

# **What's Wrong with the TV Documentary "Jesus"?**

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A seriously diluted Jesus is now being peddled by a wide variety of scholars who are getting publicity in the media. This pint-sized Jesus did not understand himself to be the Messiah. He did not die deliberately to rescue believers from the wrath of God, but was executed for his naivete in thinking he could reform Judaism. For some of these scholars, Jesus is best understood as a traveling cynic, a kind of anti-establishment philosopher patterned after certain Greeks.

Popularized in a television miniseries, in a documentary with a major news anchorman, and in sensationalistic magazine articles, this impotent Jesus is overtaking the true Jesus in the minds of many Americans. What is wrong with this picture? How can we know that the Jesus portrayed in the gospels is the real Jesus?

Behind much of the fanfare and "scientific" rhetoric in this new picture of Jesus is a group called the "Jesus Seminar". Luke Timothy Johnson describes this panel of scholars:

A so-called academic seminar, supposedly devoted to the soberest historical research, but actually desirous of exerting power over or within the Christian church, and consciously designed to be a media juggernaut, meets a group of religion reporters with more than a slight professional interest in the Seminar's work (The Real Jesus, p.11).

The Jesus Seminar is a compendium of New Testament faculty from various colleges who share a skeptical viewpoint regarding the gospels. In their highly publicized meetings, they vote on what parts of the gospels are historical and which are fantasy. Since they shared a bias against the gospels at the outset, their conclusions are predetermined.

Do all scholars agree with the Jesus Seminar and with the portrayal of Jesus currently popular in the media? Certainly not. Evangelical scholars are completely left out in many of the media presentations. Scholars who believe the traditional picture of Jesus are anti-climactic for a news story set upon breaking with tradition. What is shocking about a seminary professor who believes that Jesus is the Messiah, Savior, and Son of God?

The modern scholarly picture of Jesus, which has captured the public imagination and has overtaken the real Jesus in the minds of many, is a picture designed to sell. It is a characterization calculated to change the church and society. Most significantly, it is a portrayal that plays fast and loose with the evidence at hand.

## **The Evidence of the Gospels**

Obviously, those who do not believe in Christianity cannot regard the gospels as the inspired, infallible words of God. Many people imagine that the traditional picture of Jesus can only be built by "mindless fundamentalists" who insist that every word in the Bible is true. Actually, thoughtful fundamentalists, evangelicals, and even mainstream moderate scholars can build the traditional picture of Jesus from the simple assumption that the gospels are eyewitness accounts of history.

The emasculated Jesus being presented as fact by some modern scholars and the media is based upon some rather silly assumptions about the gospels. First and foremost has been the assumption that miracles are impossible. For an in-depth treatment of this issue, I recommend C.S. Lewis's book, *Miracles*. A miracle is essentially a case where the laws of nature seem to be violated. Jesus turned water into wine and walked on water. Such acts violate principles that we observe every day. To say that such acts are impossible, however, is to make a claim that cannot be substantiated. How do we know miracles are impossible-because we've never seen one? If miracles were common they wouldn't be special. I've never seen alien life, but I'm not prepared to say that alien life is impossible.

Another assumption of these modern scholars is that we can, 2,000 years after the fact, better decide which parts of the gospel are historical and which parts are fantasy. In reality, most of the rejected parts of the gospels are rejected based upon presuppositions, not evidence. For example, these scholars claim that Jesus never said he was the Messiah. Therefore, the church writing after Jesus' death must have made up words in his mouth any time the gospels show Jesus claiming to be the Messiah. Note the circular reasoning here: "A" cannot be true, thus, any eyewitness account of "A" must have been fabricated. The above reasoning would only hold if there was a compelling reason why "A" could not be true. In reality, Jesus' claims to Messiahship are rejected because of presupposition, not because of research or evidence.

In order to give some scientific credence to the idea of cutting out sayings and stories in the gospels, scholars generally claim to be able to determine "seams" in the text. These "seams", like patches in a restored garment, are supposedly places where an enlightened scholar can see that later generations added words to an earlier book. In reality, the criteria for determining the seams is usually ideological-if the story in question contains ideas thought to be later, then the story must be a later addition. Thus, claims of scientific observation as the basis of rejecting certain stories are generally false. Stories are rejected by presupposition, not by clues found in the language itself.

Perhaps the prime example of a priori rejection of a gospel event concerns the resurrection. We all know that people do not rise from the dead, therefore Jesus could not rise from the dead. Therefore we have to explain the evidence that he did rise from the dead somehow as false. At least, this is how some people reason.

John Dominic Crossan, the bright star of the Jesus Seminar, has proposed in his book, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, what seems to him a much better theory of the resurrection than that presented in the gospels. In this highly acclaimed book, Crossan gives what he hopes will be perceived as an unbiased, scholarly view of the historical incident behind the resurrection story.

Crossan's first point is that "Jesus' first followers knew almost nothing whatsoever about the details of his crucifixion, death, or burial" (p.145). Instead, they drew up the story, a complete fiction, by looking at certain prophecies from the Hebrew Bible and projecting them into Jesus' life. Second, he assumes that Jesus would not have been buried in a stone tomb, as the gospels say, but either left on the cross or put in a shallow grave, where dogs and vultures would have eaten his corpse (pp.152-158). Third, he assumes that disciples would have known that the body of Jesus was to be eaten by carrion animals and that they made up a story to give his death more

dignity (p.156). Crossan says, "With regard to the body of Jesus, by Easter Sunday morning, those who cared did not know where it was, and those who knew did not care" (p.158). Finally, the church gradually developed the story of the empty tomb and the resurrection as a myth, starting with Paul who dreamed up the whole idea (p.163).

In other words, Crossan's unbiased historical reconstruction of the resurrection story is that the disciples were not present at the crucifixion, they lost Jesus' body and knew that dogs had eaten it, and they began to make up ever more fantastic stories to give dignity to Jesus' death and to keep the religion they had started alive.

The old adage, truth is stranger than fiction, certainly describes Crossan's fanciful account. The real reason that historians tend to doubt the resurrection has nothing whatsoever to do with the evidence of the gospels. Even the often discussed contradictions (I would say seeming contradictions) in the resurrection stories do not present a problem for historians. A few contradictions in different eyewitness accounts serves all the more to validate the authenticity of the accounts than to discredit them. The real reason for skepticism about the resurrection is the presupposition that miracles are impossible.

But Crossan's explanation of the resurrection is harder to defend than the truth. An Orthodox Jewish scholar, Pinchas Lapide, best expresses why explanations such as Crossan's fail:

When this scared, frightened band of apostles which was just about to throw away everything in order to flee in despair to Galilee; when these peasants, shepherds, and fishermen, who betrayed and denied their master and then failed him miserably, suddenly could be changed overnight into a confident mission society, convinced of salvation and able to work with much more success after Easter than before Easter, then no vision or hallucination is sufficient to explain such a revolutionary transformation (The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective, p.125).

To apply Lapide's logic to Crossan's theory of the resurrection: if this band of disciples made up the whole resurrection story, why did they die tortured deaths defending it and how did they preach it so convincingly that it fooled the world? Historians might get away with denying that the resurrection happened, but it is not feasible to deny that the disciples thought that it happened.

### **Problems With the TV Documentary View of the Gospels**

The emasculated Jesus of the TV documentaries and mini-series' is not the Jesus of the gospels. All four gospels are crystal clear that Jesus lived his life purposefully and redemptively, always with an eye toward his death. Mark, the earliest of the gospels by most people's reckoning, quotes Jesus as saying, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for the many" (Mark 10:45 NIV). Jesus saw the whole purpose of his life in his death and told his disciples so from a point early in his ministry.

Jesus did not go around claiming to be the Messiah and revealing that he was God in human form every day. But he did reveal these things occasionally at appropriate times. Claiming Messiahship required caution in an age rabid with Messianic fever and misunderstanding the

nature of Messiah's mission. Claiming divinity always requires caution in any age, lest one be thought insane. At key moments, with the right person or the right crowd, Jesus would reveal his true nature. Matthew, Mark, and Luke give the broad picture of Jesus' life, a true cross-section of what his teaching ministry was like. John focuses on the moments when Jesus did reveal his Messiahship and deity. For this reason, John is the most unique of the four gospels and gives a focused picture of one aspect of Jesus, rather than a total view.

Here is a sampling of what the gospel of Matthew alone has to say regarding the mission and identity of Jesus:

"She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." -- Mat 1:21 (NRSV)

"And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'" -- Mat 3:17 (NRSV)

"But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins," ...He then said to the paralytic, "Stand up, take your bed and go to your home." -- Mat 9:6 (NRSV)

"Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven." -- Mat 10:32 (NRSV)

"All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." -- Mat 11:27 (NRSV)

"I tell you, something greater than the temple is here." -- Mat 12:6 (NRSV)

"But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you." -- Mat 12:28 (NRSV)

"The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!" -- Mat 12:41 (NRSV)

"And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'" -- Mat 14:33 (NRSV)

"Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'" -- Mat 16:16 (NRSV)

"From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." -- Mat 16:21 (NRSV)

"For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done." -- Mat 16:27 (NRSV)

"While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" -- Mat 17:5 (NRSV)

"As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." -- Mat 17:9 (NRSV)

"As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands," -- Mat 17:22 (NRSV)

"and they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised." And they were greatly distressed." -- Mat 17:23 (NRSV)

"For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." -- Mat 18:20 (NRSV)

"Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." -- Mat 19:28 (NRSV)

"See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death;" -- Mat 20:18 (NRSV)

"then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised." -- Mat 20:19 (NRSV)

"The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born." -- Mat 26:24 (NRSV)

"for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." -  
- Mat 26:28 (NRSV)

The picture of Jesus presented in Matthew is a far cry from the helpless religious reformer of the TV documentary Jesus. Every single one of these statements, as well as dozens in Mark and Luke, and nearly the entire book of John, has to be discredited as historical to emasculate Jesus in the way that the Jesus Seminar does.

Here are some of the problems, logical and historical, with the conclusions of the Jesus Seminar and the popular media presentations of Jesus:

Statements in the gospels that run contrary to modern theory are removed by circular reasoning (Jesus couldn't have said that, so if the gospels show he did then they made it up).

The gospels are too honest to be propaganda pieces made up by the church (They show Peter's denials, prostitutes amongst the women close to Jesus, and many other embarrassing facts that would never be included in propaganda).

The gospels were written early, the latest of them by the early 90's, when there were numerous eyewitnesses who could refute a bogus picture of Jesus (We even have fragments of the Gospel of John, the latest gospel, dating from 125 C.E.).

The gospels are not uniform, but contain differences of detail suggesting different sources in some cases, different sources for the same sayings and events. Differing details show that this is not rehearsed eyewitness fabrication and uniformity shows that all are reporting on the same person and events.

The greatest area of agreement in all four gospels, even John, regards the timing, sequence, and redemptive nature of Jesus' death-which is the focal point of every gospel.

The concept of a Messianic figure, whose death would bring forgiveness of sin, is very Jewish and ancient and predated the life of Jesus (Isaiah 53). Those who understand the Jewish context of Jesus' life and teachings see in his actions and words the marks of a genius within first century Judaism. The genius is too great to have been manufactured by peasant fishermen. His genius and the reaction of certain corrupt Jewish priests is extremely believable in first-century history.

### **A Remedy to the TV Documentary "Jesus"**

To anyone who has been deeply affected by the modern, emasculated Jesus, the remedy is simple. Read the gospels, or even one gospel. Mark, the shortest of the four, will do nicely. Does Jesus really exhibit the traits of naivete? Would he really be believable as nothing more than a Galilean hick rabbi who fell afoul of the Jerusalem elite? If you cast aside any prejudice against miracles for a moment, what is unbelievable about the figure of Jesus in the gospels?

Rather than a tragic figure whose deeply held religious beliefs were a threat to Rome, you may discover Jesus as the Son of Man, who is coming again on the clouds in glory (Matt. 26:64). You may understand the Son of Man who came "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). You may conclude that you are one who needs that saving and put your trust in the one who said, "Everyone who beholds the Son and believes in him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:40).