

# THE JESUS SEMINAR, JESUS, AND HIGHER CRITICISM—PART FOUR

by Dr. John Ankerberg and Dr. John Weldon

## What Are the Unjustified Assumptions of the Jesus Seminar?

Once the biblical Jesus is safely disposed of, we need not worry about His claims on our life or the possibility of our own judgment in the next life for rejecting Him now. Perhaps more than any other factor, this explains why liberal scholars adopt such unjustified assumptions in their treatment of the biblical text, e.g.,

**There are at least 10 important areas in which the JS adopts assumptions and perspectives that are widely held in non-evangelical scholarship but which need to be challenged. Those assumptions include: (1) The authors of the four canonical Gospels are not Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, as traditionally believed. (2) None of these four Gospels were written before the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. (3) The oral tradition of Jesus' sayings was quite fluid. Simple teachings were often greatly expanded, embellished, and distorted in the process. (4) Various people in the early church, including the Gospel writers themselves, felt free to invent sayings of Jesus that had little or no basis in what He actually taught. (5) If a saying can be demonstrated to promote later Christian causes, it could not have originated with Jesus. (6) The historicity of John's gospel is extremely suspect. (7) Historical analysis cannot admit the supernatural as an explanation for an event. Therefore, Jesus' words after His resurrection—like His earlier predictions about His death, resurrection, and return—cannot be authentic. (8) Jesus never explained His parables and aphorisms. All concluding words of explanation, especially allegorical interpretations of parables and metaphors, are thus inauthentic. (9) Jesus never directly declared who He was. All such "self-referential" material (in which Jesus says, "I am..." or "I have come to..." ) is therefore also inauthentic. (10) The burden of proof rests on any particular scholar who would claim authenticity for a particular saying of Jesus and not on the skeptic.<sup>28</sup>**

Thus, as *Newsweek* comments, "According to this elaborate academic protocol [i.e., the methods of higher criticism], the Resurrection is ruled a priori out of court because it transcends time and space."<sup>29</sup> And,

**...even the most orthodox Scripture scholars recognize the brief, almost enigmatic accounts of Jesus' resurrection and its aftermath are fraught with special problems for the historian. For one thing, there were no witnesses to the Resurrection.... For another the post-resurrection stories contain a variety of factual discrepancies about the main characters, places, times and the messages attributed to the Risen Jesus .... In short, the post-Resurrection narratives are ambiguous stories allowing ample room for historians to imagine what really took place.<sup>30</sup>**

The above quotations illustrate the seemingly endless distortion of historical methodology and historical fact that one finds not only among liberal theologians but also in the treatments of Christianity in the popular press. There is no legitimate reason for the historian to discard a genuine miraculous event just because it is a miracle. As long as it happened *once*, it is history. Hence, there is no reason to discard the resurrection and attempt to explain the origins of Christianity by other means, especially when those means raise far more problems than the resurrection itself. In addition, the fact that no one actually saw Jesus rise from the dead inside the tomb is irrelevant if hundreds of people saw Him on

many occasions outside the tomb later. One does not need to witness or explain the specifics of an event in order to know whether or not it occurred. No one sees the evaporation of surface waters that in the end produces clouds in the sky. Yet no one doubts those clouds are real entities containing millions of tons of water. To suggest even the slightest doubt concerning the factual nature of the resurrection because no one actually witnessed the very moment Jesus rose—in light of both the nature and kind of the post-resurrection appearances—is nonsense. It's as absurd as denying the holocaust because we can't produce the body of Adolph Hitler. Reliable eyewitness testimony in both cases proves what happened.

In a similar fashion, to argue that the accounts in the Gospels concerning the resurrection are brief and almost enigmatic is just not true. "Of all the miracles of Christ, the Resurrection receives the most careful and extensive coverage in the Bible. If the Gospels are historically accurate, then the most carefully documented event in the Gospels should be accurately reported."<sup>31</sup>

Finally, to speak of *factual* discrepancies, ambiguous stories, etc., that allow for all kinds of philosophical latitude in approaching the resurrection accounts is simply careless reasoning. As we demonstrated (as have many others in more depth) in *Do the Resurrection Accounts Conflict?*, there is not a single provable contradiction or "factual discrepancy" in the four accounts of the Gospels. Indeed, as biblical scholar Murray Harris points out, "When we remember that countless 'facts' of ancient history rest on the testimony of a single literary witness, this fourfold literary testimony to the emptiness of the tomb becomes a powerful argument."<sup>32</sup> And as Robert Coleman correctly points out concerning the evidence for the resurrection, "It is the kind of firsthand, objective evidence that would stand in a court of law."<sup>33</sup> We also documented this in the above book (and our *Knowing the Truth about the Resurrection*), by citing numerous first-class lawyers of past *and present* who agree that the truth of the resurrection would stand cross-examination in a modern court of law.

### **Should It Be the New Testament That Is Rejected or Liberal Scholarship?**

Consider another statement from *Newsweek*, "Unfortunately, apart from what is found in Scripture, there is little that one can say about the identity of Jesus."<sup>34</sup> Besides being false,<sup>35</sup> even if it were true, why should anyone think this unfortunate? On what historical, rational basis can anything the New Testament writers say be rejected? Why this unwavering bias against the writings of four men that have, for 2,000 years, been proven to be the writings of honest historical reporters? Has even a single argument against their accuracy withstood the test of time? No. Here we have four accounts, two of which (Matthew and John) were written firsthand by eyewitnesses who spent three years with Jesus Himself and knew Him intimately. The other two, Mark and Luke, received their information from the Apostles and were written with great care by men whose integrity is unassailable. These four accounts have been subjected to the most vigorous criticism for 2,000 years by some of the world's best and most critical intellects who have yet to make their case. The writers themselves declare that they were either eyewitnesses to the events recorded or that they took pains to research and write with care and accuracy exactly what did happen. The Apostle Luke told Theophilus, for example, in composing his biography of Jesus, "I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning... so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (Lk. 1:3, 4). In referring to his entire gospel, the Apostle John ended his biography with these words, "This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We *know* that his testimony is true" (Jn. 20:24).

John was so confident in the accuracy of his gospel that he made this bold statement publicly even to those most eager to disprove it. The Apostle Peter, from whom Mark received the information for his gospel appealed to eyewitness testimony, “*We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty*” (2 Pet. 1:16). Peter’s comment could almost be considered a personal rebuke to the participants in the Jesus Seminar.

As the noted biblical scholar F. F. Bruce remarks,

**There is, I imagine, no body of literature in the world that has been exposed to the stringent analytical study that the four gospels have sustained for the past 200 years. This is not something to be regretted, it is something to be accepted with satisfaction. Scholars today who treat the gospels as credible historical documents do so in the full light of analytical study, not closing their minds to it.<sup>35a</sup>**

What more could the Christian ask for? What more does the critic want?

The writings of the Gospels themselves bear the “ring of truth” by what they report and the manner by which they report it. Yet, somehow, we are told that such writings are *not* to be trusted. And on what basis? Largely because of the widely disseminated, entirely false conclusions of the liberal theologians in books such as Burton Mack’s *Who Wrote the New Testament? The Making of the Christian Myth* and radical endeavors such as the Jesus Seminar.

Here is the real truth. If we discard the Gospels as accurate history, then, as a result, because of the basis upon which we can document their historicity, we must quite literally throw out every other ancient historical document. And which of our critics and liberal scholars are willing to do *that*? When it comes down to it, not one. As Dr. Montgomery recalled on “The John Ankerberg Show”:

**Last week we mentioned a debate that I had some years ago with Professor Stroll at the University of British Columbia. Professor Stroll said that the documents of the New Testament were simply not adequate to get a picture of Jesus. And I offered evidence to show that these documents are the best attested documents of the classical world. I said, “If you want to give up Jesus Christ, you first of all have got to dump your knowledge of the classical world.” Professor Stroll said, “Fine. I will throw out the classical world.” At which point the head of the classics department got up and said, “Good Lord, Avrum, not *that*!”**

**You can’t just toss out Greco-Roman antiquity because you don’t want to face the documents that present Jesus Christ. Last week we went over these documents and we showed that these documents are sound historical materials for understanding who Jesus actually was.<sup>36</sup>**

And *here* is the real Jesus: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12). “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (Jn. 14:6). Jesus commanded men to love Him in the exact same way that they love God—with all their heart, soul, and mind (Mt. 22:37-38). Jesus said that God the Holy Spirit would bear witness of Him and glorify Him (Jn. 16:14). Jesus said that to know Him was to know God (Jn. 14:7). To receive Him was to receive God (Mt. 10:40). To honor Him was to honor God (Jn. 5:23). To believe in Him was to believe in God (Jn. 12:44-45; 14:1). To see Him was to see God (Jn. 8:19; 14:7). To deny Him was to deny God (1 Jn. 2:23). To hate Him was to hate God (Jn. 15:23).

In Matthew 25, He said that He would actually return at the end of the world and that He Himself would judge every person who ever lived; that He would personally raise all the dead of history and that all the nations would be gathered before Him! Who ever said *that*?

He would sit on His throne of glory and judge and separate men from one another as a shepherd does the sheep from the goats (Mt. 25:31-46, cf. Jn. 5:25-34). Just as clearly, Jesus taught that every person's eternal destiny depended upon how they treated Him (Jn. 8:24; Mt. 10:32).

All these statements and many more like them, leave us little choice. Either Jesus was who He said He was—God incarnate—or else He was absolutely crazy. But who can believe *that*?

In time, the conclusions of the Jesus Seminar and indeed, all liberal, critical biblical "scholarship," will be relegated to the *circular files* of rationalistic, historical skepticism. *Time* magazine itself questioned what the final outcome of the Jesus Seminar would be four or five years from now, e.g., "their areas of agreement, thus far, have largely been in the negative, and their respective rescued Jesuses vary considerably." Crossan himself confesses that in the end, "There could be hopeless disagreement."<sup>37</sup> It might be begging the question, but what other conclusion could one logically expect from the kind of subjective approaches, biased research and dismal scholarship we find in the Jesus Seminar?<sup>38</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

29. Woodward, p. 65.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

31. Fernando, *The Supremacy of Christ*, p. 343.

32. Fernando, p. 248 citing Harris, *From Grave to Glory*, p. 107.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 248.

34. Woodward, p. 70.

35. cf., Gary Habermas, *Ancient Evidence for the Life of Jesus*.

35a. Foreword in Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1987), p IX.

36. Transcript, "Jesus Christ: Was He a Liar, a Lunatic, a Legend or God?", (Chattanooga, TN: The John Ankerberg Show, 1988), pp. 7-8.

37. Van Biema, p. 59.

38. Those who desire a more detailed refutation should consult the anthology of Michael Wilkins, J. P. Moreland, eds., *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (Zondervan); Gregory Boyd, *Cynic, Sage or Son of God?: Recovering the Real Jesus in an Age of Revisionist Replies* (Victor) and N. T. Wright, who until recently taught New Testament at Oxford University, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, a 600 page scholarly text which among other things, demonstrates that Christ's bodily resurrection has a sound historical basis. (Wright has also written a 40 page critique of the Jesus Seminar, cf., N. T. Wright, "The New Unimproved Jesus," *Christianity Today*, Sept. 13, 1993.)