

JESUS: THE MAN AND THE MESSAGE
Rev. Ann Buehler, UU Congregation of the Outer Banks, NC
Read by Ann Kelsey
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By an interesting coincidence, the week before Easter in 1997 all three major news magazines featured the admittedly controversial work of the Jesus Seminar scholars in trying to determine who Jesus really was. I've been collecting their books for several years, and to me reading them has been like a fascinating detective serial. Predictably, reaction from many other readers was less enthusiastic.

Most traditional Christians will tell you that there's plenty to be known about Jesus right in the Bible, thank you—especially in the four Gospels and Paul's letters. Yes, there is. If you read the New Testament cover to cover in a horizontal or linear way, it seems one almost seamless historical account. It's only when you line the Gospels up vertically—side by side—that you begin to discover interesting inconsistencies. And when you get into Biblical criticism that you begin to recognize historical inaccuracies.

In Christian Sunday school, we were presented the New Testament stories as eyewitness accounts. They weren't. It was not until the year 60 that anyone began writing down these gospels—and the last one wasn't written until the year 120. So, these were not eyewitness accounts, but the legends that had grown up over time in the small surviving Jesus communities.

These familiar gospels were not written in either Hebrew or Aramaic, but in Greek—an important fact to remember as we try to establish their authenticity. You'll recall that there are frequent references to the Old Testament or Hebrew scriptures in the New Testament, in order to support claims of prophecy about the coming of the Messiah. But since the writers did not read Hebrew, they had to rely on a 300-year-old Greek translation—the Septuagint—and it was full of errors, some of them critical.

Also, you'll note there are a number of gospels, some written even earlier than Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, that never made it into what finally became known as the New Testament about the year 200. Why were they excluded? One provocative theory is that the early Church scholars, or "fathers" as they are called, had two main reasons for excluding certain books—either they did not support the establishment of the power of the apostles—the apostolic succession—or they showed a more powerful role for women than was permitted by the time the canon was closed. Even Paul, whose early letters had acknowledged an equal role for women, had come to renounce that view before his death.

It's only recently that scholars have begun to recognize these inconsistencies: the church fathers had deemed all other writings as heretical and had attempted to destroy all copies. In the past fifty years there's been a great deal of publicity and speculation over finding the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls—the records of an ascetic community known as the Essenes, which flourished in Palestine during the last years before the birth of Jesus. But even more interesting, for our purposes, were the early Gnostic writings in ancient

Egyptian found in Nag Hammadi about the same time. Until then, about all we knew about the Gnostics had been their denunciation as heretics, since their complex cosmology or worldview that advocated a personal, unmediated knowledge of God was at variance with traditional Christianity.

So, let's see why the discovery of these told texts is so exciting. For at least 100 years, scholars have known that Mark was the first of the gospels to be written. Actually, what we read today is a sanitized version from as late as the second century. The original, or "Secret Mark", contained references to the ritual of male baptism that seemed homoerotic and, therefore, troubling. So, these were expurgated.

Both Matthew and Luke, written some thirty years after the fall of Jerusalem, had relied on Mark for many of their stories. But they obviously had another source for the sayings of Jesus, which over time has come to be called "Q". So, imagine what it meant to scholars to find that the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas contained many of these same references! Although the actual Q Gospel has never been found, it is now possible for it to be reconstructed from these three independent sources.

Several of these early writings had obviously been compiled in layers, or stages. There are noticeable developmental shifts in emphasis and outlook within the books themselves. We've seen this in the Old Testament, as well. For example, the Book of Isaiah is actually the work of at least three different writers, spanning several centuries. Finally, none of the original manuscripts of the New Testament survives today—the present texts are copies of copies of copies, dated around 300.

So, that gives us plenty of margin for error in what is considered by some as the inerrant word of God. Of course, small copying errors are usually only of interest to scholars. But the important point for us is: how much of a spin or gloss did those writing decades after the death of Jesus put on the events of his life and death? Earlier this century, Albert Schweitzer, in his landmark book, "The Quest for the Historical Jesus" concluded that we'll never really know.

Well, that didn't stop biblical scholars! In 1987, a group of thirty such people (all with PhD's) met to form what they called the Jesus Seminar. First, they made a completely new and contemporary translation of the four biblical gospels and the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, using not only the manuscripts I've noted, but scraps of other writings that have been discovered over the centuries, too numerous to list. I'm sure you're all familiar with the King James Bible with the words attributed to Jesus printed in red. There is Thomas Jefferson's Bible in which he removed all dubious miraculous material.

Well, the Jesus Seminar people (whose numbers eventually grew to 74, including one UU minister) voted separately for each phrase by means of colored beads, using a set of criteria arrived at by consensus. A red bead signified that Jesus had really said what was reported, pink was probably, grey doubtful and black definitely not. In 1993, they published their conclusions, and created a major furor: only 18% of the words attributed

to Jesus are considered authentic. There is only one line even in pink in the entire Fourth Gospel of John!

These scholars did not just rely on early manuscripts. They also steeped themselves in histories of that period, particularly the writings of Josephus. They included scholars in the fields of Middle Eastern anthropology and sociology. They wanted to know more than just what Jesus said—they wanted to know who he really was, what he taught, and who he believed himself to be. And some of the resulting theories are absolutely fascinating.

Years ago, a Jesuit friend of mine declared that either Jesus was who his disciples said he was, or the whole bunch of them were a pack of vicious liars. Well, it just isn't that clear cut. The Jewish tradition of folklore and legend—fanciful stories that still make an important truth statement—is well known to us by now. But the Greeks were also adept at creating their own legends with no intent to falsify history, as we would judge it. Advanced students would create whole dialogs in the style of some noted writer or philosopher. In Rome, complete biographies were fabricated to support luminaries—for example, once the deceased Augustus Caesar was declared divine, a detailed picture of his supernatural origins and life developed. Such myth making was established culture in the Middle East.

That understood, what is it we can know about Jesus? Let's start with his birth. It was not in Bethlehem; he was born in Nazareth, far to the north. The Bethlehem invention was needed to support Old Testament prophecy about the coming messiah. There was also no census during the reign of Augustus Caesar. There was a limited census for purposes of taxation a bit later on—ten years after the death of Herod—and all people were registered at their present place of residence.

There was no virgin birth, either. The Greek word, mistranslated “virgin” in the Septuagint version of Isaiah, in the original Hebrew actually meant only a woman who had never had a child. Jesus was probably one of six children born to Joseph and Mary, and perhaps not even the oldest. There is one theory that Jesus was illegitimate, the child of a Roman centurion. This is used to explain his later rejection of his family because of the shame felt by his bastard birth—honor and shame were fast-held values in that culture. There was also no slaughter of infant males and no flight to Egypt—that was a deliberate parallel drawn to Moses.

Jesus was a peasant—like peasants in all times and all places, chafing under the exploitative and repressive patronage of his social betters. If we consider that he may have been a carpenter (or the son of a carpenter), that would have made his status even lower—carpenters and other artisans were socially just above total outcasts. His vision was one of complete egalitarianism—not a Kingdom of God in the afterlife, but today. God's preference was not just for the poor, but for the really destitute. They were the only ones invited to the heavenly feast.

When Jesus spoke of being like a child, don't consider that in light of how we think of children today, naïve, cherished, adorable. In Jesus' time, children were nobodies. Infanticide was common, especially for girls. The Kingdom of God was for the nobodies of the world; those without honor—a truly radical egalitarianism that had to be played down by the hierarchical Christian Church which subsequently developed.

Some see Jesus as very like the Greek Cynic philosophers—solitary men, who wandered the city streets, eschewing accepted manners and mode of dress, and making outrageous pronouncements designed to discomfort the comfortable. Jesus had certainly seen such people, and his pronouncements surely turned the establishment on its head. But his ministry was rural, not urban, and he expressly forbade his followers the walking sticks and knapsacks that marked the Cynics. If he was a Cynic, it was a thoroughly Jewish Cynic, not at all under Greek influence.

Was Jesus a miracle worker? Again, many of the miracles have their origin in the Old Testament Book of Kings. Some scholars have called him a magician, in the sense that tribal shamans are considered by unsophisticated persons to work magic. Perhaps a better word is charismatic—the man who was Jesus knew how to attract crowds, even though he often fled from them. The demons he drove out appear to be a psychological metaphor for oppression. His healing was more spiritual than physical. That which was called leprosy in the New Testament was actually just psoriasis. But it was enough to cause a person to lose even the precarious social status of a peasant. Jesus accepted such people into his presence—he gave them back their self-respect. And those were the people who went on to become his disciples.

Jesus' style of ministry is probably what alienated his family. They recognized his gifts and wanted him to settle down in Nazareth as his fame spread. That would be good for the town and good for his family. But Jesus wasn't interested in local fame or fortune. He wanted to spread his message of a just and loving God to as many of the disenfranchised as he could. He never claimed to be the son of God, only the son of man, and he never preached salvation from sin. His vision of equality bypassed even the authority of earthly parents.

As much as anything, it was this egalitarian relationship of siblings that probably drew him to Jerusalem. His brother James was in Jerusalem before him. His friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus—three siblings—were in nearby Bethany. The temple in Jerusalem represented the kind of worldly hierarchy that Jesus detested. Of themselves, the moneychangers were not the real problem—they were necessary to help worshippers offer their ritual sacrifices. However, they were part of the system that Jesus wanted to destroy symbolically.

But such an action could not go unnoticed or unpunished—Jesus seemed dangerously close to a political cult known as the Zealots who vowed to overthrow Roman authority. So, he was arrested. The events of his trial are pure speculation—all of Jesus' friends fled when he was arrested. There was no grave, no tomb, no resurrection. Of all the thousands of persons crucified by the Romans in that time, only one partial corpse has

ever been found. It was part of the disgrace of crucifixion to leave the bodies to be scavenged by birds and wild dogs. Then the Romans placed the bones in shallow, unmarked sites for quick deterioration. A family would need unprecedented influence to reclaim such a body.

So, enter Joseph of Arimathea, as created by Mark. And, once again, a scouring of Old Testament sources—now of Daniel—to create the resurrection myth. Even the renowned Catholic theologian Hans Kung views the resurrection as a metaphor for reunion with God outside of a temporal plane. Stripped of the myths and miracles, what is left of the man Jesus?

Obviously, a very singular personage—a radical, illiterate peasant who gave a loving and just God back to the world's dispossessed, not only for his generation but for generations to come. And that is the real miracle. Jesus was not a Roman emperor or a noted Greek philosopher whom one might expect to merit deification. He was a nobody. And that's where scholarship must come to an end.

By careful reconstruction, scholars can flesh out the probable facts of the life and death of Jesus. But the ensuing cult that flourished even beyond the borders of Palestine, and eventually exploded into a major world religion under the tutelage of Paul and, later, Constantine, is a consequence of faith, not fact. It is the deification of Jesus—the concept of Christ—that distinguishes Christianity as unique when compared to the other world religions. In contrast, Mohammed and Buddha are prophets, not gods. Judaism is rife with prophets, but no messiah—no savior—has yet appeared.

As can be imagined, the Jesus Seminar scholars have come under some intense criticism from traditionalists, some of whom rushed to publish rebuttals. Yet I imagine that most of the Seminar scholars consider themselves to be believing Christians still. The separation of fact and fantasy has not served to diminish their faith. As the writer of the Fourth Gospel observed, the truth can set one free. Yet the truth seems to reveal a Jesus who might make many professing Christians feel somewhat uncomfortable today. And for that, I say Amen.