

## **Jesus Who?**

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"If you could spend an evening with any one person, living, deceased or fictional, whom would you choose and why?" This was a question recently put to prospective students of the University of Pennsylvania. The top three choices of these 8,000 teenagers were God, Jesus, and Chrysler Corporation Chairman Lee Iacocca. The inclusions of Iacocca and God may represent, respectively, the short-sightedness and spontaneous presumption of adolescence, but that of Jesus testifies to the persistent popularity of this first century man of the Middle East—even now in the fast lane of a "post Christian" Yuppie youth culture.

Every time we put a date on anything we inadvertently note the most significant single person in the history of the world. People pray in his name and curse in his name; show kindness in his name and kill in his name. The instrument of his own execution emblazons flags of the world, from Greece and Great Britain to Tonga and Tuvalu. His birth is the excuse that keeps "Toys R Us" in the black. Charlie Brown says of himself that he himself is "always sure about things that are a matter of opinion." Well, opinions about this person have ranged from the idea that he never was at all to the idea that he is all that ever was. Some say that he was only a man. Some say that he was not even a man. Some say that he was a man and more.

In discussion of Jesus today, we dare not assume that we're all thinking and talking of the same Jesus. This fact is lamented by two of our century's most gifted writers, Dorothy Sayers and Flannery O'Connor. Each of these women saw the difficulties the modern world has with discussion of him. In 1949 Sayers said: "The brutal fact is that in this Christian country [she was speaking of England] not one person in a hundred has the faintest notion what the Church teaches about ... the person of Jesus Christ." O'Connor noted something even deeper when she wrote in one of her letters: "One of the awful things about writing when you are a Christian is that for you the ultimate reality is the Incarnation, the present reality is the Incarnation, and nobody believes in the Incarnation ... "

In the first century, Jesus was perceived as an agent of the devil, a blasphemer, and as the very word of God in the flesh. Much later there was the 11th century "Monk Who Rules the World," the 16th century "Universal Man," the 18th century "Teacher of Common Sense," the 19th century Moralizer of Victorian parlors, and the 20th century "Liberator" of South American fruit-pickers and North American "fruits." There's the "Superstar" Jesus of Broadway and the skateboarding Jesus of Vacation Bible School. There's Jesus Falwell, Jesus Cardinal O'Connor, Jesus Baker Eddy, and Jesus Myung Moon. There's Jesus the household god of suburban American

nuclear families and Jesus the boyfriend of the "beloved disciple" in gay religionism. There's the Jeffrey Hunter Jesus and the Max von Sydow Jesus. There's the Mormon Jesus, the Unitarian Jesus, and the avatar Jesus of Vishnu. There's the joyless Jesus of Fulton Oursler and Kazantzakis, the journalist's Jesus of Jim Bishop and the "Positive Thinker" of Norman Vincent Peale. There's the "swooning" Jesus of *The Passover Plot* and the UFO Jesus of *Globe* and *The Star*. There's the blue-eyed blond Jesus of Neo-Nazis, son of Mary and a fair-skinned Aryan soldier in outpost Palestine. (Didn't Goebbels himself say: "Christ cannot possibly have been a Jew. I don't have to prove it scientifically. It's a fact"?)

Some people agree with Lord Byron: "If ever man was God or God man, Jesus Christ was both." Some say with André Gide: there's "more light in Christ's words than in any other human words." But some people don't think he was so unique. Sherwood Anderson said "Everyone in the world is Christ" and Shirley MacLaine says "Everyone is God." To make sure we get it she repeats: "Everyone." It's evidently easier for the MacLaines of pop Hinduism to believe that everyone is God than that Jesus was somehow the "only begotten Son of God."

With such a pantheon of Jesus Christs, no wonder the mystic William Blake could discern: "The vision of Christ that thou dost see Is my Vision's Greatest Enemy; Thine is the friend of all mankind, Mine speaks in parables to the blind." Two missionary-theologians have well observed that there is a cultural conditioning to our many versions of Jesus: Albert Schweitzer saying that "Each successive epoch found its own thoughts in Jesus" and Lesslie Newbigin saying that "Jesus is always perceived and can only be perceived through the eyes of a particular culture."

Well, is it possible to move through the Jesus junket of history, ancient and modern, to find not simply our own projections or opinions but what we can call the historical truth about Jesus of Nazareth? "I'm Jesus!" "I'm Jesus!" "I 'm Jesus!" If we ask that the "real Jesus please stand up," will we have any reliable response?

In every supermarket check-out line "enquiring minds want to know" what Linda Evans is really like and the truth about Joan Collins and the evidence for their steamy affair with Dolly Parton. Do our "enquiring minds" want to know what *Jesus* was really like? If so, can we even hope to know the truth about him? Is there any good evidence on the historical Jesus?

In the heyday of 19th century rationalism some said that there never was a historical Jesus. Even today, according to the Great *Soviet Encyclopedia* of 53 large volumes, there's only a 2-line entry for "Jesus." It says that Jesus is "the name of the mythological founder of Christianity." But even at the turn of the century, before more recent documentary and archaeological findings, Cambridge anthropologist of ancient folklore and myth, Sir James Frazer, wrote in his 12 volume work, *The Golden Bough*: "The doubts which have been cast on the historical reality of Jesus are, in my judgment, unworthy of serious attention." Even the very liberal biblical critic Rudolf Bultmann admitted that "By no means are we at the mercy of those who doubt or deny that Jesus ever lived," though for Bultmann, all that could be known about Jesus could be put on his

legendary 3" by 5" index card. We must not be misled though by Bultmann, for as Munich theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg cautions, the very liberal Bible critics are really skeptics rather than historians. And as historian Michael Grant puts it: "If we apply to the New Testament, as we should, the same sort of criteria as we should apply to other ancient writings containing historical material, we can no more reject Jesus' existence than we can reject the existence of a mass of pagan personages whose reality as historical figures is never questioned." Among the modern giants of the study of history, e.g. Moore, Butterfield, Collingwood, Toynbee, Wells, Latourette, and the Durants, none doubts that Jesus existed and that we can know far more about him than can be put on a 3" by 5" card. In the words of the venerable Yale historian Kenneth Scott Latourette: "Although our accounts of Jesus are brief, they enable us to know him and his teachings as well as we can know any figure of like antiquity." The historians Will and Ariel Durant have asked, "Does history support a belief in God?" and have answered with "a reluctant negative." Nonetheless, Will Durant agrees with the Christian Latourette and the others: "That a few simple men should in one generation have invented so powerful and appealing a personality [as Jesus], so lofty an ethic and so inspiring a vision of human brotherhood, would be a miracle far more incredible than any recorded in the Gospel." Perhaps the greatest modern historian, Arnold Toynbee, even went so far as to affirm that "the human founder of the Christian Church is God Himself incarnate," although, of course, this is a statement of faith rather than a scientific verification.

We learn about Jesus primarily from the New Testament. But we learn about Jesus also from other early sources. One such source of information and confirmation is the collection of non-Christian material about Jesus, both Roman and Jewish. For example, Princeton biblical scholar Bruce Metzger says that even without the New Testament records, "early non-Christian testimonies concerning Jesus, though scanty, are sufficient to prove ... that he was a historical figure who lived in Palestine in the early years of the first century, that he gathered a group of followers about himself, and that he was condemned to death under Pontius Pilate. Today, no competent scholar denies the historicity of Jesus."

We have hostile non-Christian Roman sources within 19 years of the crucifixion—even before the gospels were completed. These include the historians Thallus, Tacitus, and Suetonius as well as the governor Pliny the Younger. They wrote about a Judean they were already calling "Chrestus," and, as Thallus attempted to do for example, they were explaining away the Good Friday darkness at noon as merely a natural eclipse of the sun. These Romans had no special interest in looking further into the life of an executed Jew. Much less did they intend to provide confirmation of his historicity. But this they did do, even though their purpose was rather to ridicule what they interpreted as dangerous and "contagious superstition [and] error" of his followers, the subjects of Rome.

Ephemeral documents of the Roman bureaucracy have not survived for many centuries, with a few scattered exceptions. But they were assumed to be still on file during the first couple of centuries, as is obvious from the way in which Christian apologists such as Justin Martyr and

Tertullian urged Roman leaders to check their official records of Pilate's reports and census lists to verify the historicity of what was claimed about Jesus.

Among the non-Christian Jewish sources for the historicity of Jesus are the accounts of the historian Josephus and at least 8 hostile references in the Talmud, the Common Era compilation of Jewish laws, customs, and interpretation, showing the contempt in which later rabbis held Jesus. F. F. Bruce of the University of Manchester sums what can be said, at the very least, of Josephus' testimony: "Josephus bears witness to Jesus's date, to his being the brother of James the Just, to his reputation as a miracle-worker, to his crucifixion under Pilate as a consequence of charges brought against him by the Jewish rulers, to his claim to be the Messiah, and to his being the founder of the 'tribe of Christians.'"

We have archaeological evidence that confirms the gospel accounts. Repeatedly, the deans of American archaeologists such as Albright of Johns Hopkins, Wright of Harvard, and Glueck of Hebrew Union, have attested to the reliability of the biblical documents. In Glueck's words: "It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever contravened a biblical reference." According to Wright, the substantiation provided by archaeology discredits all ideas of skeptics that the Bible is simply myth and legend.

Summarizing the study that has been done in search of the historical Jesus, Princeton scholar James Charlesworth states: "The search for the historical Jesus over the last two hundred years has been a rocky road with many dead ends and detours. Many scholars have served us well; and it is now obvious the journey is both possible and necessary."

Toynbee calls Christianity "the historical religion par excellence," Pannenberg calls history the very mode of God's revelation, and Charlesworth says that history is itself "of the essence of Christian theology." Here these Christians are echoing the Apostle Paul who said that if our faithing is not connected to history it is futile (I Cor 15:17). It is the significance of the historicity of the acts of God that is one of the major differences between biblical religion and the world's religions. (Another is the difference between the grace and righteousness of God which is crucial for biblical religion and hard work and self-righteousness which is crucial to others.) In seeing Jesus within history, it's well to note that the ancient world of Jesus' day was both like our world and unlike our world. Some people have the silly notion that his was a world of only stupidity, superstition, ignorance, and gullibility while ours is one of sophisticated rationality, science and honest doubt. As Richard Meltzer has criticized in *The Saturday Review*, "primitive peoples' [have been thought to have] barely [been able to] take a shit if left to their own devices." But we have only to look at the New Testament records of the disciples' own skepticism and disbelief and at our own society's fascination with astrology, Tarot cards, palm reading, Scientology, est, the wisdom of Shirley MacLaine and the fact that *The National Enquirer* outsells *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* all put together, to relieve ourselves of arrogance. True, first century Judea and Galilee were not as technologically advanced—for either good or

evil—as is our own world, at least as is much of America. But human nature with all its conflicts, hopes, and despair, was basically the same. After spending their entire working lives studying and writing history for their multi-volume *Story of Civilization*, Will and Ariel Durant concluded: "Since we have admitted no substantial change in man's nature during historic times, all technological advances will have to be written off as merely new means of achieving old ends—the acquisition of goods, the pursuit of one sex by the other (or by the same), the overcoming of competition, the fighting of wars."

In order to learn from the New Testament documents, we must first ask hard questions about the reliability of the documents themselves. For it's only if they can be trusted to give a credible witness that we can think that we may know anything really believable about Jesus.

According to F. F. Bruce: "There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament." It is at this very point of the credibility of the New Testament documents, where so many ill-informed secularists and liberals think we evangelical people of the Book are to be so embarrassed, that we enjoy one of our most encouraging strengths. Of course we don't have the autographs, the original mats and scrolls, but we do have many thousands of ancient manuscripts containing all or parts of the New Testament. In contrast to these thousands of old manuscripts, we know Caesar's *Gallic Wars* (composed in the 50s BC) from only 9 good manuscripts all dating from at least 900 years after Caesar. The Roman *History* of Livy, who died in AD 17, survives in only a few good manuscripts, the oldest of which is 4th century. The works of the historians Thucydides and Herodotus are attested by manuscripts that date only as close as 13 centuries removed from their authors. And yet we take for granted today that what we have of Caesar, Livy, Thucydides and Herodotus is reliable—else we know nothing of them. Over against such long stretches of time between secular event and autograph and manuscript, among the earliest New Testament papyrus fragments is a portion of John's gospel (18:31, 37f) dating from about 30 years after the autograph and the very earliest papyrus fragment of a gospel we have may be Mark 6:48, dated paleographically to AD 50. That's fewer than 20 years after the crucifixion and a decade before some critics think Mark was written. And what do you suppose is in Mark 6:48? The account of Jesus walking on the water—refuting all who have tried to say that the miraculous couldn't possibly have been part of the original historical witness but was rather added later as the "tale" grew and grew. What these many and early manuscripts mean for students of antiquity is well stated by John Warwick Montgomery, a leading writer in both theology and jurisprudence: "To be skeptical of the resultant text of the New Testament books is to allow all of classical antiquity to slip into obscurity, for no documents of the ancient period are as well attested bibliographically as the New Testament."

For about a generation, most of the gospel accounts circulated orally. It was usual for the disciples of a rabbi like Jesus to memorize their teacher's words and works. According to Bruce: "The evidence indicates that the written sources of our Synoptic Gospels are not later than c. AD 60; some of them may even be traced back to notes taken of our Lord's teaching while His words

were actually being uttered. The oral sources go back to the very beginning of Christian history. We are, in fact, practically all the way through in touch with the evidence of eyewitnesses. The earliest preachers of the gospel knew the value of this first-hand testimony, and appealed to it time and again. 'We are witnesses of these things,' was their constant and confident assertion." According to Cambridge historian Herbert Butterfield, the essential form of the gospel materials was settled by 20 years after the crucifixion. Bruce explains that "There were probably several selections of sayings of Jesus in circulation before the Gospels proper began to be produced."

Until the 60s of the first century AD, there was probably no perceived need for written accounts of Jesus' life and work. But as eyewitnesses were getting older and dying, the need was seen for written accounts. So from Rome, Mark, the interpreter and companion of Peter, wrote down Peter's preaching. In doing so he introduced to the Roman world "a type of popular literature previously unknown," as William Lane of Western Kentucky University puts it, "... a witness document ... neither a formal historical treatise nor a biography ... but a proclamation." Matthew's gospel was composed by an unknown author, as Trinity Evangelical Divinity School scholar D. A. Carson points out, probably on the basis of a collection of the tax-gatherer's reminiscences, and it became the most frequently quoted of the canonical gospels during the first three centuries when Mark's was mistakenly believed to be but a brief summary of Matthew's and therefore somewhat neglected for a while. In the meantime, from Achaia, the Syrian companion of Paul named Luke was writing his own witness document for Greeks, the two-volume Luke-Acts. Much later, probably around 90 or 95, "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (21:20, 24)—that's his only identification—wrote his account, known as the Gospel According to John. The author of this last gospel may have been John or Lazarus or Nathaniel or the rich young ruler or somebody else. John's was written with heavily theological meditations, thus separating his from what we call the Synoptic or "seen together" gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. According to Fuller Seminary's Everett Harrison: "... the plurality of Gospels, although it seems to accent the element of interpretation because of variations in parallel passages, may actually be urged as an argument in favor of historicity, for the Church would hardly care to advertize its laxity of supervision over the proper understanding of the message by allowing the spawning of divergent accounts for the very purpose of advocating new interpretations." None of these gospel accounts is, of course, strictly speaking, a biography of Jesus. As we've noted, each was a proclamation, a new genre. Harrison says: "Our Gospel records are not on-the-spot accounts by neutral reporters of what Jesus said and did, but are the distillation of the materials of the life after much reflection and repetition by men of faith. ... They are a combination of history and interpretation."

Contrary to the dogmatic assertions of fundamentalist preachers and the innocent statements of Sunday School teachers, there actually appears more and more evidence of editorial liberty in the texts of scripture. But as the British biblical scholar T. W. Manson stated: "Odd as it may seem to us, the freedom with which [New Testament writers, for example] handled the [Old Testament] Biblical text is a direct result of the supreme importance which they attached to it."

Jesus himself seems to have used the Hebrew scriptures in the same way. Evangelical biblical scholars acknowledge that the gospel writers at times made synonymous substitutions for Jesus' words, sometimes put Jesus' sayings in particularly designed settings for the presentation of the material, and added short explanatory glosses, all within the scope of what these first century writers deemed true history. While teaching New Testament at Westminster Seminary, Ned B. Stonehouse admitted some New Testament editing that departed from a strict report of the actuality of events in his *Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*. General Editor Frank E. Gaebelien of The Stony Brook School and Consulting Editors James Montgomery Boice (chair of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy) and Merrill C. Tenney of Wheaton permit Bethel Seminary's Walter W. Wessel to say in his commentary on Mark that Mark edits and places Jesus' sayings into various story settings. Robert Gundry of Westmont College states: "Jesus was so extraordinary that he evoked both efforts to recall his life as it was and efforts to amplify it. Evangelistic and pastoral purposes lay behind both kinds of efforts. Amplification, no less than recollection, shows high regard for the historical Jesus." Though Gundry was voted out of the Evangelical Theological Society for not being conservative enough in his handling of the Bible, it should be noted that the vote was far from unanimous. Former Gordon-Conwell Seminary professor J. Ramsey Michaels demonstrates this broader approach in his book, *Servant and Son*. Even Bruce is too liberal for many American fundamentalists. Having taken note of all of this, however, it is well to put it into the perspective of evangelical theologian Helmut Thielicke who writes: "Although many of the words of Jesus which have been handed down to us may not in the strict sense go back directly to the historical Jesus himself but are formulations of the early church—and hence to the archivist not genuine—nevertheless they have not been plucked out of the air and arbitrarily added on. They are rather the church's response to what Jesus has said to her—and means to her."

Toward the end of the first century, the four gospels were brought together as *the Gospel* with each of the four narratives presented as The Gospel "according to Matthew," "according to Mark," "according to Luke," and "according to John." Even earlier the faithing community had collected letters of Paul and circulated them as *The Apostle*. So then the Christians had *The Apostle* and now *The Gospel*.

Luke's gospel begins by noting that many others had undertaken similar written proclamations and John's finishes by noting that there were many other things which Jesus did which are not included in what has been handed down to us. We may assume that our good news writers had access to the narratives of at least some of these others noted by Luke, that they also had knowledge of at least some of that which is not relayed to us, that they had access to the oral tradition behind the written materials, and that eyewitness recollection played the significant role in it all. We may also assume that we possess only a fraction of what Jesus did and said, but that what we don't have did not digress from what we do have.

Recognizing the high quality of the New Testament texts we have, let's move to a consideration of their *content*. Do we have good reasons for judging that what they say about Jesus is credible

and not merely the invented polemic of the early church? After all, what good is the high quality of the documents if the content is nothing but fairy tales? Since the significance of what we're asked to believe from Livy's writings falls short of the significance of what we're asked to believe from Luke's, the more important question is, after all: Are these highly reliable texts *true*? The New Testament presents Jesus as such a unique person that it has very often been difficult for people to take the presentation literally,—and then seriously, no matter how good the documents are.

Back in 1906 the liberal Protestant theologian, organist, and medical missionary Albert Schweitzer concluded his analysis of the 19th century "Life-of-Jesus Movement" by saying: "There is nothing more negative than the result of the critical study of the Life of Jesus." At the close of his famous book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Schweitzer stated: "[Jesus] comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old." Several years later, the biblical theologian Rudolf Bultmann tried to interpret the New Testament gospel through the prism of Heideggerian existentialism and concluded: "We can know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus." But it must be clearly understood that Bultmann and the other earlier liberal critics did not offer evidence for their rejection of so much of the historicity of Jesus, especially his resurrection. They simply assumed it to be not historical. To Bultmann and other "demythologizers," history, by definition alone, has no room for a man who is seen as the literal enfleshment of God and who rises from the dead. Any claims to the contrary must, they took on faith, be well-intentioned fabrications. Their argument is simply one of *a priori* thought. As Oxford biblical scholar John Macquarri states: "Bultmann does not take the trouble to examine what evidence could be adduced to show that [for example] the resurrection was an objective-historical event. He assumes that it is myth." Interestingly, Bultmann's own disciples, the so-called "Post-Bultmannians," have recognized more historicity in the gospels than did their mentor. For example, Gunther Bornkamm admits that he found in his research for his book on *Jesus of Nazareth* that he was amazed at how very much of the New Testament records he could accept as historical. Research on Jesus is changing radically in this more optimistic direction, especially now as we are aided with more sophisticated tools like computers and archaeology and ongoing study of more recently found material such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi manuscripts. As Princeton New Testament scholar James Charlesworth writes most recently: "The new research on Jesus will be different from and more informed than previous attempts primarily because of the increased documentary evidence and the phenomenal archaeological discoveries."

The new evidence is confirmational and explanatory. But in terms of New Testament content, it has been there all the time. However, the presuppositions of different centuries, the waxing and waning of culturally-conditioned theological proclivities,—these have determined how the content has been read over the years. The assumptions of some secularists have precluded even a most elementary investigation of the documents by many people who have been inordinantly influenced by such modernity.



Let's look now at some of the internal documentary evidence for the trustworthiness of the narratives on Jesus, that evidence which has been around all along.

We might start by reminding ourselves that what the first Christians said about Jesus was not said about someone who had lived 2,000 years before them (as is our case), someone they'd only heard about, a great and ancient religious figure. Rather, it was said by eyewitnesses among many other eyewitnesses, their peers. They had lived with Jesus, observed him, talked with him, touched him, smelled him. Together they had experienced him in confusion, fear, anger, and joy. And just as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and the others did not know Jesus as the Christ of the 2,000 year old Christian religion and Western culture, so they did not see themselves as our 2,000 year old world-class Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Bruce reasons: "It can have been by no means so easy as some writers seem to think to invent words and deeds of Jesus in those early years, when so many disciples were about, who could remember what had and had not happened." Even if some words and deeds were composed for didactic purposes, could these believably be far different from the actual words and deeds remembered by the eyewitnesses and still have found a place in the documents? As C. H. Dodd, the British biblical scholar, said: "The Synoptic writers give us a body of [Jesus'] sayings so coherent, and withal so distinctive in style, manner and content, that no reasonable critic could doubt that whatever reservations he might have about individual Sayings, we find reflected here the thought of a single, unique Teacher."

What immediately strikes an investigative reader of the gospel accounts is the fact that, throughout, both the content and form are of Jesus' own day and not of the time of the early Christians who wrote some 20 or more years later on. Cambridge biblical scholar John A. T. Robinson says: "The obvious thing would have been for [the early Christians] to have made Jesus merely the mouthpiece of their preaching—to put back on his lips, and claim his sanction for, everything that they said about him. But this, unexpectedly, is what we do not find."

As over against the Pauline agenda, for example, the gospels contain half a hundred references to the Sabbath and Sabbath day controversies. Jesus is presented by Mark as condemning a Corban convention (7:11) whereby, under the tradition of the Pharisees, people were shirking their responsibilities to parents by excessively "dedicating" their property to the Temple. These concerns are not the concerns of the Christians 30 or more years later. Jesus' very heavy emphasis on his Kingdom stands in marked contrast to the emphasis on the assembly or "called-out ones," the church, among the later first generation Christians. In contrast to the apostolic use of the titles "Lord" and "Christ" for Jesus—titles literally incorporated into Jesus' name—Jesus himself is rarely said to have used these terms for himself. Rather, he is consistently presented in the gospels as having repeatedly used the self-designation "Son of Man," an apparently deliberately confusing reference modeled on Daniel 7 and not used by Paul. The term is virtually absent from the vocabulary of the primitive church. Furthermore, the term "Son of Man" is consistently presented as being used *by* Jesus of himself and not by others in reference to him.

This is well-explained if Jesus actually used the title in this way. It is difficult to explain if invented by the writers, in which case it would be reasonable to expect the term to be both on the lips of Jesus and in their references to him, as Westminster Seminary New Testament professor Vern Poythress points out.

The credibility of the gospel narratives is also strengthened by the fact that even though the writers obviously proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, as Mark, for example, makes plain in his very opening sentence, nonetheless the gospels are reluctant to have Jesus admit this identity,—"surprisingly" so, as Oxford's E. P. Sanders says, "unexpectedly" so, as Cambridge's J. A. T. Robinson says. We have writers of the so-called Easter Faith refraining from placing in Jesus' mouth their own declaration about him which would have been advantageous to their cause. New Testament scholar Oscar Cullmann reasons thusly about apostolic presentation obviously under the discipline of historical accuracy: "Precisely the fact that we have to do here with restraint and not with rejection seems to me to be the best proof of the fact that we are concerned with history, not with early Christian theory."

There was no temptation by the Devil scenario connected with Messianic expectations. So it can be assumed that the early church would not have had any reason to make up the story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. We may assume that the account is based on what Jesus told his disciples about his own temptation experiences.

In contrast to Paul's use of the typically first century view of children as childish (Cf. I Cor 14:20), Jesus' view was of the children as the childlike and he did not "keep out of reach of children." (Cf. Mark 10:15; Matt 19:13ff; Luke 18:15ff). According to John Stambaugh of Williams College and David L. Balch of Brite Divinity School (respectively professors of classics and New Testament), the authenticity of the gospels is supported by the fact that "Jesus' omission of 'fathers,' [Cf. Mark 3:31-35; 10:28-30; Matt 23:9] his valuation of a child, and his practice of calling women followers differ significantly from the patriarchal structures and values of Greco-Roman cities. However, within a decade or two after the crucifixion of Jesus, the movement had crossed the most fundamental division in Greco-Roman society, the gulf between village and city, between Capernaum and Corinth, and had absorbed urban attitudes toward fathers, children, and women very different from those of the earliest traditions."

And where, in the gospels, is there any trace of Paul's theology which was already circulating before the gospels were written? There is none. Instead of a Pauline-quoting Jesus we have a parable-telling Jesus. Yet Jesus' pedagogical use of the parable or riddle was not used a few years later at the time of the gospel writing. As Harrison comments: "Parables constitute the most common framework for the teaching of Jesus as found in the Synoptic Gospels. [But] this medium is strangely lacking in the literature of the early Church. Whatever may be the reason for this, it seems to show that there was no tendency to read the practice of the Church back into the ministry of our Lord."

Furthermore, if as liberals contend, the gospels read back into the time of Jesus the thought and agenda of the later Christian community, we would expect to see some endorsement of Gentile equality with Jews placed on the lips of Jesus. But we see in Jesus only rare contact with Gentiles, and that of "some reluctance," as Harrison puts it. Jesus is quoted as saying that he has been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt 15:24). As Harrison explains, "The Church's policy toward the Gentiles developed as a matter of the guidance of the Spirit rather than as something justified by the Master's instruction." W. D. Davies makes the same point: "It is of the utmost significance that the Apostle to the Gentiles was not able apparently to appeal to any specific word or act of Jesus during his ministry which would justify his championing of the Gentile Christians." It's well to keep this in mind today in our championing of gay Christians when we are pressed by our more conservative critics to find something very explicit in the Bible to justify our ministry. "Where does the Bible commend gay relationships?" they sneer. "Chapter and verse!" We must remember that, as with slavery, it can take the church almost two millennia to understand the guiding influence of the Spirit of God coupled with the push of general societal change." In all these years the Bible never changed—on the issues of slavery, for example—but the interpretations of the Bible have changed significantly.

The gospels contain no evidence that early Christians inserted their liturgy into their gospel witness of Jesus, even though Paul earlier did so in his letters. Even the so-called Lord's Prayer "contains no word or phrase that is explicitly Christian," as Harrison notes. The earlier Pauline account of the Last Supper (I Cor) was not written back into the gospel accounts of the Last Supper. Though each gospel puts great emphasis on the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, there is none of the already existing Pauline theologizing connected with these events as they are presented in the gospel narratives. The detailed emphasis in the gospels on the empty tomb of Jesus is preserved even though it had not figured in Paul's strong defense of the resurrection in his letters already in the archives of the new Christian assemblies.

The credibility of the gospels is also enhanced by the fact that they feature content that was clearly *embarrassing* to the purposes of the early Christians. As Charlesworth says: "Embarrassing data ... are preserved in the narratives—notably Judas' betrayal, Peter's denial, and Jesus' crucifixion. Such data shaped the Church; they were not created to serve the needs of the Church." According to the documentary evidence preserved by the early Christians, including the disciples themselves, the disciples were egotistically competitive, greedy, disloyal, stupid, and dull (Cf. Mark 9:33-37; 10:35-40). Historian Paul Maier notes that, as presented in their own gospels, the disciples "seemed to have one thing in common despite their varied backgrounds: a reliable dullness that hardly ever failed to misinterpret Jesus' message." Their preservation of data on their flaws, says Maier, "add[s] a convincing touch to the New Testament records."

And what about Jesus' other followers? What the gospels report in abundance about Jesus' view of and association with those designated "sinners" also lends veracity to the documents, for as even the liberal Oxford professor E. P. Sanders argues in his book, *Jesus and Judaism*: "The

church would not have created the description of Jesus' proclamation as being directed toward 'sinners.' ... It is unlikely that the church created from nothing the charge that Jesus associated with sinners." Sanders says that "The one distinctive note which we may be certain marked Jesus' teaching about the kingdom is that it would include the 'sinners' ... A high tolerance for sinners was not a characteristic of the early church." Nor was it in Judaism. Nor is it in the Moral Majority and in what Jerry Falwell ironically now calls his "Liberty" movement. As Sanders says: "Jesus said, God forgives you, and now you should repent and mend your ways; everyone else said, God forgives you if you will repent and mend your ways." Sanders goes so far as to aver that Jesus "may have offered [his hearers] inclusion in the kingdom not only *while they were still sinners* but also *without* requiring repentance as normally understood, and therefore he could have been accused of being a friend of people who indefinitely *remained* sinners. Here at last we see the full implication of the repeated observation that Jesus did not issue a call for repentance." It may be only on this basis that the Pharisees' opposition can be more completely understood, for as Sanders argues, "If Jesus, by eating with tax collectors [and other "sinners"] led them to repent, repay those whom they had robbed, and leave off practicing their profession, he would have been a national hero." There are important implications here for interpreting and analyzing the moral majoritarian preaching against various unpopular lifestyles.

And what about other "offensive" material about Jesus in the gospels? What about Jesus' baptism by John, for example? That event is not only preserved but celebrated as one of those times that Jesus is clearly identified as Son of God. And yet John's baptizing, as everyone knew, was "for the forgiveness of sins." (Cf. Mark 1:4f; Luke 3:3; Matt 3:6). Surely the primitive Christian community would not have invented the story of Jesus' being baptized as a sinner! From the earliest days of the church, this story has been seen as something of an embarrassment and yet it was preserved without apology. If the church left this one in, it is harder to believe that it made up the rest.

If the church rewrote the history of Jesus in order to push its own agenda, why did it leave in the gospels so much that was potentially embarrassing about Jesus? For example, the gospels present Jesus as saying that a word spoken against himself as Son of Man is forgivable (Matt 12:32) but that a word spoken against the Holy Spirit of God will never be forgiven. He is presented as saying that he doesn't know the "day and hour" of the future coming of the Son of Man (Mark 13:32), thereby admitting not knowing what preachers at any two-bit prophecy conference know today.

Another illustration of such potentially embarrassing material retained is the account of Jesus' very human agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. As Maier says: "If the story of Holy Week were a pious invention of writers who wanted to portray a superhero, this scene would never have been included." Harrison reasons, too, that "if the followers of Jesus were willing to include in the record such items which were capable of being turned against a supernaturalistic conception of His person, it is certainly arguable that there was no conscious manipulation of the data."

The evangelists report some of Jesus' sayings differently. But variations in Jesus' sayings can be attributed to his having preached much the same message from place to place for more than three years. And as Poythress observes, Jesus says different kinds of things to hostile listeners on the one hand and to disciples on the other. This sort of difference is more easily understood as reflecting history than as a consciously fabricated device of the writers.

Another example of that which is unlikely to have been invented is the fact that all four gospels attribute the discovery and report of the empty tomb to the testimony of women, the least credible witnesses of the first century. At the time, a woman had no right to bear witness because Genesis 18:15 was said to confirm that women are liars. Women could not even pronounce a benediction after a meal. Unless the gospel writers were simply trying to honestly convey what actually happened, why would they not have come up with more "credible" witnesses than the two Marys, Salome, and Joanna? (Mark 16:1; Luke 24:10; Matt 28:1).

This last illustration brings us to another kind of evidence for the trustworthiness of the gospel accounts: namely, that there are, throughout the documents, conflicts and discrepancies which surely would have been reconciled and smoothed over if anything but honest reporting and naturally occurring variations in eyewitness testimony were the agenda of the evangelists and their comrades. The accounts of the empty tomb illustrate this: one gospel says that the women at the empty tomb were two Marys, another that they were two Marys and Joanna, and another that they were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. With all the clear opportunity necessary and the understandable necessity within a hostile religious and secular world for the evangelists to consolidate their stories, they did not do so.

Princeton's New Testament scholar Bruce M. Metzger makes this point: "If the evangelists had fabricated the resurrection narratives, they would not have left obvious difficulties and discrepancies—such as those involving the number of angels at the tomb, the order of Jesus' appearances, and similar details. That the accounts have been left unreconciled without any attempt to produce a single stereotyped narrative inspires confidence in the fundamental honesty of those who transmitted the evidence." Every good detective, trial attorney and judge knows this.

It is not as though these difficulties remained for only the "enlightened" modern scholars to discover. From the beginning, they were recognized and were enough of an embarrassment to some early Christian leaders that attempts were made even then, notably by Tatian, to harmonize the witnesses. But it is significant that these harmonies did not replace the canonical documents—even before the canon was officially or ecclesiastically closed. They were left to stand as they were, on their own, as true eyewitness accounts.

In the Palestine of Jesus' day shepherds were hated as dishonest thieves and trespassers. And they often were just that. Yet the gospel of Luke says that it was to shepherds that angels announced the birth of Jesus and that these shepherds were the first to report to others their

eyewitness account of the newborn and were the first people to praise God for the birth of Jesus. The birth itself is presented as involving a virgin mother, yet in Judaism it was said to be the heathen who did not know who their father was. This potentially embarrassing fact of virgin birth became the basis for one of the most common rebuttals of Jewish polemic against the Christians in the early centuries of the Common Era. The followers of Christ were ridiculed for following a bastard.

Two of the four gospels are identified with less than respectable professions: medicine and tax collecting. The author of Luke/Acts is said to have been a physician. Physicians, however, were all said to be on their way to hell—a perhaps understandable conclusion in the days before anesthesia! They were also thought to be money-hungry, serving only the rich who could pay well for their services. In the case of the Gospel According to Matthew, even though as has been said we do not have good evidence on the person who compiled it, the early Christians were bold enough to claim that it was the work of Matthew, the tax collector. Among the Jews, tax collectors were despised as traitors, selling out their brothers and sisters to the greedy powers of the Roman Empire. What Rome did not pocket the tax collectors did. They were also thought to be ceremonially unclean for their contact with Gentiles and there was even a linguistic custom associating tax collecting with stealing. Furthermore, the Jewish authorities did not allow tax collectors to be valid witnesses. But not only is Jesus repeatedly presented as "a friend" of tax collectors and as having called a tax collector to be a disciple, but this very tax collector is identified as the witness of the longest of the gospels, the one especially aimed at Jews.

In less than a decade from now we can be observing the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus (December 1995 or January 1996), though it will probably not be observed until Christmas, 2000. Jesus was born in December of 5 BC or January of 4 BC. He was probably crucified on Friday, April 3, AD 33 and rose from the dead early on the morning of Sunday, April 5, AD 33. Most of what we know about him concerns his last three and a half years, from before Passover AD 30 to Passover AD 33.

Today we live in a world of some 5 billion people. Jesus was born into a world that altogether numbered only about 250 million, roughly the population of the United States today. Virgil's *Aeneid* and the *Ode* of Horace were the bestsellers among the Roman literati. Ovid was writing his poetry, Livy his history, and Strabo his geography. In Rome slaves were building the Pantheon and in Jerusalem priests were building Herod's Great Temple of Yahweh. Caesar Augustus was ruling the Roman Empire. The sundial and the Julian calendar were new inventions.

Ever since Joshua had led the children of Israel across the Jordan River about 12 centuries before, the Jews had controlled the land for fewer than 100 years. When Jesus was born, the land of the Jews was ruled by Rome's puppet, Herod the Great, dubbed "king of the Jews" by the Roman Senate. Although nominally a Jewish convert, Herod was seen as an outside Edomite by the Jews. They were poor and extremely over-taxed, longing for the release foretold by their

prophets who had been persecuted by their ancestors. Through the grinding centuries, "the chosen people" had suffered subjugation by Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and finally by Romans and they were looking for a messiah who would rise up to lead them in overthrowing Roman oppression. In 165 BC Judas Maccabeus had led a revolt now remembered at Hanukkah. This led to the Hasmonean line of priest/kings, finally wiped out by Herod. In 150 BC the Essenes started their own community down at Qumran on the Dead Sea, waiting in separation for a great intervention by God.

Well, who was this Jesus, this Y'shua as he was called in his native tongue? First of all, Jesus was a human being. He was a first century Jew who did not float a few millimeters above the dusty roads of Galilee. He was not a Greek mythological god masquerading as a peasant. According to evangelical theologian Bernard Ramm, Jesus "was not general man or universal man but was a particular man existing in his own right as a particular man. Jesus lived as his contemporaries lived. There was nothing supranormal in the conduct of his life. He appeared to his contemporaries as any other Jew would." Fuller Seminary's Ralph Martin agrees when he says that "nothing in Jesus of Nazareth compelled belief that in Him God was personally present."

In spite of the hard-won conclusions of the early church councils to which evangelicals pay lip-service, some of them can easily slip into some of the heresies condemned back then. Some people mistakenly think that Jesus was omnipotent and omniscient, but he would not have known what a television set was had he stumbled upon one come back from the future. He would not have been able to read the King James Version of the Bible for he did not know English, a language which, like the King James Bible, did not come along for many centuries after Jesus' day. People who don't know what the Bible teaches about Jesus fall into the heresies of Apollinaris, the Monophysites, and the Docetists which were roundly rejected by the early church. The amazing proclamation of the New Testament is that the enfleshment of God involved an *emptying* of the Son of God (Cf. e.g., Philippians 2:7).

The story of Jesus is no fairy tale. It does not begin with "Once upon a time" but with lengthy, even boring, genealogies (Matt 1:1-18; Luke 3:23-38). These lead to what only Matthew and Luke, among New Testament writers, present as the virgin birth of Jesus (Matt 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-28). Contrary to the way in which the virgin birth accounts have been used by fundamentalist apologists, the gospels do not present the accounts to prove that Jesus was the preexisting Son of God. As Westminster Seminary's John Frame explains, "The [biblical] writers draw no inference from the virgin birth concerning Jesus' deity or ontological sonship to God; rather, they simply record the event as a historical fact." But do they? This has been a theological hot potato for years, especially in the past century. Secularists and even some Christians such as Bultmann, who arbitrarily reject miracle, have rejected the virgin birth stories as common myth. They say that it always takes two to have a baby. Other Christians, such as Emil Brunner, reject the virgin birth because they say it does not allow for a full enough human nature in the incarnate Jesus Christ. On the other hand, Swiss theologian Karl Barth argues that the necessities inherent

in incarnation demand a literal virgin birth. Others, more influenced by the remnants of Greek categories and Victorian prudery insist on a literal virgin birth in order to avoid what they dread as carnal knowledge between the mother of Jesus and Joseph the carpenter. But evangelical theologian Helmut Thielicke thinks that insistence on a literal, biological virgin birth misses the point of the evangelists themselves. He says that "the virgin birth is theologically insupportable if it is meant to be a biological explanation." The American evangelical theologian Donald Bloesch grants what he terms "certain legendary elements" in the virgin birth stories in the gospels and says that the question of what is meant by "virgin birth" is basically a theological question rather than one of "historical-grammatical exegesis" of the Bible. Even the more rightward leaning Frame suggests in the *Evangelical Theological Dictionary* that when Matthew says that the virgin birth "fulfills" Isaiah 7:14 ("Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son ... ") it may be that Matthew is simply speaking in "aesthetic dimensions" and in "bizarre ways which the prophet himself might never have anticipated." Frame asserts further: "It is more likely that the event of the virgin birth influenced Matthew's understanding of Isaiah 7:14 than the reverse," thereby arguing again for the historicity of a biological virgin birth.

Whether we agree with the fundamentalist president of the Southern Baptists, Adrian Rogers, shouting: "I wouldn't give you half a hallelujah for your chances in heaven if you don't believe in the virgin birth!" (a view that quite cheapens grace) or with Thielicke's saying the "virgin birth is not fundamental to Christology ... [it's] an optional rather than an obligatory confession"—even Frame admits it's not a "necessary" dogma—it is obvious that affirmation of a biological virgin birth does not assure belief in Jesus as the only begotten Son of God. Mohammedans, for example, pay honor to the Virgin Mary without recognizing Jesus as other than a human prophet. A sex-negative Mary Baker Eddy extolled the virgin birth as a model for what she hoped could some day be achieved by all Christian Scientists, but she never taught that Jesus was the only begotten Son of God.

No matter what the gospel writers meant by virgin birth, today it is scientifically understood that a literal, biological virgin birth is not the impossibility the 19th century rationalists thought it was. A fascinating biological explanation has been lately superimposed on whatever the biblical documents may have been intended to mean. Edward L. Kessel (emeritus professor of Biology at the University of San Francisco, an emeritus curator at the California Academy of Sciences, and a Fellow in the American Association for the Advancement of Science—he'll need all those credentials for what you're about to hear) has written an article in the *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* (an evangelical scientists' professional journal) explaining a biological interpretation of the virgin birth of Jesus. Jesus' conception, gestation and birth, Kessel says, were accomplished by the Holy Spirit through the natural process of parthenogenesis. Based on the scientific knowledge that virgin-conceived offspring are chromosomal females, Kessel deduces that Jesus must have been conceived as a female and must have remained chromosomally female throughout life. Through the equally natural process of H-Y antigen translocation at about 7 weeks of embryonic age, Jesus began to show sex reversal toward the



male phenotype. Jesus thus assumed the anatomy of a male while retaining the XX chromosomal identity of a female. Jesus was thus neither an hermaphrodite, with a double set of sex organs, nor a pseudohermaphrodite, with defective sex organs. Jesus was androgynous in the unique way of being chromosomally female and phenotypically male at the same time.

Well, however one might want to use Kessel's explanation, let us move on. As indicated, Jesus was born in December, 5 BC or January, 4 BC. His birth is geographically and historically set in the gospels: "born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king" (Matt 2:1) "while Quirinius was governor of Syria" (Luke 2:2). He was the first-born son of Mary, a teenage girl engaged to Joseph, a building contractor at Nazareth in Galilee. Eight days after birth little Y'shua was circumcised (Luke 2:21) as was every Jewish boy. It was then that, as Luke says, the baby was named Jesus (Y'shua), a very common name of the day, by prior direction of the angel Gabriel. (Luke 1:31; 2:21). "Jesus" is the Greek form of the actual name by which he was known: the Hebrew or Aramaic "Y'shua" (Joshua) meaning "Yahweh is Savior" or "Jehovah is Salvation."

According to Leviticus 12, both mother and child were rendered ceremonially impure for forty days after the mystery of childbirth and so, for their purification, Luke the physician reports that after this period Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem and offered the poor peoples' sacrifice of two turtledoves as sin-offering. Mary and Joseph also presented the baby Jesus at the Temple for dedication of first-born son to God and Luke records that an old priest named Simeon and an old prophetess by the name of Anna praised God for the child and for his significance in God's plan of salvation.

Probably following all of this and certainly not at the manger with the shepherds as our Christmas tree creches depict, astrological magi or priests from the east, perhaps from Arabia or Persia, came to Jerusalem looking for an infant "king of the Jews." Herod was consulted about this and as this was his own title was naturally threatened by the news. True to form, Herod plotted to locate and destroy the infant. When his plot failed he murdered all the boys of Bethlehem under two years of age. In the meantime, Mary and Joseph had taken the six to twelve month-old Jesus and escaped out of Herod's jurisdiction to the well-ordered Roman province of Egypt, some 75 miles to the southwest.

After Herod's death and when it was safe, Mary and Joseph returned with Jesus and settled back in their obscure village of Nazareth. Luke says "the child *grew* and *became* strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him .... And Jesus *grew* in wisdom and *grew* in stature and in favor with God and people." (Luke 2:40; 52) Aside from the account of the 12-year-old Jesus discussing theology with teachers in the Temple (Luke 2:46f), Luke's two sentences of summary are all we have of Jesus' childhood in the canonical scriptures. Outside of these New Testament sources we find fanciful childhood tales of an almost spoiled-brat or bully Jesus using his magical powers to get his way, such as when, in the Gnostic *First Infancy* Jesus condemns another little boy to death for knocking him down.

The scene of the boy Jesus in the Temple is one of distraught parents finally finding their missing son after a 3-day search of the city of Jerusalem, overcrowded during Passover week (up from 50 to now 150 thousand people). His parents finally found him in the Temple, discussing theology with the religious teachers of the law. That this may have been one of the last places they looked could mean that he had been thought to be a rather ordinary 12-year-old boy. Mary scolded him: "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." Jesus looked up and may have now added to the young couple's exasperation when he said what are his earliest recorded words: "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49) But, says the text, his parents didn't understand what he meant (Luke 2:50). After this incident, we know nothing about the life of Jesus during the next twenty years. In general, we know little about Jesus' relationship to his family other than that, as put by Evelyn and Frank Stagg of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, "All four Gospels indicate a strained relationship between Jesus and his family. John 7:5 says explicitly, 'Not even his brothers believed on him.'"

The New Testament shows that Jesus grew and developed (Luke 2:40; 46; 51f) physically, emotionally, intellectually, socially, and spiritually. He got hungry, thirsty, tired, felt physical and emotional pain, desired human companionship and fellowship as well as time apart and in communion with God. He could be surprised, amazed, and astonished (Mark 6:6; Matt 8:10) He didn't know everything (Mark 13:32; Matt 24:36). He learned things by normal means of hearing, reading, studying, experiencing, practicing, and praying. Jesus' education was probably what he learned at the feet of Mary and Joseph and then at the local synagogue school. Evidently he did not attend a rabbinical academy (Cf. John 7:15). He was never "ordained" by the religious establishment. He learned the carpenter trade in his own father's shop in Nazareth.

Our Western sex-negative culture has made it difficult for us to deal well with sexual matters and this is certainly true in the case of any discussion we might attempt about the sex life of Jesus. Even in the most "spiritualized" form, terms suggestive of sexuality and Jesus have caused Christians to become quite squeamish. In efforts to express adoration for Jesus, Methodist hymnwriter Charles Wesley shocked his own brother John by calling Jesus his "Lover" to whose "bosom [he would] fly." John Newton, the Olney priest who wrote "Amazing Grace," called Jesus "my Husband," and "pious" editors later dropped this title from later copies of his hymns,—though Charles Spurgeon's hymnbook retained it. Some Christians today view as too sentimental Fanny Crosby's singing that she was "Safe in the Arms of Jesus, Safe on His Gentle Breast." If even these milder references to the Christians' adoration of Jesus are too difficult for some Christians, it is understandable that contemporary Christians find quite intolerable the Renaissance artists' habit of producing devotional imagery in which the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus were celebrated by emphasizing the fondling of the Christ Child's genitals and the penile erection of the Risen Christ.

Preachers say Jesus was tested in all points as we are because the Bible says so but they somehow don't feel comfortable if asked what testings of sexual feelings Jesus experienced.

Even when Bernard Ramm grants that process theologian Norman Pittinger raises an important point in this regard and acknowledges that "If sexual fantasies are part of our normal sexual maturing" (what does Ramm mean, "If") "then we need not deny them to Jesus," he immediately pleads "learned ignorance—*docto ignoranta*," to put it more remotely, on the basis of the "uniqueness of the incarnation." Would Ramm have needed so readily to make such a plea for "learned ignorance" if the speculation had focused rather on Jesus' fantasies about his favorite foods or his preferences in the matter of the flowers of the field?

One big question in this area is this: Did Jesus have sexual desires? Another is this one: Did Jesus ever marry? The New Testament is silent on these questions. But we know that it would have been extremely unconventional and even scandalous for a man to reach the age of 30 and not have been married. In Jesus' day girls and boys were married from the ages of 12 and 13 onward. There isn't even a word for "bachelor" in the Hebrew scriptures. Since the oral law of the Jews decreed that "An unmarried man may not be a teacher," if Jesus were not married, such a forbidden status would have been an easy target of his critics, the religious leaders, as he went about teaching. But we have no such record, either in the New Testament or in anti-Christian Jewish sources. Fuller Seminary systematic theologian Paul Jewett makes an interesting point on the subject though: "If Jesus was only and essentially a first-century Palestinian Jew, then in all likelihood he was married. But if he was the Word made flesh who dwelt among us (John 1:14), then in his person the Kingdom of heaven is present, the kingdom in which 'they neither marry nor are given in marriage' (Luke 20:34-36)." Jewett makes sense, but this does not fully account for the New Testament silence. So far as Jesus' own sexual experience is concerned, we just don't know.

It's important on this and any number of other matters pertaining to the psychological or experiential life of Jesus—whether sexual thoughts or the degree of self-consciousness he had and when he had it—that we really be careful to exercise a healthy agnosticism. We must not fool ourselves into thinking that we can know or figure out what it could have been like to be Jesus. The very fact of his incarnation precludes our identification with him in all ramifications of intra-psychic consciousness.

Do we know what Jesus looked like? Not really. Not exactly. But then, there's no good reason from the documents for us to think that he was in any way unusual in his appearance. Some interpreters, however, have thought that perhaps the taunt, "Physician, heal yourself!" was a possible allusion to a physical defect. Some people think that the Shroud of Turin was Jesus' burial sheet and if it was, his height would have been 5'11".

Since Jesus conformed to the ordinary conventions of his day, we may assume that he wore hard leather sandals fastened to his feet by leather thongs (Mark 1:7). He probably wore a linen turban to protect his head from the sun. It was the national headgear, fastened under the chin by a cord. His hair was probably black and was moderately long, with the forelocks at the ears uncut. He would have had a trimmed beard which he may have anointed with oil. His undergarment was a

rather good quality seamless tunic, a somewhat tight-fitting sleeveless shirt reaching to the knees. It was this tunic that the soldiers at the cross gambled to win. The tunic would have been worn with a leather or linen girdle that doubled as a purse (Mark 6:8). (This fact may frighten some fundamentalists.) Jesus' outer garment was a free-flowing, ankle-length caftan with the prescribed corner fringes which were reminders of the Lord's commandments (Mark 6:56; Matt 14:36; Cf. Numbers 15:38-40). The caftan could be plain or striped.

In Jesus' day, four languages were used in Palestine: Aramaic, Greek, Hebrew, and Latin. "Whether more Aramaic or Greek was spoken in Palestine is debated," according to Stambaugh and Balch, but it is highly probable that Aramaic was the most commonly used. Certainly Jesus would have spoken Aramaic, though probably he had a working knowledge of Greek since Galilee was a heavily Gentile area, and he would have known Hebrew in connection with the synagogue. He probably knew little Latin except for what would be found on coins and in the most conspicuous usage in public.

Jesus never had a birthday party since Jews didn't celebrate birthdays and he never had a Bar Mitzvah celebration since that arose in the Middle Ages.

His food was mainly wheat or barley breads. He also ate fresh broiled fish as well as dried or salted fish and a kind of catsup made from dried fish. He was familiar with lamb, kid, veal, and roasted locusts and probably drank both cow's milk and goat's milk. He drank wine and probably ate goat cheese, raisins, melons, some citrus, dates, figs, olives, honey, carob, eggs, lentil stew, cucumbers, pomegranates, almonds, pistachios, and grapes. Unlike his Gentile neighbors, Jesus of course never ate pork or shellfish.

The gospels focus on Jesus' last three and a half years—what are commonly called his years of "public ministry." Each of these three years was different: the first was a year of some obscurity, the second was a year of open opportunity, and the third was one of increasing opposition culminating in his execution.

His "coming out" as it were was his identification with those who were repenting of their sins and being baptized in the Jordan River by his cousin, the herald of Messiah, John the Baptizer. All four gospels retain the record of this event, even though Jesus' submission to John's baptism of repentance became an embarrassment in the early church. According to J. Ramsey Michaels, recently of the Gordon-Conwell faculty, "Jesus *does* come to John as an expression of his solidarity with sinners. But this solidarity is real; he is not simply pretending to be human. There is no reason to think that his reaction to the message of John, or his motives for seeking baptism, were different psychologically from those of the people who preceded or followed him into the water. He was touched by the Word of God, and because he actually *felt* the weight of his people's guilt, he came to the Jordan much as anyone else would come."

Immediately following the baptism, during which Jesus was somehow given God's assurance of their special relationship with each other, he underwent a severe time of testing during which he

resisted the temptation to use his powers for his own advantage. His trust in his Heavenly Father did not waver during this time of testing.

Here at the beginning of his public ministry, following his baptism and temptation in the wilderness, Jesus gathered four of the Baptizer's disciples—Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathaniel—and took them with him as he began to teach, cast out demons, and heal the sick. Today some people have trouble with the reports that he cast out demons and healed the sick. They say they've never seen a demon. They shouldn't get upset, the ancients never saw a virus. Remember that at a wedding at Cana Jesus is said to have turned water into wine. What can be said about such accounts of miracles? Here, for example, did Jesus literally turn H<sub>2</sub>O into a vintage wine? Neither liberals nor fundamentalists believe he did. Fundamentalists say he turned the H<sub>2</sub>O into a sort of grape flavor Kool-Aid. Liberals assume water never turns into wine, no matter who's around. We have no good reason to doubt the plain literal reality of the miracle accounts. They are presented in the same straightforward way the more "normal" events are reported. Unless we rule them out in this admittedly unique ministry simply because *we a priori* do not permit miracles in our idea of what should have taken place, we can accept them without explaining them away.

However, we must acknowledge that evangelical Christians take different views of miracles, though all would agree that Jesus performed them. Some "see miracles as objective events that give irrefragable proof of divine intervention," as Colin Brown of Fuller Seminary explains, while others "believe in the possibility of miracles, but do not think that it is possible to offer hard historical evidence to show that every biblical miracle really happened in such a way as to compel belief." Brown goes on to argue that "The point at issue is not whether Jesus performed miracles, but whether miracles may be regarded as objective, historically testable evidence, which compels assent and which thus serves as independent 'supernatural credentials' for Christianity. ... For [the miracle stories about the turning of the water into wine, the stilling of the storm, the raising of the widow's son, etc.] we do not have the same degree of scrutinizable testimony that we have for the resurrection. ... it is beyond our capability to corroborate them [and] ... we cannot get away from an element of decision over whether to believe or disbelieve." But might not these miracles for which we do not have such evidential data borrow credibility from the evidential data on the resurrection?

It would seem that about this time Jesus went on a series of pilgrimages to Jerusalem. On one of these visits for Passover he demonstrated his disgust over the "bazaars of Annas" in the Temple's court of the Gentiles. Annas' high priest's family ran a rip-off of the pilgrims through these bazaars. Jesus responded by overturning some of the tables of the dove inspectors and sellers. He condemned what he called the turning of His Father's house into a crass money-hungry operation when it was to have been a house of prayer for all people. As the Glasgow Bible teacher William Barclay comments: "Jesus' ejection of the money-changers and the sellers of doves demonstrates his passion for social justice. His anger was kindled to a white heat at the sight of simple people cheated, swindled, imposed upon by clever and rapacious scoundrels. ...

There is an even deeper condemnation here: there is the condemnation of anything which hinders ordinary people in their search for God. Into the Court of the Gentiles all nations and all people might come. To the Passover there came not only Jews from all over the world, but also people from many other nations, for Jerusalem was one of the wonders of the world. Many must have come to the Temple with a sense and hope that perhaps there they might find God; and instead they found a swaying, disputing, bargaining mob, and an atmosphere in which devotion was impossible." Barclay pointedly concludes: "Any who render the search" for God more difficult must face the anger of Jesus.

Jesus preached through the Judean countryside even while John the Baptizer was still conducting his ministry of baptism and call to repentance in view of the coming of Messiah. That even John, however, was not sure about Jesus' identity is evident by his sending from prison for word from Jesus about who he was. In response, Jesus sent back word of the healings and liberation of the demoniacs.

During what was perhaps his second year of ministry in Capernaum Jesus healed a young male "companion" and dear special servant to whom, as South African Reformed scholar Norval Geldenhuys puts it, a Roman centurion was "particularly attached." He continued to heal others, but not everyone was pleased with what he was doing. When he continued to heal even on the sabbath he ran afoul of the religious authorities. He also went on teaching, as a rabbi, in parables or riddles about the kingdom of God.

People today sometimes miss the point of the gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry when they erroneously think of Jesus simply as some sort of religious or ethical teacher. Some have defined him as a Pharisee, an Essene, a magician, a prophet, a teacher of morality, or a deluded apocalyptic fanatic. But our 'texts—both biblical and extra-biblical—do not support such ideas. Jesus did teach and work miracles, but he cannot be defined simply as just another rabbi or miracle-man.

In Luke and in Mark (4:32; 1:22) we read that when Jesus spoke, he did so "as one who has authority" and not as the scribes who would cite precedents. He was not in the habit of "footnoting." Even so, it may be clear as Jewish scholar Joseph Klausner has said that "throughout the gospels there is not one item of ethical teaching which cannot be paralleled either in the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, or in the Talmudic and Midrashic literature of the period near to the time of Jesus." Other Jewish scholars such as David Flusser, Pinchas Lapide, and Israel Abrahams do say, though, that Jesus' ethical teaching on loving enemies is unique. But Jesus cannot be understood simply as another rabbi teaching the same things or even adding a new ethical plank to Judaism. When Jesus read the Hebrew scriptures in the service at his hometown synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:18) he did not simply read and give a standard exposition as he would be expected to do. He conflated passages from Isaiah 61:1, 58:6 and 61:2 and then sat down to explain that these Messianic prophesies had just been fulfilled in the hearing of the congregation. As Ramm states: "his teaching cannot be separated from his

person." Yale historian Kenneth Scott Latourette writes: "It is not his teachings which make Jesus so remarkable. ... It is a combination of the teachings with the man himself. The two cannot be separated." He went on to teach that a person's relationship with *him* would be decisive on Judgment Day (Matt 7:21ff; Mark 10:29; Matt 25:31-46).

By the third year there was escalating opposition from the religious authorities—the scribes or theologians of the Law, the legalistic Pharisees or "separated ones," and the wealthy high priests. This was a year of waning enthusiasm among the people, due in part to the opposition of their religious leaders and also to Jesus' demands for self-denial and total dedication among his followers (Mark 8:34-38; 10:21f; John 6:60ff).

One day, while walking along with his disciples in the region of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked who the people thought he was. His disciples replied with various theories and labels of those who observed from a distance. Jesus then asked: "But who do *you* think I am?" Peter's impulsive answer: "The Messiah!" Jesus granted that his Father had revealed this to Peter but warned that Peter's interpretation was too orthodox. The old prevailing ideas about a triumphant military Messiah were wrong. When Peter objected to Jesus' unorthodox views Jesus strongly rebuked him: "Out of my sight, Satan!" Jesus began there to explain how his Messiahship was not what was popularly expected but would involve his suffering and death (Matt 16:20f; Mark 8:30f; Luke 9:21f). He apparently then spent less time with the multitudes and more time teaching within his intimate circle of disciples who all proved to be rather resistant and dull until after Jesus' resurrection and Pentecost.

Modern secularism, liberalism and fundamentalism all tend to oversimplify the claims and therefore the identity of Jesus. The former simply assume he made no outlandish claims to be in any way God and they ridicule those who disagree with them. The latter simply assume that he did make even outlandish claims to be God and they condemn those who disagree with them. But the evidence from the biblical texts is neither so utterly poor as the secularists and liberals insist nor as simplistically explicit as the fundamentalists insist. But it's there.

Speaking as an informed and conservative evangelical scholar, Donald Bloesch states: "There is no simple equation of God and Jesus, but neither can there be any separation. God has united himself with the manhood of Jesus, and yet deity remains forever distinct from humanity." Bloesch's statement is not only the testimony of the Bible but of the historic church councils. "God did not change into a man as in Greek mythology," says Bloesch. "Instead, the Son of God adopted human nature and united it with his divine nature in the unity of one person." Admitting that "Too many Evangelicals see the incarnation as a theophany, the visible appearance of God in human form, and therefore the divinity of Christ as something self-evident," Bloesch calls attention to the fact that "we have to remember that God was in Christ incognito, that deity is hidden in his humanity."

As evangelical believers we must not insist on explanations of incarnation that go beyond the Bible or our own abilities to understand. With Peter, we may all need to do some revising of old conventional ideas. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, Philip Melanchthon, Luther's closest companion, was disgusted by an overly scholastic speculation on questions of the precise nature of the person of Christ and we dare not even today insist on levels of detail more precise than the great minds of the Reformation saw their way clear to explore. The Dutch theologian G. C. Berkouwer says: "Who can penetrate into the unfathomable mystery of [hypostatic union of the God-man]? But the idea is not to penetrate that which simply passes our comprehension but to accept the message of Scripture which distinguishes for us the power of Christ from the omnipotence of God ... and the knowledge of Christ from the omniscience of God." Says Ramm: Because the incarnation "is an event that happens from the divine initiative there is that aspect of it not available to human understanding. It cannot be totally clarified."

Well, can we say that Jesus is presented in the Bible as having *claimed* to be God? Certainly at the beginning of his ministry, as we learn from Mark's early gospel, he muzzled all acknowledgments of his deity. But as Ralph Martin of Fuller Seminary emphasizes: "Throughout His public ministry the Lord deliberately made no overt claims to His divine nature and status. The 'hiddenness' of Mark's christological portrait is an outstanding feature."

Today, Jesus is called "The Messiah" by fundamentalists, Jews for Jesus, and fans of G. F. Handel. But according to evangelical expositor William Lane, the question of the Sanhedrin in Jesus' final week (Mark 11:28) "proves that Jesus had never said openly that he was the Messiah, the institutor of an entirely new economy, or even a prophet." Instead of misleading the people into thinking that he was a political savior, Jesus repeatedly referred to himself as the "Son of Man." The title "Son of Man" was itself a kind of riddle, but by his use of it his hearers were forced to ask fresh questions instead of assuming stale answers. Bruce explains that when Jesus spoke of the Son of Man, his hearers' response really had to be "'Who is this Son of Man?' (Cf. John 12:34)—and the answer to that question could be found only in what he said about the Son of Man .... the designation was sufficiently flexible for him to give it what meaning he chose." At the same time, we recognize that, as Fuller Seminary's Donald A. Hagner reports, even "the majority of modern Jewish scholars conclude that Jesus believed himself to be the Messiah." Hagner adds that "Without exception, of course, it is held [by these Jewish scholars] that on this point Jesus was deluded."

Was Jesus the "Son of God" or "merely," as some misunderstanding secularists would say it, the "Son of Man?" Both liberals and fundamentalists who do not understand the biblical meanings of the titles "Son of Man" and "Son of God" often stupidly fight over the designations, liberals pushing "Son of Man" as if it meant mere humanness and fundamentalists pushing "Son of God" as if it meant clear deity. But these are erroneous notions. As James D. G. Dunn of the University of Durham says of the latter: "there was nothing particularly unique about calling someone 'son of God' at the time of Jesus" and as biblical scholar Ethelbert Stauffer says of the former: "Son of Man ... [was] just about the most pretentious piece of self-description that any man in the ancient



East could possibly have used." Ramm says of "Son of God" that it was "a transitional title on the way to the affirmation of the deity of Christ" and of "Son of Man" that it defies any systematic representation. According to Martin, there is "no evidence [that] clearly shows that 'Son of God' was ever applied to the Messiah in rabbinic Judaism." Bruce adds that for Jesus to have accepted the title Messiah "did not encroach on the prerogatives of God; neither did the claim to be Son of God in *that* sense." Bruce points out that the "Son of Man" statement before the high priest (Matt 26:64), however, "did appear to be an invasion of the glory that belongs to God alone. It was there that blasphemy was believed to lie." In John 10:34 Jesus replied to religious rulers seeking to stone him for blasphemy: "Is it not written in your Law, 'I said, you are gods?' [Psalm 82:6]" This he said after having said "I and the Father are one." With an *a fortiori* argument for affirming his own status, Jesus then asks: "Do you [then] say of him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming' because I said I am the Son of God?" It is to be noted that Luke, in his genealogy, calls Adam "the son of God."

In the biblical texts, Jesus' self-consciousness is depicted by his knowledge of a very special relationship as Son of the One he repeatedly called his own Father (Cf. Matt 11:27). Paderborn's Otfried Hofius writes that Jesus "evidently never called God the father of Israel. He spoke of God as his Father ('my Father') and as the Father of the disciples ('your Father'). But he never joined with them together in a common 'our Father' (the Lord's Prayer is a prayer for the disciples to use!)."

Jesus "was intensely aware," as Bruce notes, "of a constant and peculiarly intimate filial relationship to God." The image of God as "Father" is used only 14 times in the whole Old Testament, "a comparatively marginal conception" as one scholar has said. In contrast, Jesus uses it over 150 times—in his discourses and in all of his prayers except one, his cry on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34; Matt 27:46) According to the New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias, "there is no evidence that anyone in first century Palestinian Judaism ever addressed God as 'my Father.' But Jesus did just this." And Jesus went even beyond this level of intimacy in his relations with "his Father." He addressed his Father as "Abba." In Jesus' Aramaic, *Abba* means "Daddy." The word is not found in the Hebrew Old Testament. Nor is it found in the Septuagint. *Abba* is the phenomenon of reduplication of the initial syllable (ab), a universal in the chatter of infants, e.g., *dada*, *mama*, *abba*, *imma*. Says Hofius: "Nowhere in the entire wealth of devotional literature produced by ancient Judaism do we find *abba* being used as a way of addressing God. The pious Jew knew too much of the great gap between God and man (Eccl 5:1) to be free to address God with the familiar word used in everyday family life." This intimate term of address underlies the various Greek versions of Jesus' address to his Father. As Jeremias says: "... with the *Abba* we are behind the *Kerygma* [preaching of the church]. We are confronted with something new and unheard of which breaks through the limits of Judaism. Here we see who the historical Jesus was: the man who had the power to address God as *Abba* and who included the sinners and the publicans in the kingdom by authorizing them to repeat this one word, 'Abba, dear Father.'" According to the great Gerhard

Kittel's *Theological Wordbook of the New Testament*, Jesus introduced "something which is wholly new" when he addressed his Father as "Abba."

Martin well observes that when it comes to an investigation of Jesus' claims of deity, "The lines of evidence are more indirect and inferential than forthright and declarative. Jesus did not parade His divine relationship nor bludgeon His hearers into submission by a display of His deity, nor make (at least in the Synoptics) overt claims to divinity. The nearest there is to the last-mentioned feature is the Fourth Gospel's record of His use of the magisterial I AM." Even in the episode of Jesus' standing before the Sanhedrin and hearing the high priest ask if he is Messiah (Mark 14:62), Jesus "replied in terms which," as Bruce asserts "probably meant, 'If that is the language which you insist on using, then my answer must be "Yes;" but if I may choose my own language, this is what I say: 'You shall see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Almighty and coming with the clouds of heaven.'"" Bruce adds: "This is the last recorded occasion on which he used the designation 'the Son of Man.'"

But as J. A. T. Robinson of Cambridge states: "It is impossible to escape the conclusion that [Jesus] went around not just talking *about* God (that would not have provoked the reaction he did) but standing in God's place, acting and speaking for [God]. ... Yet the one who is seen is utterly and completely *a man*," as the priests say (John 10:33). Jesus did not so much claim in so many words to be God as he acted as though he was God (John 5; Matt 28:18ff). His actions spoke louder than words. Repeatedly, *this* rabbi substituted "Thus sayeth the Lord" with his own "Truly I say to you"—prefacing rather than concluding with "Amen." Repeatedly, *this* rabbi overruled and re-edited the scripture, the Law: "You have heard that it was said to the men of old (i.e., said by God) but I say to you" (Matt 5:33). Jesus even "demanded transgression of the law: the demand to the man whose father had died. Otherwise the material in the Gospels reveals no transgression by Jesus." Sanders continues: "he did not consider the Mosaic dispensation to be final or absolutely binding ... he issued at least one law for a new order: the prohibition of divorce." Repeatedly, *this* rabbi arrogated to himself the prerogatives of God, forgiving sins in his own name! (Mark 2:10). He invited people to come to him for life and rest, to trust him in the same way they would trust God (John 14:1); he is shown as picturing himself presiding at Judgment Day (Matt 7:21ff; 25: 31-46; John 5:22-30).

We can well trust that Jesus did in fact behave in these ways since the evangelists' report is so obviously restrained from what they were otherwise willing to say on the basis of their firm later belief in Jesus' being God in the flesh.

No wonder all the sources agree that Jesus was condemned by the Jewish religious establishment for blasphemy (Cf. Mark 14:63f; Matt 26:65; Luke 22:23; John 10:33ff; John 19:7). Even the Talmud, compiled by the Jewish religious establishment between 70 and 200 AD, states: "On the eve of the Passover Yeshua was hanged [Cf. Gal 3:13; Luke 23:39] ... because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy."

Jesus' final condemnation before the religious rulers in Jerusalem was the culmination of their opposition all along. The religious establishment was very proud of its pedigree, records of which were safeguarded in the Temple archives. The priests and scribes, Pharisees and rabbis all sought control over the consciences of the Jews. The wealthy polygamous priestly aristocracy was filled with self-righteousness and though Jesus never directly attacked the priestly system as such, he did rebuke individual priests. The religious leaders did not permit marriage to "harlots." But by "harlots" they meant all proselytes, manumitted slaves, and even women who had been raped. The rabbis often viewed even married non-Jewish women as harlots. No wonder they balked when Jesus said that harlots were being welcomed into his Father's reign ahead of them.

The rabbis were the religious *teachers*. Jesus himself was addressed as rabbi (Matt 26:25, 49; Mark 9:5; 11:21; 14:45, etc.)—actually as "Rabboni," in the Aramaic. He forbade his disciples to be called rabbis, for there was, according to Jesus, only one Teacher (Matt 23:8).

The scribes were the legalistic theologians who expanded the Mosaic Law or Torah so that all their own oral teachings became more important than the Law itself (Mark 7:5ff). They opposed Jesus (Matt 21:15) at least in part out of resentment that the people were recognizing an authority in Jesus' teaching that was not seen in their own fumbling citation of precedent and fine print (Mark 7:28f). Jesus was addressing the scribes when he said in disgust: "The world will come to an end before you give up the tiniest part of your traditional interpretation of the law!"

There were probably some 25,000 Pharisees in Jesus' time, most of whom resided in Jerusalem. They posed as "separated" custodians of morality but Jesus often repudiated them as mere pretenders to morality (Matt 15:7f; Mark 7:6f; Luke 13:15). He said that hypocrisy is the leaven of the Pharisees" (Luke 12:1). In but one chapter of Matthew's gospel (the 23rd), there are seven times when Jesus pronounces: "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees—hypocrites!" He called them everything from devourers of widows' property to oppressors of conscience, blind guides, self-indulgent thieves, whitewashed tombs, laughable fools, snakes, and sons of hell who neglect the weighty matters of justice and mercy. Their retaliation was now only a matter of time and calculated opportunity.

Very much of the everyday teaching and behavior of Jesus was just too much for the religious leaders to stomach. In Matthew's account, Jesus is depicted as saying that a (gay?) Gentile centurion had more faith than anyone in Israel. Matthew says that Jesus added that many non-Jews will come from east and west and take the places of Jews at the feast with Abraham Isaac and Jacob. While these non-Jews are enjoying heaven, the Jews they replaced will be in hell. According to Robert Gundry of Westmont, "The severity of this warning to Israel has no equal in rabbinic and apocalyptic literature." Trinity Evangelical Divinity School scholar D. A. Carson notes: "Matthew's words stress even more than Luke's the uniqueness of the centurion's faith [for example] and underline the movement of the gospel from the Jews to the Gentiles. Since Matthew's gospel was put together by a Jew and was basically addressed especially to other Jews, the strength of this warning is evidence of its authenticity. And it is not only in Matthew

that the non-Jewish centurion is honored. As Barclay says, "Every centurion mentioned in the New Testament is mentioned with honour."

Jesus made the hated Samaritan the good guy and the priest and Levite the bad guys in his riddle about the mugging on the Jericho road (Luke 10:29-37). That certainly didn't endear him to the priests and Levites. It would have been like an evangelical Presbyterian church today sponsoring a play in which the plot concerned a subway mugging where the one who saves the day is a Roman Catholic lesbian and those deserting the victim in his time of need are fundamentalist TV preachers. How would that play in Lynchburg? The same way the story of "The Good Samaritan" went down with the leaders of Judaism is the way the story of "The Good Lesbian" would go down with the leaders of fundamentalism today. (The Jews, by the way, were wrong about the Samaritans being "half-breeds." In all likelihood they were actually pure-bred Israelites who, because of their earlier history, were now worshipping at Mount Gerizim instead of at Jerusalem. This may illustrate the folly of a too-cock-sure fundamentalist interpretation of the spiritual status of gay Christians today.) In his conversation with the Samaritan woman—something that was itself unconventional—Jesus rejected the claim that either Gerizim or Jerusalem was superior to the other place of worship (John 4:1-42).

Although in Mark (1:44) the cleansed leper is told by Jesus to show himself to a priest and to make the required offering, this is the only case of such ritual prescription from Jesus. This was very early in his ministry. And since the leper, as such, was no transgressor, the incident "highlights," as Sanders says, "the lack of any such statement [of ritual prescription] to the tax collectors and other sinners." Instead, Jesus went right ahead and associated closely with people who were ritually unclean. Sanders notes that so did most of the people most of the time. It was the religious establishment, the professionally "pro-moral," that shunned the ritually unclean. Jesus accepted defilement of women, disregarding the commands of Leviticus (15:19-32). Jesus told a parable in which Lazarus was ritually unclean because he was being licked by animals and yet Jesus pictured him in Abraham's bosom (Luke 16:19). Jesus was ready to enter a Gentile house, an act of ritual uncleanness (Matt 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10). Jesus picked a tax-collector as a disciple, certainly not something that a separatist Pharisee would have done. Jesus made following him more important than the Fifth Commandment in the case of the would-be follower who wanted first to bury his father (Matt 8:21f; Luke 9:59f). Jesus' followers didn't observe religious fasts (Matt 9:14-17; Mark 2:18-22; Luke 5:33-39).

Sanders observes that "Jesus' message [itself] to sinners presumably further discredited him in the eyes of the *normally pious*." What was Jesus' message to followers that Jeremias says "consisted predominantly of the disreputable, [the 'sinners'], ... the ignorant, whose *religious* ignorance and *moral* behavior stood in the way of their access to salvation, according to the convictions of the time?" As the New Testament documents make plain: Judaism offered forgiveness to the reformed, the righteous, while Jesus offered it to "sinners."

TV preacher Jimmy Swaggart has said that he would not give "two cents for a church full of sinners." Jesus collected sinners as friends. Jesus was known as "the friend of sinners." But let's remember that this was an accusation by the moral majoritarians of the day (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:34). Can you imagine Jimmy Swaggart being accused of being "the friend of sinners?" Is Jerry Falwell in danger of being known as "the sinner's friend?" Sanders says: "The one distinctive note which we may be certain marked Jesus' teaching about the kingdom is that it would include the 'sinners.'" To the religious establishment of his day, Jesus' "kingdom" was more like a "kinkdom." In the words of the 19th century Episcopal bishop of Massachusetts, Phillips Brooks: "In the best sense of the word, Jesus was a radical. ... His religion has been so long identified with conservatism—often with conservatism of the obstinate and unyielding sort—that it is almost startling for us sometimes to remember that all of the conservatism of his own times was against him; that it was the young, free, restless, sanguine, progressive part of the people who flocked to him." As true as this description is, we must not take it too far in a "revolutionary" direction, politically, for while what Jesus was preaching was indeed *revolutionary* in certain terms, it was not the revolutionary plan of the Zealots, terrorists, and other politically "restless" Jews of the day.

Sanders says that "No one would have been offended if Jesus converted quislings [e.g., tax collectors, usurers]. The case with other 'sinners' is similar. ... The notion that the conversion of sinners was offensive to the Pharisees is, when thought about concretely, ridiculous." Sanders explains that "By ordinary Jewish standards offenses against fellow humans required restitution as well as repentance (Cf. Leviticus 6:1-5 [Hebrews 5:20-26]; Numbers 5:5-7). Other offenses were atoned for by repentance alone. While the temple stood—that is, in Jesus' time—repentance would be demonstrated by a sacrifice ... . It may have been just these requirements that Jesus did not make of his hearers. He may have offered them inclusion in the kingdom not only *while they were still sinners* [as Paul says] but also *without* requiring repentance as normally understood, and therefore he could have been accused of being a friend of people who indefinitely *remained* sinners. Here at last we see the full implication of the repeated observation that Jesus did not issue a call for repentance ... " A modern parallel can be seen in the fundamentalist requirement that all homosexuals, in order to be forgiven and in order to participate in the life of the church, must repent of their homosexuality and become "ex-gays." In the view of fundamentalists of our day, nobody who claims forgiveness who continues to engage in even the most faithful and loving gay relationship is recognized as being truly forgiven.

According to Sanders, "the novelty and offense of Jesus' message was that the wicked who heeded him would be included in the kingdom even though they did not repent as it was universally understood—that is, even though they did not make restitution, sacrifice, and turn to obedience to the law. Jesus offered companionship to the wicked of Israel as a sign that God would save them, and he did not make his association dependent on their conversion to the law. ... If Jesus added to this such statements as that the tax collectors and prostitutes would enter the kingdom before the righteous (Matt 21:31), the offense would be increased. The implied self-

claim, to know whom God would include and not and the equally implied downgrading of the normal machinery of righteousness, would push Jesus' stance close to, or over, the border which separates individual charisma from impiety." Sanders says that "Jesus offered the truly wicked—those beyond the pale and outside the common religion by virtue of their implicit or explicit rejection of the commandments of the God of Israel --admission to *his* group ... *if* they accepted him .... Jesus did not call sinners to repent as normally understood, which involved restitution and or sacrifice, but rather to accept his message, which promised them the kingdom. This would have been offensive to normal piety."

But even his own followers—the intimate inner circle—had some of the same trouble with his words and deeds as did the leaders of organized religion. John 6:66) records the grumbling desertions among his disciples. When Jesus said they would have to eat his flesh and drink his blood these literalists were repulsed. Jesus asked: "Does this offend you?" The reaction of Peter (Matt 16:22), Barclay notes, "must have sharply reminded Jesus once again that the course that he was following was a flat contradiction of all accepted Jewish messianic hopes and dreams and expectations. ... If [Jesus] went on, he went on to the death. If he went on in this way, he was the direct contradiction of all that men expected the Messiah to be."

His death—as a result of all this pride and anger of the religious establishment—was inevitable. He had gone too far to escape the retaliation of organized religion bent upon its own self-righteousness. Jesus himself knew he was headed for execution, there was now no turning back; he himself had chosen that route.

Lately, in a spirit of ecumenicity and in a well-intentioned effort to combat centuries of vile anti-Semitism which has monstrously labeled every Jew in the history of the world a "Christ-killer," there has been a tampering with the historical texts to rewrite the gospels and blame Jesus' crucifixion entirely on Rome. No Roman delegation exists today for inclusion in "inter-faith" services nor is there a Roman lobby to object to such casting of blame. In the modern revisionist effort, it has been exaggerated that no Jew had any part in the crucifixion, as though there was not one Jew in all of Jerusalem or within a thousand miles of the city at Passover, 33 AD. In a very similar way, some older Germans and Japanese today would have us believe that they were all born after World War II and had absolutely no part in any atrocities that took place during the war. Segregationist fundamentalists of the 1950s and 1960s now would have us all believe that they never supported the oppression of black people. All of this is understandable, normal human nature but it does not deal honestly with historical facts.

There are propagandists today who claim that the gospels present a deliberately anti-Semitic picture of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus, that the evangelists fabricated the stories to make their fellow Jews look bad and the oppressive Romans look good. But this rewrite of the historical gospels by modern "ecumenists" overlooks too much. The followers of Jesus who wrote the accounts of the trial and execution of Jesus, had no reason to whitewash Rome's blame and magnify the blame of Jews. The writers themselves were Jews. The victim on the cross was

a Jew. It is true that those Jews who followed Jesus were increasingly discriminated against by the Jewish religious establishment, socially and economically, but both as Jews and as followers of Jesus all of them were oppressed subjects of Rome. They were all increasingly persecuted, tortured, and executed by Rome. The earliest gospel, Mark's, is thought by some to have been written precisely in order to encourage Christians—including many Jews facing Roman persecution.

To be sure, no Jew not directly involved historically in the trial and execution of Jesus is a "Christ-killer" in the sense meant by the peddlers of hate, just as no German not directly involved historically in the Nazi atrocities is a "killer of 6 million Jews." Moreover, the Bible makes it very clear that nobody took Jesus' life from him; he laid down his life voluntarily (Cf. John 10:11-18; John 6:51; Mark 10:45; Matt 20:28; Acts 2 and 3). Both the narrative and theological exposition in the New Testament supports this. As it is stated in what certain propagandists have erroneously called the most anti-Semitic gospel, that of John: Jesus said, "No one takes my life away from me, but I lay it down on my own initiative." (John 10:18) It is John who reports Jesus as saying that "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (10:11) This is repeated more than once in the following sentences of the gospel.

It should also be kept in mind that the Bible, over and over, teaches that Jesus' death is connected to the sins of the whole world, not to the actions of his executioners.

There is no honest getting around the fact that the only available historical documents indicate that, as Barclay says, "The opposition to Jesus is consistently connected with the scribes and Pharisees (Matt 12 :2, 14; Mark 2:16; 3:6; Luke 6:2, 7; 14:3) ... Jesus was hounded to his death by the most fanatically religious people of his day, by men who genuinely believed that they were serving God and protecting the rights of God by killing him." What the records show is totally believable when seen in the context of the ages-old bent of organized religion and its predictable and ruthless oppression of anyone and anything that threatens its identity and agenda.

As historian Paul Maier reminds us, "even purely Jewish rabbinical sources and traditions require the death penalty for Jesus of Nazareth, such as *Sanhedrin 43a* of the Babylonian Talmud which states that he 'shall be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy.' And almost all scholars agree that in 62 AD, only 29 years after Good Friday, a stunning near-parallel occurred: the high priest [Ananus] and the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem stoned to death James, the brother (or relative) of Jesus and first Christian bishop of Jerusalem in the *absence* of the Roman governor Albinus, who was later so angry at this execution that the high priest was deposed. [All of this is according to the Jewish historian, Josephus.] The Talmud, moreover, heartily agrees with the New Testament in its evaluation of Annas and the sacerdotal aristocracy of Jerusalem in the time of Jesus. Early Jewish traditions about Jesus were gathered also in a fifth century compilation called the *Toledoth Jeshu*, which freely assigns all responsibility for Jesus' conviction to" the priests, hardly even mentioning Pontius Pilate." And why not? Devout Jews willingly took the credit for getting rid of an out-and-out blasphemer:

Such an account, by the way, is not the way the historical Christian creeds said it. It isn't the way Christians around the world and throughout every day throughout Christian history have recited it: professing faith in Jesus Christ "who was born of the virgin Mary, *suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified dead, and buried ...* ."

The Sadducees were aristocrats whose "hatred ... was based on self-interest. In Jesus they saw a threat to their privileges; therefore Jesus must go." The moralistic Pharisees were offended by what they saw as Jesus' lawlessness and they were stung by his many rebukes. They concluded that he must be done away with. The Herodians, too, had their reasons to oppose Jesus and his message of a kingdom they could interpret as a threat to their cozy accommodation with Rome. No matter what theological problems these various parties of Jews had with each other, they were able to put them aside in order to accomplish their common goal: to get rid of Jesus. And so far as the priests were concerned as Barclay says, "Either Jesus had to go, or the whole sacrificial system had to go." It was the powerful chief priests, the administrators of the Law as Josephus confirms, that "were the prime movers in the death of Jesus," as Sanders says, for as Falk notes, it was the "High Priest who was in charge, under Rome, in political matters and perhaps also in matters of capital offenses."

"The Pharisees honestly and sincerely believed [Jesus) to be a bad man and an evil influence on other men," as Barclay says. "The Sadducees wished only to remove a possible threat to their civil and political power and social standing. The priests were determined to eliminate a teacher whose teaching spelt the end of their perquisites and of their spiritual dictatorship. " Barclay continues: "Jesus cut across blind and rigorous orthodoxy, political and social ambition, ritual and spiritual aristocracy; and so men came to the conclusion that he must die."

Contrary to Jewish law—it was in the middle of the night—Jesus was brought to the high priest. Joseph Caiaphas on whom the later Talmud would pronounce woes for his "serpent-like hisses." The cunning and calculating Caiaphas confronted Jesus with this question: "Are you the Messiah? Are you the Son of God?" Jesus replied, according to Mark: "I am," according to Matthew: "You have said so," and according to Luke: "You say that I am." These versions of Jesus' reply should be compared with Jesus' reply to Judas when the traitor asked if Jesus meant that it was he who would betray Jesus: "You have said so." (Matt 26:25) "Jewish custom," as Maier notes, "discouraged a bald Yes or No to questions of grave import:" Here Jesus seems not to be practicing what he himself preached to his disciples, that they should give straight-forward replies, "Let your yes be *yes*, your no be *no*. (Matt 5: 37) But Jesus had also told them not to give to dogs what is holy. (Matt 7:6) Some people do not deserve the plain truth stated directly because that isn't really what they're after. Later during this ordeal at the end, when Herod Antipas asked Jesus idle questions Jesus is said to have remained silent (Luke 23:9).

Contrary to Jewish law, Caiaphas is said to have torn his high priest's robe to express his indignation. He knew very well what Jesus meant, and he called it blasphemy. As St. Augustine would say many years later: "The Jews understand what the Arians [Unitarians, for example]



cannot grasp." When at dawn Caiaphas sought a verdict from the Sanhedrists seated in their semi-circle of judgment it was probably 69 votes "guilty" and 2 abstentions from Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. At that point, had Judea not been in Roman hands, Jesus would have been stoned below the eastern walls of Jerusalem. But capital punishment was reserved for Roman authority and so Jesus was brought by his prosecutors, the Jewish religious leaders, to Pilate, the Roman governor.

Barclay says: "In their private trial of Jesus the Jewish charge against Jesus was a charge of blasphemy, the charge that he had claimed to be the Son of God (Matt 26:65; Mark 14:64; Luke 22:71). But that was not the charge on which they brought him to Pilate. When they brought him to Pilate the charge was: 'We found this man perverting our nation, and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ a king.' (Luke 23:2). That was almost certainly a charge concocted by the Sadducees, for they knew that Pilate would never listen to a charge of blasphemy, which would have seemed to him a mere matter of Jewish religion, but that he was bound to listen to a charge of political insurrection." The charges were lies clearly designed to alarm Pilate.

Since Pompey conquered Palestine in 63 BC, there had already been dozens of serious uprisings put down by brute Roman force. In one year alone, the year of Jesus' birth, 2,000 terrorists had been crucified in Jerusalem under the order of the Roman governor of Syria. But that the Jewish religious leaders as well as their lay collaborators did not really believe Jesus to be a traitor to Rome is proven by their demand that Pilate release an *actual* Zealot, Barabbas. To the religious leaders, Jesus was a blasphemer; to the people who hated Roman oppression and who wanted a real revolutionary released to them, Jesus was of no use whatsoever.

Jesus' trial before Pilate probably took place in the esplanade of the lavish Palace of Herod on the western edge of old Jerusalem on Friday, April 3, 33 AD. For two years, the emperor Tiberius had sought to comply with the wishes of the Jewish authorities in the Sanhedrin. As Stambaugh and Balch state: "In defense of his position, therefore, Pilate seems to have had to proceed rather gingerly in dealing with the high priest and his associates. This may explain his conduct at the trial." A few months before, the often tactless Pilate had already encountered Tiberius' impatience with him for antagonizing the Jewish leaders who had reported him for affronting them with his inscribed golden shields. Caiaphas' men were saying in effect: "If you release Jesus you're no friend of Caesar's. You'll be in trouble again with Tiberius because we'll report on you again." It did the trick. They blackmailed Pilate into executing "king" Jesus.

To carry out their plan these religious leaders had to conceal their real reasons, coordinate their lies with their theological rivals, and break the Mosaic law in falsely witnessing against Jesus (Mark 14:56; Matt 26:59f; Luke 23:2). These fiercely monotheistic radicals who said they owed all allegiance to Yahweh King of the Universe and who attacked Jesus and wanted him executed for "making himself God," had no apparent trouble in shouting their allegiance to Caesar: "We have no king but Caesar!" while pressing the prosecution.

Pilate finally "washed his hands" of the affair and turned Jesus over to the will of the priests, sending Jesus to execution outside the old walls of the city, at the place of execution on the site of an abandoned limestone quarry. The place was a rocky outcrop of a hill called Golgotha, not half a mile from the Temple altar.

There Jesus was executed by means of crucifixion, a killing process Cicero called "the cruelest and most hideous punishment," and therefore never used on Roman citizens. Death by crucifixion was slow, finally coming by asphyxiation after the victim could no longer keep from suffocating under his own weight as he hanged from the cross to which he was nailed or tied. Victims would often curse back at their tormentors. Maier reminds us that they'd "try spitting on them, or urinate triumphantly in their faces, as in the case of the slaves crucified after the Spartacus revolt." But all of this is in contrast to what we know of Jesus' endurance on the cross. He prayed for his executioners, asking his dear Father to forgive them for not knowing what the hell they were doing in carrying out the orders of powerful figures looking after their own selfish advantages. Jesus ministered tenderly to a criminal being executed on a cross beside his own. He asked his friend John to look after Mary as if she were John's own mother and asked his mother to look after John as if John were her own son.

His dying was as misunderstood on the day of crucifixion as is the dying of people with AIDS today. He was dying as an outcast, judged by the self-righteous religious establishment to be getting the punishment he deserved. He was seen as the degenerate, the one gone disgracefully wrong who now had to pay. His family did not understand. Certainly his friends did not. And what about Jesus? Did he himself fully understand, now for the first time not communing with his "Abba" but crying out in anguish from the cross: "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?"

Socrates is said to have drunk the cup of death calmly, serenely discoursing with his disciples on the immortality of the soul while his "inferior" body was dying and thus freeing his "superior" non-physical soul. In contrast, Jesus sweats blood, begs his Father to let the cup of death pass from him, pleads with his disciples not to leave him alone, and cries out in anguish from the cross. In the Jewish mind, in the biblical view, as New Testament scholar Oscar Cullmann explains, "Death is not something natural, willed by God, as in the thought of the Greek philosophers; it is rather something unnatural, abnormal, opposed to God. The Genesis narrative teaches us that it came into the world only by the sin of [humankind]. Death is a curse, and the whole creation has become involved in the curse." As Paul says, death is the universal payment for sin (Romans 6:23). In Christian theology, the penalty of every sin of every man and woman was borne by Jesus on the cross. In this framework, his agony in the face of death must be grasped.

Sometimes it took days to die on a cross, but within a few hours Jesus' terrible ordeal was over. Pilate was surprised that Jesus was reported dead so soon. Before allowing Jesus' body to be taken down, Pilate ordered his officers to make sure that Jesus was actually dead. That

established, the body was purchased by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, two closeted believers within the Sanhedrin. They did this so that the corpse would not wind up as vultures' food on the city's garbage dump in Gehenna, the biblical picture of hell. They took the body to Joseph's newly cut rock cave tomb and placed it there on a long narrow ledge within. Then they rolled the stone seal shut. This garden tomb was only some 150 feet from Golgotha and is not to be confused with the so-called Garden Tomb associated with Gordon's Calvary, shown to tourists ever since it was erroneously identified as biblical Golgotha by the gay 19th century adventurer, General "Chinese" Gordon.

The previously more open disciples were now nowhere to be seen. They were all back in their closets locked in fear, confusion and bitter disillusionment. They were sadly assessing that Jesus could not even save himself; he would now never be the Messiah of their high nationalistic hopes.

But within seven short weeks of the arrest of Jesus, Peter's three-time denial, Jesus' crucifixion and the disciples' hiding behind locked doors, they were not only no longer cowering in fear and dejection but were publicly proclaiming Jesus to be the Messiah, the Christ, as Peter was doing at Pentecost. Peter himself would go on proclaiming Jesus as Lord for another two decades before being killed in Rome for his faithing. Others of them, too, would meet violent ends for their faith: Stephen would be the first, stoned by religious fanatics as the Pharisee Saul (later Paul) stood by approvingly. James, John's brother, would follow in turn, beheaded by Herod Agrippa I in 44 AD. Jesus' own half-brother James, apparently not a believer until after the crucifixion, went on to preside at the first church council in Jerusalem where he led the assembly of Christians and wrote his Epistle, and as we've said, was stoned to death at the hands of the high priest Ananus in 61 AD. Peter's brother Andrew would go on to be martyred in Achaia. Thomas and Bartholomew may have gone on to martyrdom in India. Philip perhaps in Hierapolis, Mark in Alexandria, Barnabas in Cyprus, Paul in Rome. Among the few who would go on to serve their Lord into old age and finally escape enemy swords at the time of their deaths were Matthew, Luke and John.

What changed these men from their having been dull and selfish associates of Jesus, then cowardly and disillusioned former disciples, into defiers of the chief priests and Rome, even when it meant torture and death? What caused these fiercely monotheistic Jews to proclaim that all the fullness of Yahweh was in Y'shua and that at the name of Y'shua every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Y'shua is Lord, to the glory of God the Father? (Phil 2:10f Cf. Rom 14:11; Isaiah 45:23) Paul, who as the Pharisee Saul had superintended the arrest and persecution of Jesus' followers, now was saying that old biblical Hebrew references to Yahweh were really references to Y'shua.

It is a psychological truism that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior unless there is a significant intervening fact. Clearly their new behavior was not their old behavior, so what was the significant intervening fact? New Testament scholar Oscar Cullmann says: "We should

for once simply listen to what the New Testament says. Christ the first-born from the dead! His body the first Resurrection Body, the first Spiritual Body. Where this conviction is present, the whole of life and the whole of thought must be influenced by it."

Well can all of this about an empty tomb and 40 days of appearances of the Risen Christ, as the New Testament reports, be believed by men and women about to move into the 21st century? Hold on. The earliest inclination to discount the resurrection was that of the women exploring the empty tomb on the very first Easter morning. The next attempt at explaining it away was that of the disillusioned male disciples later that day. Another early explanation was the one concocted by the chief priests and elders. After bribing the Temple police who had been stationed at the tomb to prevent the disciples from stealing the body of Jesus, the religious authorities fabricated a story about the disciples' stealing the body while the guards were asleep on duty. For many years afterward, the Jewish religious apologists were sending specifically commissioned liars all around the Mediterranean to combat the proclamation of resurrection with the accusation that the original disciples had stolen Jesus' corpse. Thus we see that hostile "Jewish polemic shared with Christians the conviction that the sepulcher was empty," as Maier states. He goes on to point out that "such positive evidence from a hostile source is the strongest kind of evidence."

If the disciples had invented the account of the resurrection, is it believable that such a lie and conspiracy could account for the dramatic changes in their lives? They all continued as absolutely transformed men and women, most of them for many years and very often through persecution, torture and death in isolation from one another's support and notice. None cracked. We can be sure that their many enemies would have grabbed hold of any recantation and published it widely. There were many opportunities for last minute confessions when facing the flames. No. A conspiracy is not believable. Chuck Colson, former Presidential aide to the man Barry Goldwater calls "the most dishonest man" he's ever known and a man not unacquainted with conspiracy and lies has said: "With the most powerful office in the world at stake, a small band of hand-picked loyalists, no more than ten of us, could not hold a conspiracy together for more than two weeks."

But some say Jesus never was killed on the cross; he only "swooned." While such fantasies are rejected by careful scholars, the "swoon" theory still surfaces from time to time in such pop religion books as *The Passover Plot* and *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*. Even a scholar such as the author of *Honest to God*, John A. T. Robinson—no flaming fundamentalist—says that if readers were more aware of the rigors of historical research such books "would be laughed out of court." Says archaeologist James Charlesworth of Princeton: "Such a position [as the "swoon" theory] cannot derive from sane and critical reflection; it emanates from polemics." Those fully aware of both the pathology of crucifixion and the professionalism of the Roman executioners of thousands of crucified prisoners find the "swoon" theory naive and illiterate.

Another attempt to explain away the resurrection accounts is to say that the disciples were sincere in their testimony but that they were all hallucinating. Such an idea does not fit what we

know today in psychopathology. Hallucinating persons do not become psychotics in unison and then go on to effective leadership in pastoral, theological, and organizational tasks. Besides, the disciples were not even looking for a resurrection. They were disillusioned with the way Jesus' ministry had turned out and were going back to life "as usual." The resurrection interrupted their plans.

Some try to discredit the resurrection accounts by pointing to variations in the documents on it. But as historian Paul Maier notes: "actually, the variations in the resurrection narratives *tend to support, rather than undermine, their authenticity*. They demonstrate that there were several independent traditions stemming from some event which must indeed have happened to give rise to them. And the fact that they were not harmonized by some ancient church editor shows that there was no agreed upon—and therefore partially fabricated—version."

The conviction that Jesus was now alive was, for each of the disciples, a very personal one. In fact, it seems that it was only after each disciple had personally seen the risen Jesus that each became convinced that Jesus was indeed alive. The empty tomb alone had not been sufficient for that. Recognizing the risen Jesus was connected with a very intimate point of contact. At the tomb, Mary Magdalene did not recognize him until his use of personal address "Mary"—the first recorded word of the risen Christ. His intimate act of the breaking of bread with the two disciples along the Emmaus road opened their sad eyes to joy. His personal invitation to Thomas to touch him dispelled doubt. Jesus had not been really *seen* until after the resurrection.

At one time these monotheistic Jews were thought to be virtual atheists by their polytheistic neighbors. Even the name of their God was so sacred that they used circumlocution to get around pronouncing it. But now these same Jews were risking and accepting death in order to proclaim that all the fullness of Yahweh their God was bodily in Jesus (Col 2:9). All of the evidence allows us to conclude that it was this unexpected but profoundly life-transforming experience of the resurrection of their teacher that accounted for the change in their lives.

In Jesus' day, as in our own, the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. On more than one occasion Jesus used a version of this proverbial saying when he warned: "Whoever have will be given more and they will have abundance. Whoever do not have, even what they have will be taken away." (Matt 13:12; 25:29) To the humble faithful who have received knowledge of the reign of God, more will yet be given, while the proud who try to justify themselves and lord it over others will be deprived even of what spiritual benefit they may once have had. Jesus said: "Cast out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matt 25:30) Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah saying this was being fulfilled as he himself taught in riddles" in order that 'while seeing they may see and not perceive; and while hearing they may hear and not understand, lest they return and be forgiven.'" (Mark 4:12; Isaiah 6:9ff) This at first seems harsh. But it's plain that there were clearer ways of presenting his teaching than in riddles. Even the disciples had trouble understanding them—and were still looking for a nationalistic kingdom right up to the hour of Christ's Ascension from the Mount of

Olives. Jesus is saying here that at least one reason for his use of such riddles is to guard the secret from the careless misappropriation of his enemies, the willfully persistent unbelievers. Discernment of the secret is had only in discernment of the Person of Jesus Christ. Jesus *who?* Jesus, the Christ. It is awareness of who he is and what that means that unlocks the secret. He is the Secret and he is the Revelation. He is God's Word to us,—a Word in flesh.

We are people of the good news, the gospel. Without the historical Jesus we have no good news, no good word. The good news is not that "gay is good" but that God is good and that, in Jesus Christ, God's good Word, we are made good by God. We have heard the best news, that, somehow,—and there's still much mystery about it, thus we faith, we trust—but somehow, almost 2,000 years ago now, in the ancient hills and villages of Galilee and Judea, and then especially on one world-changing weekend at Jerusalem in April, AD 33, Yahweh, the God of the universe was in this Y'shua, in Christ, actually accomplishing our reconciliation to God. (II Cor 5:19) Thanks be to God.