disturbing, refrains heard in the media's coverage of contemporary radical views of Christ is that New Testament scholars have recently "discovered" new sources of information about Jesus that contradict the Bible's own view of Jesus. It is claimed that works such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, *Secret Mark*, the *Gospel of Peter*, and especially "Q," contain material about Jesus that was lost, or intentionally suppressed, when the Gospels were accepted by the early church. Now that these works have been discovered, however, we can, as one liberal scholar put it, finally free ourselves from the "tyranny of the canonical Jesus" and come up with an alternative Jesus along the lines of these other non-biblical sources.

At first glance, the average reader can be taken back by these spectacular claims. The very idea that there are ancient books outside the Bible that speak about Jesus -- let alone books that speak about him more accurately than does the Bible! -- is confusing to believers and nonbelievers alike who have never heard such things before. In the interest of improving your "Bible literacy," many liberal scholars have gone out of their way to inform you of their discoveries. But, also in the interest of improving your Bible literacy,

you need to know that there *is* another side to this story. Many scholars, you should know, think that all of this amounts to little more than hot air! In what follows, I'll tell you why.

How 'New' Are the 'New Discoveries'?

In the light of all the media talk about "new" discoveries, it may come as something of a surprise to learn that there are, in fact, no 'new' documents that have been discovered. Indeed, two of the four so-called 'discoveries' now being most heavily used by liberal scholars in their attempts at reinventing the historical Jesus have *never* been discovered ("Q" and *Secret Mark*). They are hypothetical 'documents' these scholars *think* once existed. Another (*Gospel of Thomas*) was discovered fifty years ago, while the fourth (*Gospel of Peter*) was discovered over a hundred years ago.

The existence of these supposed sources, therefore, is not new. What *is* new, however, is what certain scholars are now trying to do with these sources. Thus, while speculation about "Q" has been going on for over a hundred and fifty years, only recently have certain scholars dreamed of completely revamping our view of who Jesus was and what his earliest followers were like on the basis of this hypothetical document.

So too, while the *Gospel of Thomas* has been in our hands for fifty years, only recently have certain influential scholars tried to argue that this document provides information about Jesus that pre-dates the Gospels. So also with the *Gospel of Peter* and *Secret Mark*. Only recently have certain liberal scholars attempted to make these works a significant part of their project of reinventing the historical Jesus.

Rest assured, then, that despite the sometimes sensational popular media presentation, there are no new discoveries that shake the foundation of the biblical view of Christ. There are simply new *theories* about old discoveries and old hypotheses. And these new theories, we shall now see, are themselves hardly "foundation shaking."

So, what are we to make of these extra-canonical sources? Of the four mentioned above that receive the most attention today, "Q" is by far and away the most important. And so I shall treat it separately below. But a few words must first be said about *Secret Mark*, the *Gospel of Peter*, and the *Gospel of Thomas*.

Secret Mark

In a letter written by Clement of Alexandria in the late second century, a "secret Gospel" that purportedly came from Mark is quoted at some length. This work, Clement says, was composed by the disciple Mark, shortly after he wrote the canonical Gospel bearing his name. And it was intended to communicate "secret" matters for "those who are being perfected." Clement of Alexandria quotes this work in the process of refuting the licentious interpretations which a certain radical gnostic group (the "Carpocratians) were giving it.

A number of liberal New Testament scholars have given this citation an incredible amount of weight, even going so far as to argue, as Crossan says, that "canonical Mark is a censored version of Secret Mark." [ [1](#) ] We need not go into the actual contents of Clement's citation here, but suffice it to say that from this premise, this citation has been used by certain scholars to substantiate some fairly controversial views. Morton Smith, the one who discovered Clement's letter, has used it as the foundation for several books which argue that the historical Jesus was a magician. Others, such as Crossan, have used it as evidence that

a number of "the first early Christians" practiced homosexuality and understood Christian baptism as a homosexual rite! [ 2 ]

In any event, there are a number of problems with taking *Secret Mark* this seriously. First, as mentioned above, no one has ever seen any copy of *Secret Mark*. What is worse, no one except Morton Smith has ever seen the actual copy of Clement's second century letter that makes reference to *Secret Mark*. It somehow mysteriously disappeared from the monastery Smith discovered it in! To the thinking of many scholars, this is enough to disqualify it as a serious source of information relevant to the historical Jesus or the earliest disciples.

But even *if* Smith's report about this reference to this work is accepted, there is no good reason to think that it pre-dates canonical Mark. That fact that Clement himself tells us it was written *after* canonical Mark is significant. The fact that we have no reference to this work until the late second or early third century further suggests that it is late. Moreover, it's contents, like that of so many other Apocryphal Gospels, can be shown to be a conflation and adaptation of the canonical Mark, again rendering the hypothesis that this work pre-dates Mark impossible.

Finally, the fact that Clement of Alexandria, in distinction from most other church fathers in the second and third centuries, was generally quite gullible in accepting spurious "secret" writings undermines his credibility as a witness to *Secret Mark*. He also accepted such works as the *Apocalypse of Peter*, the *Gospel According to the Hebrews*, the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, and the *Gospel of Thomas* as authentic even though other church fathers (rightly) rejected them as forgeries.

*Secret Mark*, then, is a non-existent work cited in a now non-existent text by a late second century author who is known for his gullibility. And thus, the reasonableness of giving this hypothetical work more credibility than the canonical Gospels, whose reliability can be demonstrated, is dubious to say the least.

#### The Gospel of Peter

We find several references to the *Gospel of Peter* among early church fathers, though it is never quoted and is usually portrayed as a heretical work. A ninth century copy of it was discovered in upper Egypt in 1886. Several scholars, most notably John Dominic Crossan, have tried to argue that its passion narrative (which Crossan calls "the Cross Gospel") is older than that of the canonical Gospels. Indeed, Crossan argues that the author of Mark *used* the Cross Gospel in composing his own narrative.

Most scholars, however, have not accepted Crossan's theory, and for good reason. For one thing, we simply have no evidence that the *Gospel of Peter*, or any section of the *Gospel of Peter*, pre-dates the second or third century. The basic reason Crossan postulates an early date for "the Cross Gospel" is that some of this material fits well with his particular conjectural scheme for how the 'mythological' passion narratives of the Gospels evolved.

What is more, the work as a whole can be shown to be dependent on the canonical Gospel material. And the work is full of outlandish legendary material such as we have come to expect from late second and third century apocryphal works. The Jesus of this work, for example, feels no pain on the cross. And when Christ comes out of the tomb, he is accompanied by two men whose heads extend up to the sky, while Christ himself extends up *beyond* the sky! And to top it all off, these three are followed out of the tomb by a cross that talks!!

Compare this with the Bible's own realistic accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection and you can see why we insisted in the last two chapters that the Gospel accounts are "sober." The fact that some yet want to give preference to works like the fanciful *Gospel of Peter* over these sober accounts simply reveals the depth of prejudice against the biblical material held by these scholars.

### The Gospel of Thomas

The *Gospel of Thomas* was part of a large collection of gnostic works discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945. Until recently, it was, along with many other of these works, universally dated in the mid-second century, and most scholars still hold to this date. But a number of scholars who are now getting a good deal of press argue that a good portion of its material pre-dates the Gospel material. Crossan, for example, argues that some of this material goes back to the earliest stage of Christianity (30-60 A.D.), a status not granted by him to most of the Gospels' material. In agreement with him, the Jesus Seminar decided to place the *Gospel of Thomas* right next to the four canonical Gospels in their publication, *The Five Gospels*.

What these scholars find most appealing about the *Gospel of Thomas* is that it is simply a collection of sayings of Jesus, many of which are identical to, or at least similar to, some sayings found in the Gospels. This work, therefore, does not portray Jesus as a miracle worker or as a resurrected Lord. And this, of course, fits well with the view that the historical Jesus was simply a teacher and that most of the narratives about him in the Gospels were created later.

Four things can be said in response to this view. First, while we cannot rule out the possibility that the *Gospel of Thomas* does contain some authentic sayings of Jesus, and perhaps even some that were not recorded by the biblical authors, no convincing case has been made that any given saying of Jesus in the Gospels *depends on* a saying of this work. To say that the Gospel of Thomas *contains* authentic sayings of Jesus is one thing. To say that these sayings are *more authentic* than the Gospels' own material is quite another.

Secondly, the *Gospel of Thomas* is clearly influenced by the kind of gnosticism we know was prevalent in the second and third centuries, but not in the first. For example, we find the Jesus of the *Gospel of Thomas* saying that "every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven." This demeaning view of women was common within gnosticism, but utterly foreign to the historical Jesus.

Moreover, a number of other sayings of Jesus in this Gospel which parallel sayings in the Gospels are given a distinctly gnostic twist. Sayings about "the kingdom of God," for example, have been hyper-spiritualized in a gnostic direction and have lost most of their original Semitic meaning. This clearly demonstrates that the *Gospel of Thomas* is largely dependent on the canonical Gospels, not the other way around.

Third, the fact that this work doesn't contain any narratives about Jesus doesn't mean that the person, or the community, that lies behind this work was unaware of the deeds of Jesus' ministry. The work seems clearly designed to be a *collection of sayings*. And if this was indeed its purpose, we cannot infer anything about what the person or group behind it did *not* believe on the basis of what this work does *not* say.

And, finally, the use made of this Gospel by these scholars is weak, if for no other reason, than because it depends on their particular (and very tenuous) views of "Q." To put it in a word, material in the Gospel of Thomas that agrees with what these scholars judge to be the "earliest layer" of "Q" is, for this reason, judged to be early. While material that doesn't agree with this "earliest layer" of "Q" is admitted to be late.

But, as we shall see, the method by which these scholars decide what constitutes the "earliest layer" of "Q" is completely arbitrary. Indeed, sometimes sayings in "Q" are argued to be early precisely because they agree with the *Gospel of Thomas*!

For these reasons (none of which are even *discussed* in the Jesus Seminar's *The Five Gospels*) there seems to be no good reason to regard the *Gospel of Thomas* as anything more than a second century distillation of somewhat twisted material about Jesus, some of which may reflect authentic traditions stemming from Jesus, and some of which simply reflects gnostic-tending creativity. Hence, the attempt on the part of certain scholars to give it priority over the canonical material is simply ill founded.

The "Discovery" of "Q"

As significant as the *Gospel of Thomas* and other extra-canonical sources are to the liberal attempt to reinvent the historical Jesus, they do not compare to the importance of "Q". The bulk of the material out of which modern liberal views of Jesus and the early Church are being carved and then fed to the media is taken from this document.

The existence of "Q" (for *Quelle*, meaning "source") was first postulated in the last century as a way of explaining the close parallels between Matthew and Luke when they are expressing material not found in Mark. If Matthew and Luke both possessed a single document that contained (mostly) sayings of Jesus, then their close similarities in the way they quote sayings of Jesus can be accounted for.

Now there are, of course, a number of *other* ways one could account for their similarities that don't require postulating a hypothetical document. From what we know about Jewish oral tradition and memorization (see chapter VI), for example, one could convincingly argue that the commonalties between Luke and Matthew is simply indicative of the reliability of the *oral traditions* that lie behind both. A number of reputable scholars espouse this position. Or, some have argued, Luke perhaps used Matthew as one of his sources when he composed his Gospel (cf. Lk. 1:1-4). Hence the similarities in wording is to be expected.

Whatever we make of these alternative theories, they serve as reminders that whenever anyone talks about "Q," they are talking about a *tentative hypothesis*, not an actual document. Not one shred of anything like this document has ever been found. This is not to say that there's anything particularly wrong with this hypothesis. It *may* in fact be correct. But it *is* to say that any theories based on this hypothesis can never be more certain than the hypothesis itself. As we shall see, however, this seems to have been largely forgotten by some of those scholars who are now trying to erect incredible theoretical fortresses upon it.

Dissecting "Q"

Many liberal scholars are now arguing that the Jesus we find in "Q" is a radically different Jesus than the one we find in the Gospels. Like the *Gospel of Thomas*, the Jesus of "Q" is more of a teacher than he is a miracle working savior. His claims, it is argued, are less pretentious, he does no miracles, he does not die for sins, and he most certainly does not come back from the dead. And since "Q" is (according to this hypothesis) earlier than the Gospels, its material, they argue, should be judged as being more reliable than that of the Gospels. It's difficult to overestimate the influence this line of reasoning has on many of those scholars getting the most media attention today.

Indeed, the scholars who are using "Q" as a foundational source are now going further and are arguing that "Q" itself can be divided into different stages, with each stage reflecting an increasingly 'mythological' view of Jesus. While the exact demarcations of these "stages" differs among scholars, the most common view is that at stage one (often referred to as "Q1") we find a *wise Jesus* who is simply a teacher. In stage two ("Q2") we find a *prophetic and apocalyptic Jesus* who is chastising his opponents and announcing the coming judgment of God. And in stage three ("Q3") we find a *superhuman Jesus* who is being seen as having divine authority and as embodying the wisdom of God.

To the thinking of these scholars, this "progression" demonstrates that the Jesus of the Gospels was not the Jesus of history. It shows that the earliest followers of Jesus, reflected in the earliest layer of "Q" (and, of course, in the 'early' material in the *Gospel of Thomas*) held a perfectly natural view of Jesus. It shows that only gradually did these people begin to see Jesus in increasingly exalted terms. And it shows, therefore, that the Gospels' view of Jesus Christ as the miracle working Son of God who died for sins and rose from the dead is *not historical*. It is simply the product of the "creative imaginations" of the early Christians.

#### Piling Assumptions Upon Assumptions

What is one to make of all this? Initially this reconstruction of early church history can look somewhat convincing. But on closer inspection, it simply does not stand up.

Among other things, the entire scheme is *completely conjectural*. These scholars are asking us to trade in the Gospel portrait of Christ, the reliability of which we have already seen (chapter VI), for a hypothetical reconstruction of history based on a hypothetical reconstruction of a hypothetical document. And, at least to thinking of many other scholars, this does not come close to being a good trade.

To see just how conjectural this speculation is, consider the number of assumptions that must be made for this version of how the 'mythological' Jesus of the Gospels came about to get off the ground. And consider how tenuous each of these assumptions are.

- It must be assumed that "Q" existed as a written document. As has already been said, however, an increasing number of scholars argue against it. At the very least, there is no concrete evidence of this.
- Even if we grant that "Q" existed as a written document, it must be further assumed that we can accurately reconstruct the "original Q" on the basis of how Matthew and Luke incorporated it into their narratives. But how do we know how much, or how little, of "Q" Matthew and Luke actually used? Perhaps there are entire sections of "Q" (if it existed) which Matthew and Luke choose to omit.
- Even if we grant that we can reconstruct the "original Q" from Matthew and Luke, it must be further assume that this document was composed for the purpose of expressing *everything* early Christians believed about Jesus. Only on this assumption can these scholars try to argue about what the earliest followers of Jesus did *not* believe on the basis of what "Q" presumably does *not* say. But why shouldn't we rather suppose that "Q" (like the later *Gospel of Thomas*) was simply intended to be primarily a collection of sayings of Jesus, perhaps used in the earliest Christian communities for teaching purposes? In this light, arguing about what the earliest followers did *not*

believe on the basis of what "Q" does *not* contain should be seen as a classic illustration of the invalidity of arguing from silence.

- Even if we grant that "Q" existed, that it can be reconstructed, and that it was intended to be exhaustive, it must still further be assumed that there was a *community of people* who created "Q." Only on this assumption can these scholars draw inferences about what the "earliest followers of Jesus" believed or did not believe from what "Q" does or does not say. But why couldn't "Q" be the creation of one person who, quite individually, decided to collect together the sayings of Jesus? Why think it has to reflect what a *community* of people believe at all?
- On top of all this, for the liberal reconstruction of early church history to stand up, these scholars must assume that we can now accurately dissect this hypothetical document to discern its various "literary stages." As we shall see below, however, the process by which they discern these "stages" is questionable, to say the least.
- But even if we grant that various stages in "Q" *can* be accurately assessed, it must still further be assumed that these different literary stages accurately reflect different historical stages in the thinking of the earliest followers of Jesus. But why should the history of a community correspond to the (hypothetical) history of this (hypothetical) document? Why could we not rather assume that (say) the earliest followers of Jesus saw him in apocalyptic terms, but that this view of Jesus simply didn't come into literary form until *after* the view that Jesus was a wise teacher? Leaping from a conjectural *literary history of a document* to a conjectural *history of a community's theology* is an *enormous* leap!
- Finally, this speculative theory on what the earliest followers of Jesus believed must still further assume that wisdom teaching (in "Q1"), prophetic and apocalyptic teaching (in "Q2"), and the perception of Jesus in exalted terms ("Q3") are *fundamentally incompatible* with each other. Only on this basis can these scholars argue that each different form of teaching must represent a *distinct* "literary stage" in "Q." And only on this basis can they then argue that each of these stages represent a *distinct* "stage of progress" in the thinking of the "people of Q." But if the final (hypothetical) editor of this (hypothetical) work didn't see any incompatibility here -- obviously, for he places them all together! -- why think that anyone prior to him would have seen any incompatibility here? If all three elements of "Q" are there at the end, in other words, why couldn't they all have been there at the start? What is more, one can cite many instances in the Jewish literature of the time in which wisdom, prophetic, and apocalyptic elements are found *together in the same document*.

### The Circularity of the Mack Attack

We see, then, that the liberal reinvention of who the original Jesus was and what his original followers were like on the basis of "Q" amounts to nothing more than a pile of arbitrary assumptions built upon other arbitrary assumptions. But what is perhaps even more damaging to their theory than this is the fact that the whole enterprise of reconstructing "Q" is a classic example of circular reasoning.

The all important question to ask yourself is this: On what basis do these scholars conclude that the material in the hypothetical "Q" document that portrays Jesus as a wise teacher came *before* the material

that portrays him as a prophetic or apocalyptic teacher? And on what basis do they further conclude that all of this material came *before* the material that portrays him in divine terms?

The answer, in a word, is that *this* conjectural scheme of what comes "before" and "after" what is simply the one that best fits their *assumption* of how the earliest followers of Jesus progressed in their views of Jesus. But this assumption is the *conclusion* they arrive at from the various literary stages they supposedly 'discover' in "Q." In other words, the supposed literary stages of "Q" are inferred from the supposed historical stages of "the people of Q." And the supposed historical stages of "the people of Q" are then inferred from the supposed literary stages of "Q." And this is a classic case of circular reasoning!

Lest you think I'm exaggerating, let's look at a few examples of how Burton Mack makes his case in his very popular work, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q & Christian Origins* (hence forth abbreviated as *LG*). For starters, Mack helps his readers note that, "Frequently the way sayings are grouped or ordered [in "Q"] makes a point. Sometimes a saying offers a specific interpretation of a preceding unit of material" (*LG*, p. 106). But remember, the only "Q" we possess is the one Mack and others have pieced together from Matthew and Luke. *They* decided how the sayings are to be ordered, and they did so on the basis of the points *they* think "the original Q" was making. So it's not too surprising that Mack 'discovers' that "the way sayings are grouped or ordered makes a point." *He's* the one who ordered them to make just this point!

Similarly, Mack argues that "the order and organization of material [in "Q"] are ... clear signs of the coherence of a particular layer of tradition" (*LG*, p.108). The coherence of various "stages" of "Q," in other words, are discernible by how well the material in each is ordered. But, of course, it is *Mack himself* (along with others) who has imposed on the sayings that Matthew and Luke have in common this particular "order and organization." So arguing on the basis of this 'discovered' organization that Q has distinct "layers of tradition" can hardly be called convincing!

Along these same lines, Mack 'discovers' that in the first layer of "Q" ("Q1"), as opposed to the second layer of "Q" ("Q2"), "[t]here is no sign of hostility" towards those outside the "Q" community (*LG*, 111). In his view, it was a growing sense of hostility to the 'outside' world that led the "people of Q" to gradually develop a more prophetic and apocalyptic view of Jesus. But this 'discovery' can hardly be called a 'discovery,' since it is again *Mack himself* who decided ahead of time that any saying which exhibits such "hostility" belongs to the later layers of "Q"!

So too, Mack notes with interest the "shift in tone that awaits the reader of Q2," and notes how, "[i]n contrast to Q1 the reader now encounters narratives, dialogue, controversy stories ... warnings, and apocalyptic pronouncements" (*LG*, 131). Amazing indeed. But who was it who ruled out all this material from "Q1" and placed it all in "Q2"? It was the very person who is now with fascination 'discovering' it!

The whole project of reconstructing earliest Christian history on the basis of "Q," we see, is as circular as it is conjectural. And we are being asked to trade in the Gospels accounts of who Jesus was, and what his disciples were like, for *this*. To some of us, it is a ridiculous proposition.

Whose History Can You Trust?

What makes this proposition far worse, however, is that accepting this liberal reconstruction also requires of us that we trade in the Bible's own history of the early Church, found in the *Acts of the Apostles*. If this reconstructed view of early Church history is even remotely close to being correct, the view given to us in

the book of *Acts* must be *altogether false!* For if there's anything that is clear from *Acts*, it's that the early Church believed and proclaimed that Jesus Christ was the Son of God who rose from the dead from its very inception. And the Church's inception, of course, occurred just weeks after Jesus' resurrection (on the day of Pentecost).

So the question is, whose history are you going to trust? Mack's or Luke's? For many reasons, a host of scholars would argue that the nod must be given to Luke. While we certainly cannot even begin to investigate this matter with any thoroughness at the present time, a brief summary of the more important pieces of evidence which substantiate the reliability of *Acts* is in order.

### The Author of Acts

The early church is unanimous in maintaining that the author of this work, as well as the Gospel which preceded it (cf. Acts 1:1) was Luke, the "beloved physician" who accompanied Paul on many of his journeys (Col. 4:14; cf. Philemon, 24; 2 Tim. 4:11). Only the most radical of Bible critics ever questions this. The fact that this author reflects such a detailed knowledge of Paul's life, and the fact that he sometimes speaks in the first person plural in his narrative, signifying that he was present at the time (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-21:18; 27:1-28:16), further confirms Lucan authorship.

This information already is enough to raise this very important question: Who is in a better position to tell us how the church began and developed in its earliest stages? A companion of Paul who, as he tells us, is writing an orderly and accurate account while relying on eyewitnesses (Lk. 1:1-3)? Or certain scholars investigating the matter two thousand years later, while relying on questionable inferences from a hypothetical reconstruction of a hypothetical document?

### The Dating of Acts

The book of *Acts* ends very abruptly with Paul under house arrest in Rome in 62 A.D. The question is, why? What makes this question especially interesting is that we know that Paul, as well as Peter and James, were martyred shortly after this time in Nero's persecution. And we also know that Luke is interested in recording the martyrdoms of key Christian figures. Thus he mentions the stoning of Stephen (7:57-59) and the martyrdom of James, the brother of John (12:2). But why then would he omit mentioning the martyrdom of the *three key figures* in his book?

The most obvious answer is that these martyrdoms *hadn't yet occurred* when Luke was composing his narrative. And for this reason, many scholars have argued that the book of *Acts* must be dated sometime shortly after 62 A.D.

A number of other factors provide further confirmation this early dating.

- Luke doesn't mention the fall of Jerusalem (70 A.D.), even though his work is centered on Jerusalem.
- Luke expresses a fairly positive view of the Roman government throughout his work which makes much better sense before this government, under Nero, began persecution of the Christians in 65 A. D.

- Jesus, in Luke's earlier volume, prophesies that the temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed. But Luke never mentions the fulfillment of this prophesy in his second volume, a fact that is wholly inexplicable unless Luke was writing before this cataclysmic event occurred (in 70 A. D.).

Other consideration could be given, but this is sufficient to show that the events Luke recorded both in his Gospel and in his *Acts of the Apostles* were events that had happened just a short time before he recorded them. Which again raises this important question: Was this author in a worse position to know 'what actually happened' than certain scholars are today as they dissect "Q"? Not likely.

### The Accuracy of Luke's Record

Even more important in establishing the reliability of Acts than is the question of its authorship and date is the question of how well it has, or has not, squared with what we know from other ancient sources about the first century Roman world. And the answer, in a nutshell, is that *Acts* has received *remarkable* confirmation from a wide variety of sources. To cite just a few examples of this confirmation:

- Luke's account frequently collaborates with what we learn from other ancient historians. For example, his unusual account of the sudden death of Agrippa, his record of a major famine "in the days of Claudius," his naming of Ananias as the high priest in 47 A. D., and his record of a certain Egyptian revolutionary who led thousands to their death, have all been confirmed by cross-checking them with the writings of Josephus.
- Perhaps the most impressive feature of Luke's narrative is the way he consistently gets the titles of certain dignitaries right. This was particularly difficult to do of officials within the ancient Rome empire, for the titles of dignitaries, as well as the status of the provinces they ruled within, changed frequently. Yet Luke consistently gets them right, a fact that has to bolster our confidence in his ability to relate reliable history. As Stephen Neill puts it, "Experience shows that nothing is more difficult than to get titles exactly right." But what we find in Luke is that "[e]xactly the right title is used at exactly the right time and place." [ 3 ]

Thus, for example, Luke is consistently correct in calling the magistrates of *senatorial* provinces "proconsuls" while calling those in *imperial* provinces "governors" (*hagemon*). In a *Roman colony* like Phillipi, however, they are correctly called "praetors" whose attenders are correctly labeled as "lictors" or "serjeants" (16:12, 35). In Thessalonica, however, they are correctly identified as "politarchs," a term elsewhere unknown, but confirmed in Thessalonica by archeology.

Now if Luke was consistently correct about such details as these, on what grounds can we question the accuracy of his record on more general matters -- such as what the earliest Christians believed about Jesus?

- Archeology has confirmed Luke's accuracy on a host of other matters as well. His detailed knowledge of the ever-changing political topography of Rome, its geography, road ways, and means of travel, have all been confirmed by archeological evidence. More particularly, Luke's remarkably detailed account of Paul's sea voyage and shipwreck in chapter 27 has been called "one of the most instructive documents for the knowledge of ancient seamanship." [ 4 ] His accuracy in portraying the widely divergent cultures and customs of various regions throughout

the Roman world has been frequently noted as well, as has his command of the complex legal processes that were employed in diverse regions of the empire.

It was evidence such as this that led Dr. Sherwin-White, arguably the ablest historian of ancient Roman law in our time, to conclude that:

The confirmation of historicity [in *Acts*] is overwhelming ... any attempt to reject its historicity even in matters of detail must now appear absurd. [ 5 ]

#### Assessing the Liberal Proposition

It is, however, just this "absurdity" that the liberal scholars who are now trying to rewrite early Church history require us to believe if we are to accept their radical revisionist views. They are, in effect, asking us to believe that the book of *Acts*, as well as the Gospels (to say nothing of the apostle Paul) are all *fundamentally incorrect* in how they viewed Jesus and his earliest disciples. Despite all the evidence which supports their reliability, we are to believe that they are, in fact, altogether untrustworthy. What we *are* to trust is certain scholars ability to locate the 'real' Jesus behind all of this myth.

And what is evidence that should compel us to accept these scholars radical views. Well, there's a brief allusion to a lost "secret" Gospel in a late second century letter that has, unfortunately, only been seen by one person and has now itself been lost (*Secret Mark*). There is a third century account of the crucifixion and resurrection which includes a talking cross that less than a handful of scholars think predates the Gospels (*Gospel of Peter*). There is a second century gnostic document, parts of which some now want to date early (*Gospel of Thomas*). And, of course, there is this hypothetical reconstruction of a hypothetical document ("Q") built on 7 sets of very tenuous assumptions that are pieced together in a viciously circular fashion.

To a good number of people, the suggestion that the New Testament record should be traded in for *this* is not even tempting. The proposed trade is a poor one. While the liberals' accounts of who Jesus was and what he did might be initially compelling to many ordinary readers, its appeal is quickly lost once you gather all the facts.

#### Endnotes

1. J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p.329).
2. op. cit.
3. S. Neill, N. T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament: 1861-1986* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 153-4, 151.
4. F. F. Bruce (quoting H. J. Holtzmann), "The Acts of the Apostles: Historical Record or Theological Reconstruction? *Aufstieg und Niedergang der romischen Welt*, ed. H. Temporini and W. Haase, 23:5 (New York; Berlin: de Gryter, 1985), p.2578.
5. A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 173.