

LOOKING FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS

IN BETWEEN EVANGELICAL AND LIBERAL SCHOLARSHIP

SEAN FINNEGAN

My Conundrum

I entered the mammoth façade of my local Barnes and Noble and found my feet carrying me directly to the Christianity section. Once at my destination, I stood before the familiar shelves, half filled with what I call “real” books and the other half with “inspirational.” I cocked my head to the side and began scanning titles in an effort to see what was new. After a few minutes I noticed an Asian girl in her twenties standing next to me. I glanced over and saw that she had a quizzical look on her face. This was her second or third time passing through this aisle since I had been there. In an effort to be helpful I asked her if I could assist her in finding something. She told me that she was brand new to Christianity and wanted a book explaining the faith. My first feeling was one of excitement at the idea of recommending a good book to form her idea of Jesus accurately. But then, before I could even smile, a sudden feeling of ineptness swept over me. I knew the kinds of books that were on these shelves. There were only two types of books to choose from: the evangelical, Jesus-is-God genre and the liberal, deconstructionist, Jesus-is-a-failed-prophet type. Naturally she would be interested in a book on Jesus but I was at a complete loss as to how to steer her.

I could tell her to read Bart Ehrman’s *Jesus: The Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, which certainly would get Jesus’ emphasis on the kingdom right but sadly would involve her in a world of skeptical, contra-supernatural notions that in the end lead to the conclusion that Jesus was a failed prophet. Or I could advise her to read Chuck Swindoll’s book called *Jesus* which does well with the supernatural but also starts out by showing that Jesus was no “mere man” but God in the flesh. In the end I gave her our website and instructed her to read the Bible because that is the only book I knew of that the store sold which would accurately portray Jesus.

Is there a way out of this dilemma? Is it possible to believe in the inspiration of Scripture and in the historical Jesus of Nazareth? Who is the actual Jesus? In order to answer these questions we will survey both evangelical and liberal scholarship on Jesus in an effort to place our movement. Are we evangelical? Are we liberal? Are we neither? My proposition is that our Abrahamic movement is

walking the line between these two massive mountains of scholarship. But, before we take a look at the data, we need to define some terms.

It is necessary in an article of this length to simplify things. For the sake of this presentation, “evangelicals” are those who adhere to the orthodox¹ brand of Christianity and believe that the Bible is reliable as a source for historical information about Jesus. For our purposes here, the label “liberals” applies to those who do not believe Jesus literally rose from the dead and believe that the gospel accounts of Jesus need to be parsed and sorted to isolate the historical sayings and deeds in an effort to reconstruct Jesus as he really was. I am a student of Scripture and scholarship alike who has observed a certain polarization in the incredible plethora of books being pumped out on history’s most fascinating person — Jesus of Nazareth. I do not think either of these camps has the complete truth of the matter but both have seized upon certain aspects of it. It is my ambitious desire to survey both sides, offering praise as well as criticism of each, and then propose a way forward by combining bits from both paradigms to forge together a better view of Jesus than either has done on its own.

The Good News about Evangelical Scholarship

Evangelical scholarship has been on the rise in America for decades. Many evangelicals now hold positions in the top colleges in the United States. Furthermore, just as the “New Atheism”² movement has been emerging, evangelical philosophers have been busy at work on the question of God’s existence. Notable contributors have presented some excellent arguments using science, logic, ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology to establish that there is a God and one does not need to commit intellectual suicide in order to believe in Him. Catholic Philosopher Peter Kreeft of Boston College has enumerated twenty arguments for God’s existence in his *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*.³ Alvin Plantinga at the University of Notre Dame lists more than a dozen arguments⁴ for God’s existence and has written extensively countering typical atheistic arguments such as evolution and the problem of evil.⁵ In an effort to be brief, we will only look at three of the major arguments commonly used today.

The first is based on the tremendous fine tuning of the thirty or so physical constants of the universe (i.e. gravitational constant, mass of an electron, etc.).

¹ I.e. belief in a literal resurrection, the Trinity, etc.

² Richard Dawkins, Daniel C. Dennett, Sam Harris, etc.

³ Available on Peter Kreeft’s site (http://www.peterkreeft.com/topics-more/20_arguments-gods-existence.htm)

⁴ Lecture Notes entitled “Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments” available at <http://philofreligion.homestead.com/files/Theisticarguments.html>

⁵ His review of Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, called *The Dawkins Confusion* is available from Christianity Today: www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2007/002/1.21.html

These numbers are so precisely balanced that if any one of them were tweaked by the smallest bit, life would not be able to exist in the universe.⁶ “Over the past thirty years or so, scientists have discovered that just about everything about the basic structure of the universe is balanced on a razor’s edge for life to exist. The coincidences are far too fantastic to attribute this to mere chance or to claim that it needs no explanation.”⁷ But before the universe came into being there was literally nothing! Thus, the only rational solution is to posit a being outside of the physical universe who “fixed” the numbers to be what they in fact are.

Our second argument in favor of the God hypothesis involves the idea of cause and effect. Scientists are now certain that the universe had a beginning — a definite point in time in which matter, space, and even time sprung into existence. If the universe has a beginning it is an effect and must have a cause. But, we cannot look within the universe for the cause because the universe itself did not exist until it was caused. Furthermore it will not do to say that some impersonal process caused it to come into being because processes do not just decide one day to do something.⁸ The only rational solution is to say that an immaterial mind, outside of the universe brought everything into being.

The third argument is based on morals. Ravi Zacharias has shown that without a law giver there can be no moral law (or standard) by which one may distinguish good from bad. In other words, if God does not exist then one is not capable of saying that it is morally superior to serve the poor than it is to torture children for the fun of it. Nevertheless, we all agree that some things are really wrong (like torturing children for entertainment). Therefore, there must be a moral law and thus a moral Lawgiver. Of course there are many more reasons to believe in God, including the incredible level of complexity and design⁹ evident in living organisms, miracles, human consciousness, personal experience, and so on.

However powerful and convincing these reasons are which point to God’s existence, we must admit that they do not tell us whether or not the God who exists is the God of the Christian Bible. In fact, one could argue for the distant

⁶ Stephen C. Meyer, “Evidence for Design in Physics and Biology” in Michael J. Behe, William A. Dembski, and Stephen C. Meyer, *Science and Evidence for Design in the Universe*, San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000, 60.

⁷ This quotation is by Robin Colins who holds two PhDs: one in physics and one in philosophy. Lee Strobel, *Case for a Creator*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2004, 131.

⁸ If a process is the beginning agent then the universe would have always been here.

⁹ An argument for God’s existence that has been around for quite some time (at least since the 18th-century watchmaker argument of Sir William Paley) demonstrates the existence of God by arguing the case for a Designer given the complexity and design of living organisms. Recently the evolutionist Francis S. Collins, the leader of the international Human Genome Project, has seen evidence for God’s existence in DNA. His book is titled *The Language of God*.

God of deism or even the pantheon Hindu deities from these same types of arguments. This is where the evangelical scholars have done ground-breaking work on the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. If one could show that the thesis, “God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead,” is true, then he would be able to identify the Creator as the God of Jesus, the God of the Jews. A strategy has now been developed to “prove” that Jesus in fact was raised from the dead by God. First some essential historical facts need to be asserted. Following Dr. William Lane Craig’s flow of thought from his article “The Resurrection of Jesus,” are these four facts which are generally agreed upon by a consensus of historians and New Testament scholars (both agnostic and evangelical):

Fact #1: *The honorable burial*: After his crucifixion, Jesus was buried in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea. This fact is highly significant because it means that the location of Jesus’ burial site was known to Jew and Christian alike. The liberal New Testament scholar John A. T. Robinson writes:

Again, the credibility gap seems to me to rule out deliberate deceit by the disciples, or that the women went to the wrong tomb and no one bothered to check, or that Jesus never really died, or that his body was not buried but thrown into a lime-pit (the burial is one of the earliest and best-attested facts about Jesus, being recorded in 1 Corinthians as well as in all four gospels and, for what it is worth, in the Acts *kerygma*).¹⁰

Fact #2: *The empty tomb*: On the Sunday following the crucifixion, Jesus’ tomb was found empty by a group of women who followed him. Evidence for this fact can be gained by looking at the earliest Jewish polemic against the Christian movement that the disciples stole the body (which presupposes an empty tomb). Furthermore, a movement based on resurrection would never have gotten off the ground if Jesus’ body still lay interred in the tomb. All the Roman or Jewish authorities (both of which were hostile towards Christianity) had to do was exhume the corpse of Jesus and put him on display to quash this movement.

Fact #3: *Resurrection appearances*: On multiple occasions and under various circumstances, different individuals and groups of people experienced appearances of Jesus alive from the dead. These appearances cannot be dismissed as hallucinations because in a hallucination experience, one can only project what is already in his or her mind. First-century Jews did not have a belief in a dying, much less rising Messiah. They were expecting the resurrection to occur corporately at the end of the age. In other words, they would have envisioned Jesus exalted to heaven or reposing in Sheol awaiting the end but they would not have projected the idea of Jesus being raised from the dead. And even if one of them did, how would he convince the rest that his vision was authentic?

Fact #4: *Origin of the Christian belief in Jesus’ resurrection*: The original disciples believed that Jesus was raised from the dead despite their having every

¹⁰ John A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God*, London: SCM Press, 1973, 131.

predisposition to the contrary. As N.T. Wright has pointed out, when someone's Messiah gets killed, he has two options: (1) go home or (2) find another Messiah. Proclaiming that he had miraculously risen from the dead was not one of the options. It simply did not fit into the historical context of first-century, pre-Christian Judaism. They expected the resurrection to occur at the end of the age when all of God's people would be brought to life together.

How is one to explain these four facts? Several naturalistic hypotheses¹¹ have been offered but none has gained wide acceptance. Some skeptics have asserted that the resurrection appearances are legendary and developed with time. However, this will not work at all because it is not from the gospels but Paul that we obtain our earliest information about the resurrection appearances. Scholars agree that Paul's letter to the Corinthians dates between fifteen and twenty years after the death of Jesus. Since this letter contains an earlier creedal formula (1 Cor. 15:3-6) which was handed over to Paul (probably in Jerusalem) we can date this information to within five years of the actual event.¹² Furthermore, this early creed states that eye witnesses included not just Peter and the twelve, but also five hundred brothers at once, most of whom were still living at the time Paul was writing to the Corinthians, and could be consulted to corroborate the event.

Much more could be said in favor of the excellent work done by N.T. Wright,¹³ Gary Habermas,¹⁴ William Lane Craig,¹⁵ and others¹⁶ on the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. Solid historical grounds exist for the notion that God raised Jesus from the dead. Of course we cannot prove that this is absolutely what happened but we can recognize that the thesis, "God raised Jesus from the dead" (especially in light of the earlier arguments for God's existence) is the best explanation for the facts. All attempts to propose alternate theories have failed to encompass all four of the facts mentioned above.

Can the New Testament, and the gospels in particular, be trusted as providing history or are they just evangelistic documents whose purpose to convert the pagans was vastly more important to the authors than reporting what actually happened? On the issue of New Testament reliability, the evangelical scholars have produced some really convincing arguments. Two issues need to be addressed: (1) Are we confident that the New Testament we possess today is

¹¹ Swoon theory, hallucinations theory, conspiracy theory, etc.

¹² Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*, Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004, 242.

¹³ *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.

¹⁴ *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004.

¹⁵ *The Son Rises: The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus*, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001.

¹⁶ Lee Strobel has pulled together expert answers from many evangelical scholars in his books, in particular *The Case for Christ*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998.

actually what was written by the Apostles? (2) Can we know that what they wrote was actually true or that they even intended to write history in the first place?

First, it is imperative to determine if the New Testament documents have been reliably transmitted for the last twenty centuries. Opinions on this matter vary greatly even though the facts are indisputable. Bart Ehrman, author of the New York Times bestseller *Misquoting Jesus*, takes up the pessimistic position, arguing that the documents are not very reliable.

Scholars differ significantly in their estimates — some say there are 200,000 variants known, some say 300,000, some say 400,000 or more! We do not know for sure because, despite impressive developments in computer technology, no one has yet been able to count them all. Perhaps, as I indicated earlier, it is best simply to leave the matter in comparative terms. There are more variations among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.¹⁷

Yet, in the rebuttal book, *Misquoting Truth*, Timothy Paul Jones persuasively argues that these 400,000 differences between manuscripts have very little significance for three reasons.

(1) First, the vast majority of the changes in the New Testament document are not even noticeable when the text is translated into other languages. (2) What's more, it's almost always possible — through a discipline known as textual criticism — to compare manuscripts and to discover where and when changes were made. (3) Perhaps most important, the copyists were more concerned with preserving the words of Scripture than with promoting their own theological agendas.¹⁸

Between the 5,700 handwritten Greek manuscripts extant today, there is remarkable agreement. But what are these variations between them? “The vast majority of changes that were introduced involved variant spellings, the accidental omission or repetition of a single letter, the substitution of one word for a synonym, and the like.”¹⁹ The discipline of textual criticism has steadily refined our understanding of which variants were in the original documents. Thus, Jason David BeDuhn can say with confidence, “Modern biblical scholars have developed all sorts of strategies for compensating for all of these errors, and

¹⁷ Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*, New York: HarperCollins, 2005, 89-90.

¹⁸ Timothy Paul Jones, *Misquoting Truth: A Guide to the Fallacies of Barth Ehrman's Misquoting Jesus*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007, 42-43.

¹⁹ Craig L. Blomberg, “Jesus of Nazareth: How Historians Can Know Him and Why it Matters,” published by Christ on Campus Initiative, 2008, 24.

the Bible today is in better shape than it has ever been.”²⁰ In other words, despite Ehrman’s sensationalizing claims to the contrary, the Greek text we have today is 99% identical to what the Apostles actually wrote.²¹ And for that 1%, we have the variants available to us so we are aware of all the options (good Bible translations will include these alternate readings of the text in footnotes). Even so, it is important to stress that these minor discrepancies do not call into question any of the major events such as the teachings of Jesus, the miracles, his death on the cross, his resurrection, the early Christian experience, etc.

Once it is established that the New Testament we have today is substantively what they originally wrote, we need to be able to determine if these writings are accurate historical reporting or fabrications. Here the evangelical scholars have done some fine work as well. F.F. Bruce in his short book, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* ably demonstrates their historical reliability. In reference to Luke and the dozens of incidental details he records, Dr. Bruce says:

The historical trustworthiness of Luke has indeed been acknowledged by many biblical critics whose standpoint has been definitely liberal...The picture which Luke gives us of the rise of Christianity is generally consonant with the witness of the other three Gospels and of Paul’s letters. And he puts this picture in the frame of contemporary history in a way which would inevitably invite exposure if his work were that of a romancer, but which in fact provides a test and vindication on historical grounds of the trustworthiness of his own writings, and with them of at least the main outline of the origins of Christianity presented to us in the New Testament as a whole.²²

Richard Bauckham has shown in his book *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* that there is a great deal of difference between recollective memory (when one is recalling an actual event) and fictional memory (where one makes up a story and retells it).

Recollective memory is selective — it fixes on unique and consequential events, it retains irrelevant detail, it takes the limited vantage point of a particular rather than that of an omniscient narrator, and it shows signs of frequent rehearsal. [Richard] Bauckham then shows these same marks in the gospel narratives. Vivid and important events can stay with you for decades if frequently rehearsed and/or retold. Factor in the fact that disciples in the ancient world were expected to memorize masters’

²⁰ Jason David BeDuhn, *Truth in Translation: Accuracy and Bias in English Translations of the New Testament*, Lanham, MD: University Press, 2003, 4.

²¹ According to A.T. Robertson as reported in Norman Geisler’s *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002, 474.

²² F.F. Bruce’s *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981, 92-93.

teachings, and that many of Jesus' statements are presented in a form that was actually designed for memorization, and you have every reason to trust the accounts.²³

In addition, Craig Blomberg has argued convincingly that the gospels were written by the traditional authors, and that given the incredible memory capacity along with acceptable limits of variation, we can trust the narratives as history. Even so-called contradictory Scriptures (especially in the gospels) have been worked out by the evangelicals²⁴ to such a degree that Dr. Blomberg can say, "Despite two centuries of skeptical onslaught, it is fair to say that all the alleged inconsistencies among the Gospels have received at least plausible resolutions."²⁵

In conclusion, the evangelical scholars have shown good reasons for (1) believing that God exists, (2) the historicity of Jesus' resurrection, (3) the reliable transmission of the gospels, and (4) trusting the gospels as historically grounded. For these contributions we are indebted to these fine people who have worked hard to counterattack the juggernaut of post-enlightenment, liberal scholarship. Now we shall turn our attention to some of the problems that perennially surface.

The Bad News about Evangelical Scholarship

Evangelical scholarship has built-in limitations. Because evangelicals have *a priori* faith commitments to a certain list of orthodox doctrines, their scholarly work is not primarily to *discover* truth but to *validate* it. Thus the scholar finds himself in an elaborate effort to prove his creed via the rules of modern-day scholarship. A book on the resurrection of Jesus will often start off innocently enough and even develop some really great historical argumentation, but before long, the author comes out with the statement "and that's why Jesus is God — the second person of the Trinity!" In other words, if one were to do a scholarly investigation but come to understand through rigorous unbiased investigation that Jesus was not God but a supernaturally begotten human, he would cease to be evangelical. This is because the label "evangelical" includes within it the typical orthodox creeds that are held in common between the main branches of Protestant Christianity. Thus, by definition evangelical scholarship will always be severely limited to the orthodox view of Jesus. *But what if the orthodox view is wrong?* What if early biblical Christianity got corrupted and the original

²³ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, New York: Penguin, 2008, 107.

²⁴ See Kaiser, Davids, Bruce, Brauch, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996 and Gleason Archer Jr., *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982.

²⁵ Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987, 10.

orthodoxy became heresy and vice versa? This possibility is not open for discussion within evangelical scholarship.

This problem comes up over and over again in many different doctrines, including Christology, soteriology, anthropology, and eschatology. Rather than list each place where evangelical scholarship could be improved through an open investigation, we will focus on two doctrines directly related to Jesus studies: (1) the deity of Jesus and (2) the definition of the kingdom of God. Evangelical scholars working on the historical Jesus will generally say something like, “the name *Son of God* implies divinity; the Bible tells us that Jesus went even further on occasion and described himself as equal with God — and even outright claimed to *be God*.”²⁶ Jesus made radical claims which can either be true or false. Then the focus is placed on the resurrection. If in fact Jesus was raised, then these claims to be God must be true. But what about these claims? Have the biblical unitarians of the world just missed these alleged texts? Where are they? Where does Jesus say, “I am God”? Typically a smattering of Johannine texts are given which supposedly validate this claim, but none of these verses is compelling once it is understood within its biblical and historical contexts. Jesus never claimed to be God; he in fact denied the claim²⁷ and instead agreed, against the later creedal developments, with a Jewish scribe on his definition of God (cf. Mark 12:28-34). Are we prepared to say that this second temple period Jew was really a Trinitarian? Of course not! He was as unitarian as all Jews were at that time (and still are). So why not believe Jesus? Why not adopt his creed²⁸ as ours? Why make up “evidence” that Jesus claimed to be the second member of the Trinity?

Another strategy used to frame the argument is to limit the options. Josh McDowell in his chapter “Significance of Deity: The Trilemma — Lord, Liar, or Lunatic?”²⁹ narrows the options through the use of a flow chart. At the top is the statement, “Jesus claims to be God” followed by the title, “two alternatives.” Either his claims were false and he was lying or sincerely deluded OR his claims are true and he is God. Lee Strobel said it this way: “The cross either unmasked him as a pretender or opened the door to a supernatural resurrection that has irrevocably affirmed his divinity.” This line of argumentation limits us to believing that Jesus was God (by virtue of his miracles, forgiving sins, his resurrection, his claims, etc.) or that he was a malevolent imposter. Yet is this how the Scripture speaks? Are these the answers the disciples gave Jesus when

²⁶ Richard Wagner, *Christianity for Dummies*, Indianapolis: Wiley, 2004, 91.

²⁷ Mark 10:18: “And Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.’”

²⁸ Jesus’ creed was the Shema (Deut. 6:4; Mark 12:29).

²⁹ Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999, 158.

he asked them who people thought he was? Did they respond, “Some say you are a lunatic, others say you are just a con man, but some think you are God — the second person of the holy Trinity”? No! Of course not! This is how they responded when Jesus asked them who he was: “‘Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’” (Matt. 16:14-16).

Where is the category “God” or “God the Son” in this confession? No one was thinking that Jesus was not a human; that would be foreign to the Hebrew thought context. Simon’s confession is that Jesus is the human Messiah, the long-awaited Davidic ruler, the Son of God. “Son of God” does not imply deity; it is a title conferred upon the Davidic king (2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 2:7). Furthermore, in the case of Jesus, there is a dual meaning because God had begotten him in the womb of his mother via the holy spirit. Luke is explicit: “The angel answered and said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy child shall be called the Son of God’” (Luke 1:35).

Jesus is the Son of God precisely because of the miracle in the womb of his mother — because God begat him. To assert that “Son of God” equals “God the Son” is to anachronistically read later theology into the historical accounts. Nevertheless, Chuck Swindoll, chancellor of Dallas Theological Seminary, states in the first chapter of his book, *Jesus*:

No one dared call himself a son of God, or he would be guilty of blasphemy. Only someone having God’s divine qualities and powers, and possessing God’s ruling authority, could call himself “the Son of God.” And for Peter to give Jesus this title meant that Jesus was a worthy object of worship, just like the God faithful Jews had worshiped in the temple for centuries. Jesus didn’t object. He praised Peter...*Yes! You’ve got it! This is a supernatural insight you have received from heaven. I am in fact deity.* Who is this man? If we are to believe the man himself, He is God.³⁰

Incredible! Peter was not confessing that Jesus was the Messiah *and* God! He was confessing that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. Perhaps Dr. Swindoll has overlooked the fact that Adam was called the son of God in Luke (Luke 3:38)? Or perhaps he has not noticed several texts in which the titles “Christ” and “Son of God” are used interchangeably? Consider the following instances:

“But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest said to him, ‘I adjure you by the living God, that you tell us whether you are the Christ, the Son of God’” (Matt. 26:63).

³⁰ Charles R. Swindoll, *Jesus: The Greatest Life of All*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008, 12.

“Demons also were coming out of many, shouting, ‘You are the Son of God!’ But rebuking them, he would not allow them to speak, because they knew him to be the Christ” (Luke 4:41).

“Nathanael answered him, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel’” (John 1:49).

“She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; I have believed that you are the Christ, the Son of God, even he who comes into the world’” (John 11:27).

“But these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

Jesus is the Son of God, the Christ, the King of Israel, the one destined to rule on the throne of David (Luke 1:31-33) but these titles do not imply deity. Another line of reasoning that frequently is used to show that Jesus was God is that he did certain things that only God can do. For example, when Jesus healed the paralytic he said, “Take courage, son; your sins are forgiven” (Matt. 9:2). Yet Jesus was explicit in his explanation for offering this forgiveness. He said that he did this “so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” (Matt. 9:6). The crowds “were awestruck, and glorified God, who had given such authority to men” (Matt. 9:8). Jesus is the one in whom God has invested authority to forgive sins and heal. This does not mean that Jesus is forgiving someone of his sins apart from God. The Father has authorized Jesus to do this, so as God’s agent of restoration, Jesus not only heals but also pronounces God’s forgiveness of sins. Furthermore, later on the apostles were invested with a similar authority (John 20:23).

It is often asked, “But what of his miracles? Can any *mere* man do all of those supernatural things, like telling the storm to be quiet and raising the dead?” The simple answer is yes. Elijah, Elisha, and Peter also raised the dead. Elijah also demonstrated power over the elements, calling fire down from the sky. Peter walked on water. The twelve and the seventy cast out demons. Peter and Paul healed scores of people with just their shadow or a handkerchief. Are we to believe that these saints were not “mere men” because they did the supernatural? Furthermore, Jesus revealed the reason that he could do so many miracles. He could do these things because he was empowered by the holy spirit,³¹ not because he was God. Besides, if he was God then why could he do nothing on his own?³²

³¹ Matt. 12:28; Acts 2:22; 10:38.

³² John 5:30; 8:28, 42; 12:49; 14:10.

Why didn't he know the time or hour of his return?³³ How could he die if he is immortal?³⁴ This whole line of reasoning is motivated by reading *our* beliefs and church dogmas into the biblical accounts rather than out of them. This is an exercise we would all do well to avoid. Much more could be said³⁵ about the subject of Christology and many good books³⁶ have been written that handle the subject in detail, but for now, we must turn to the second area where evangelical bias does great harm to the quest for the historical Jesus: the kingdom of God.

All will agree that Jesus' main message concerned the kingdom of God. However, the scholars are too quick to say that the kingdom came with Jesus. William Craig puts it like this: "He [Jesus] claimed that in himself the Kingdom of God had come, and as visible demonstrations of this fact he carried out a ministry of miracles and exorcisms."³⁷ C. H. Dodd is generally credited with being the premier champion of this viewpoint during the last century. "Dodd argued on the one hand, that Jesus viewed his total ministry (culminating in the cross and resurrection) as the crucial eschatological event; in short, the kingdom of God had *arrived* in the career of Jesus."³⁸ But is this line of thinking, of reinterpreting the grand Old Testament passages, the correct one? Is this the result of a fair reading of the biblical text in the religio-historical context of second temple Judaism? Were the people of Israel wrong to anticipate a Messiah to come who would free them from foreign oppression, establish the *Olam Ha Ba* in which there is no more pain and suffering, and usher in the resurrection as a

³³ Mark 13:32; Matt. 24:36.

³⁴ God lives forever (Isa. 57:15; Dan. 4:34); God is immortal (1 Tim. 1:17; 6:15-16); Jesus died (Matt. 17:22; John 10:11; 18:32; 19:33; Rev. 1:17-18).

³⁵ For example, biblical unitarians do well to admit that Jesus is called "God" twice for sure in the New Testament (John 20:28 and Heb. 1:8). Even so, it is entirely probable that he is being called God in a representative or functional sense (cf. Brown, Driver and Briggs on *Elohim* and the NET on Isa. 9:6 as well as on Ps. 45:6 which says, "Because the Davidic king is God's vice-regent on earth, the psalmist addresses him as if he were God incarnate." This is particularly helpful because Ps. 45:6 is quoted in Heb. 1:8 and applied to Jesus.)

³⁶ Sir Anthony Buzzard and Charles F. Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity's Self-Inflicted Wound*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998; Greg Deuble, *They Never Told Me This in Church!* Morrow, GA: Restoration Fellowship, 2006; Patrick Navas, *Divine Truth or Human Tradition*, Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2006; Anthony Buzzard, *Jesus Was Not a Trinitarian*, Morrow, GA: Restoration Fellowship, 2007. Many audios and articles are also available on the web: www.kingdomready.org/topics/god.php.

³⁷ William Lane Craig, Antony Flew, *Does God Exist? The Craig-Flew Debate*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2003, 23.

³⁸ Robert F. Berkey, "ΕΓΓΙΖΕΙΝ ΦΘΑΝΕΙΝ, and Realized Eschatology," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 82, No. 2, Jun., 1963, 177.

result of which the ancestors would finally inherit the land? Was Daniel's vision mistaken when he saw a series of beasts followed by a "son of man" to whom was given the kingdom in order that all nations would serve him forever? In order to answer these questions and acquire a less domesticated view of the kingdom, we shall turn to the liberal scholars.

When Liberalism Frees Us from Dogma

The beauty of liberal scholarship is that it does not submit to the authority of Christian dogma. Since they are not required to agree with orthodox Christianity, liberal scholars are free to investigate history, peer into the world of the first century, and *discover* Jesus. There is still the issue of bias, not for Christianity, but against supernaturalism (a topic we will take up later). Even so, the quest to uncover the historical Jesus, rather than simply trying to prove what the Church has always taught, has yielded some remarkable fruit. When it comes to the kingdom of God and Jesus' proclamation to repent, scholarship has come to somewhat of a consensus over the last century that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet who "thought that the history of the world would come to a screeching halt, that God would intervene in the affairs of this planet, overthrow the forces of evil in a cosmic act of judgment, and establish his utopian Kingdom here on earth."³⁹ In modern times, this understanding first appeared in 1892 with Johannes Weiss' little book titled *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (originally titled *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes*). In it he argued that:

When Jesus spoke of the kingdom he was not referring to the church...nor was he speaking of God's rule in the human heart. He was, rather, announcing the imminent advent of an eschatological reality that would transform the physical world. That reality would be ushered in by the final judgment, which would mean punishment or annihilation of the condemned and reward in paradise for the righteous.⁴⁰

This was the understanding of "kingdom of God" prevalent in first-century Palestinian Judaism and Jesus never took the time to redefine the kingdom he proclaimed.⁴¹ Before we talk more about Jesus' message of apocalyptic eschatology, perhaps it would be helpful to define and distinguish the terms "eschatology" and "apocalyptic."

³⁹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 3.

⁴⁰ Dale C Allison, "The Eschatology of Jesus," in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism: Volume 1*, ed. by John J. Collins, New York: Continuum Publishing, 1998, 268.

⁴¹ Johannes Weiss, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971, 69, 101. Originally *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes*, first edition; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892.

Eschatology is a vision of God's own cleanup of God's own world now grown toxic from evil and impurity, injustice and oppression, war and violence. An *apocalypse* adds to that expectation claims of a special *revelation* about it. Strictly speaking, an apocalyptic seer could be proclaiming anything about any aspect of that eschatological faith, but primarily and predominantly, an *apocalyptic eschatology* claims a special revelation about the imminence of God's transformative action. It is to happen soon, the apocalyptic seer asserts, any day now, certainly in our lifetime. Those who are foolhardy give a precise date. Those who are wise do not.⁴²

This is not to say that Jesus intended to bring about the kingdom through typical, warrior-like violence, but that God Himself would act in concert with His heavenly hosts (the angels) to enact the final judgment. After Weiss, in 1906, the famous *Quest for the Historical Jesus* was written by Albert Schweitzer, which popularized the idea of Jesus as an eschatological prophet and changed the tide of Jesus scholarship from then on.

[Schweitzer] argued that both "Kingdom of God" and "the Son of Man" are eschatological concepts...Jesus was not simply an end-of-the-world prophet who proclaimed...that the end would be sometime soon, perhaps within a few decades. Rather, Jesus saw himself as an instrument for bringing about the end. He believed a sequence of events would occur before the end could come: the return of Elijah, a period of radical repentance, and the suffering and persecution of the righteous (the "messianic woes" of the end time). *Then* God would intervene.⁴³

Schweitzer's impact was staggering in that he was able to effectively end historical Jesus studies for decades through demonstrating that the work of the 19th-century scholars was problematic and resulted in them finding the Jesus they went in search of — they were reconstructing Jesus in their own image. George Tyrell's summary can be applied to all those in the first quest, not just Adolf Harnack: "The Christ that Adolf Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well."⁴⁴

Few have taken up Schweitzer's particular reconstruction of Jesus but the majority of liberal scholars have accepted the general premise that Schweitzer defended: that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet who preached about an eschatological kingdom soon to arrive. Though it is popular in the evangelical

⁴² John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now*, San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2007, 82.

⁴³ Marcus Borg in the preface to Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 2001, vii.

⁴⁴ George Tyrell, *Christianity at the Crossroads*, London: Longmans Green, 1909, 49.

world to say that in Jesus' ministry (especially his exorcisms) the kingdom of God was established and that the Christian task ever since is to grow or build the kingdom, the historical Jesus apparently never engaged in the task of domesticating the grand prophetic hope of the Hebrew Scriptures. The following remarks by Bart Ehrman magnificently explain the meaning of the kingdom of God for Jesus and his followers in the context of first-century Judaism.

Moreover, when Jesus refers to this coming Kingdom, in which God will reign, he does not appear to be thinking in purely symbolic terms about God becoming the ruler of your heart. For he often describes the Kingdom with graphically tactile language. Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God "coming in power," about people "entering into" the Kingdom, about people "eating and drinking in the Kingdom" with the Jewish ancestors, about his disciples serving as "rulers" of the Kingdom, sitting on actual "thrones" in the royal court.

...Jesus, like other apocalypticists living before him and afterwards, evidently thought that God was going to extend his rule from the heavenly realm where he resides down here to earth. There would be a real, physical kingdom here, a paradisaal world in which God himself would rule his faithful people, where there would be eating, drinking, and talking, where there would be human co-regents sitting on thrones and human denizens eating at banquets.⁴⁵

One way that scholars have endeavored to demonstrate that Jesus was an apocalypticist is to look at the person who preceded Jesus and the communities that were established in his name. Jesus' predecessor was John the Baptist who preached repentance in light of the soon-coming kingdom. John is explicit in his fiery pictures drawn from agriculture about the eschatological judgment. Very little is written about John, which is why it is so hard to misread what is recorded about him — either he was a first-class apocalypticist or the writings about him are inauthentic. But then what of Jesus' association with John? "Did not the former submit to the latter's baptism because the former believed what the latter taught? So if the Baptist averred that repentance was required and that judgment was coming, must not Jesus have thought this too?"⁴⁶ It is clear that Matthew wants us to connect Jesus' Gospel proclamation with John's, for he uses identical language to describe both:

"Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, '**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand**'" (Matt. 3:1-2).

⁴⁵ Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, 143.

⁴⁶ Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998, 104.

“From that time Jesus began to preach and say, ‘**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand**’” (Matt. 4:17).

Furthermore, there is solid, frequent evidence from within the Jesus tradition that demonstrates that Jesus was a prophet proclaiming the kingdom and repentance (Mark 1:15; Matt. 4:23; 9:35; Luke 4:43). He sent out the twelve and the seventy with this same kingdom message of repentance (Matt. 10:7; Mark 6:12; Luke 9:2; 10:9). Jesus believed that one day many will come from east and west and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of God (Matt. 8:11; Luke 13:29). Even though the righteous will be enjoying this Messianic feast, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth because the evildoers will see this new world but then be denied entrance — they will be thrown out (Matt. 8:12; Luke 13:28). Those who are meek — who endure injury with patience and without resentment — will inherit the land (Matt. 5:5). In fact, the twelve disciples will be chief among these meek, for they will rule over the twelve tribes of Israel on twelve thrones (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30). The compassionate who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned will one day inherit the kingdom, whereas the ones who have made no effort to care for the afflicted will be summarily dismissed into eternal punishment (Matt. 25:31-46).

Jesus also believed that in the end, a cataclysmic irreversible act of divine judgment will occur, in which the Son of Man will send forth his angels to separate out the lawless and throw them into the furnace of fire so that the righteous can shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father (Matt. 13:41-43). That day will be a cause of mourning for all the tribes of the earth except for the elect who will be gathered together by the angels (Mark 13:24-27; Matt. 24:29-31). This moment will be sudden like the days of Noah — people were eating and drinking and getting married until suddenly the flood came and destroyed them all. Jesus says, “It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed” (Luke 17:26-30; Matt. 24:37-39). “Jesus’ central message, then, was a call to repent, to believe that the kingdom was about to come, and to begin to live the life of the new age. This was the life of love. Here Jesus stood within a strand of Jewish thought that became prominent in the first century CE.”⁴⁷

Now we shall turn to the early, post-crucifixion, Christian witness. “The letters of Paul provide abundant evidence that Jewish eschatological expectation stands at the conclusion as well as at the beginning of Jesus’ career.”⁴⁸ Paul writes, “The Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thess. 1:7-8). He fully

⁴⁷ John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, 21.

⁴⁸ E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985, 93.

anticipates Jesus coming in the clouds with the angels as God's agent to carry out the eschatological judgment (i.e. Day of Yahweh has become Day of the Lord Jesus Christ). Not only this, but restoration occurs for those who obey the Gospel. For those who are "in Christ" his *parousia* will be the moment of resurrection to immortality (1 Thess. 4:16-17). Also, the saints will rule the world in this glorious new age (1 Cor. 6:2; 2 Tim. 2:12).

Is Paul entirely out of sync with the rest of Christianity that had been founded in the name of Jesus? Does he represent the apocalyptic fringe of the earliest Christian movement? On the contrary, Peter, John, James, and Jude all have similar passages to Paul. James instructs the Christians to "be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord...for the coming of the Lord is near" (James 5:7-8). Peter speaks of the genuine faith that will "result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 1:7). He says to the chosen of God, "fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 1:13); meanwhile the wicked "will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead...The end of all things is near" (1 Pet. 4:5, 7). John believes that those who do not abide in Christ will "shrink away from him in shame at his coming" (1 John 2:28) whereas the children of God "will be like him, for we will see him as he is" (1 John 3:2) when he appears. Jude expected that "the great day" (Jude 6) would come in which God's divine judgment would be poured out on the wicked when he quoted Enoch as follows:

Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of His holy ones, to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him (Jude 14-15; cf. 1 Enoch 1:9).

Furthermore the last book of the Bible is rightly called the Apocalypse for it is rife with apocalyptic terminology and content. In short, the communities that bore Jesus' name were eschatologically focused; they had accepted the notion that Jesus would return as the agent of God's divine clean-up program to punish the wicked and reward the righteous. Dale Allison exposes the absurdity of a non-eschatologically focused Jesus:

So, as many have repeatedly observed, to reconstruct a Jesus who did not have a strong eschatological orientation entails unexpected discontinuity not only between him and people who took themselves to be furthering his cause but also between him and the Baptist, that is, discontinuity with the movement out of which he came as well as with the movement that came out of him.⁴⁹

⁴⁹*Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet*, 40.

In hearty agreement with this line of thinking is Paula Fredriksen when she summarized her findings:

Jesus...is a prophet who preached the coming apocalyptic Kingdom of God. His message coheres both with that of his predecessor and mentor, John the Baptizer, and with that of the movement that sprang up in his name. This Jesus thus is *not* primarily a social reformer with a revolutionary message; nor is he a religious innovator radically redefining the traditional ideas and practices of his native religion. His urgent message had not the present so much as the near future in view.⁵⁰

There is little doubt that Jesus was a prophet who proclaimed that the kingdom of God was at hand, that people needed to get right with God and live radically moral lives in anticipation of this grand future event. It is virtually certain that Jesus operated under a Jewish apocalyptic worldview or what E. P. Sanders calls “restoration eschatology.” This does not mean that the category “apocalyptic prophet of the eschatological kingdom” exhausts Jesus’ works and deeds. However, to deny this element and “pull Jesus entirely out of this framework would be an act of historical violence.”⁵¹

When Liberalism Imprisons Us in Post-Enlightenment Rationalism

But there are also severe drawbacks to the endeavor of historical Jesus studies from a liberal perspective. This is because they are convinced from the outset that the text, as it stands in the gospels, is not really good history. Rather, it is a combination of at least two layers: historical and theological. The first layer of historical data has been polished up, embellished, and woven together with many threads of superstitious Christian theology and miracle stories. In other words, there are at least two voices speaking from the text. The first is the voice of the historical Jesus. The second is the voice of the community that produced the text. It is believed that many sayings of Jesus are not what he actually said but were placed on his lips by his second and third generation followers. As a result of this “dirty history” the scholar must engage in a quest to sift through the various strata of the Jesus tradition and sort out what is authentic and what is not. Only through an elaborate process of reconstruction can one hope to hear the authentic voice of Jesus undistorted by later Christian dogma. Though the criteria used to determine authenticity vary from one scholar to another the following are probably used by most.

A section is likely to be authentic if it is:

1. **Written earlier:** if a document is closer to the events it records it decreases the likelihood of legendary development.

⁵⁰ Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*, New York: Vintage Books, 2000, 266.

⁵¹ *Jesus and Judaism*, 330.

2. **Historically credible:** if we encounter a saying that is anachronistic or geographically inaccurate then it probably did not happen.

3. **Multiply attested:** if an event is independently recorded by multiple authors then it is more likely to be authentic.

4. **Dissimilar:** if the action or saying would likely have been embarrassing or dissimilar to the community from which the text was produced it is a strong indication that it is factual.

In response to this branch of Jesus historiography,⁵² we reply (along with the evangelicals) that (1) we do not grant that the gospels are unreliable histories in need of deconstruction and (2) these criteria have built-in limitations that distort rather than discover the facts. The first point has already been commented on above and can be investigated further by reading the work of several evangelical scholars.⁵³ In response to the second point, these criteria have severe limitations. While the criterion of historical credibility is completely reasonable, the others run into problems. Dale Allison puts his finger on a number of these issues in his deconstruction of the tools of deconstruction:

Concerning the date of composition:

It certainly makes sense to suppose that time dimmed and distorted memories and even crafted false ones. Still, there is not really much time between, say, Q and Mark or between Mark and L. We are talking about years, not centuries...Moreover, is it not possible that...our earliest source could have been a tendentious production that subsequent sources improved upon?...[It is misleading to suppose] that there is a correlation between the date when a document appeared and the age of the traditions preserved in that document...Geologists refer to inverted strata and thrust faults: some things are not in the expected order. In like manner, historians of Jesus know all too well that the historical figure they seek is not, so to speak, really confined to the bottom; he is scattered throughout the different layers of the first and early second century.⁵⁴

Concerning multiple attestation:

The more frequently a complex is attested, the more congenial, one naturally infers, it was to early Christians. But the more congenial a complex was to early Christians, surely the less likely it is that Jesus

⁵² In this case we are speaking of the hypercritical, anti-supernatural approach.

⁵³ *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* by Richard Bauckham; *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* by Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd; *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* by Craig A. Evans; *What Have They Done with Jesus? Beyond Strange Theories and Bad History—Why We Can Trust the Bible* by Ben Witherington III; *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* by Craig Blomberg.

⁵⁴ *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet*, 18-19.

composed it. Conversely, the less congenial a tradition, the more likely its origin with Jesus and the less likely its multiple attestation. Here the criterion of multiple attestation is in a tug-of-war with the criterion of dissimilarity: they pull the same unit in opposite directions.⁵⁵

Concerning dissimilarity:

As others have often remarked, it can at best tell us what is distinctive, not what was characteristic of Jesus. Because Jesus lived and moved and had his being within the Jewish tradition, the criterion is not a net that catches fish of every kind; it can only find things that Jesus did not take from elsewhere. All too often, however, dissimilarity has been misused as a means of separating the authentic from the inauthentic, that is, a way of eliminating items from the corpus of authentic materials. The result is a Jesus who “is necessarily a free-floating iconoclast, artificially isolated from his people and their Scripture, and artificially isolated from the movement that he founded.”⁵⁶

Concerning progress in light of these criteria:

Whether or not one shares my misgivings about dissimilarity, coherence, and embarrassment, it is certain that they and other criteria have not led us into the promised land of scholarly consensus. If our tools were designed to overcome subjectivity and bring order to our discipline, then they have failed.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, the vast majority of liberal scholars spend years working with criteria of credibility to deconstruct the sources in order to reconstruct the historical Jesus. But why are liberal scholars so resistant to taking the gospels as history? Miracles. Here we reach the true heart of the matter, the impasse at which evangelicals and liberals always part ways. The canonical gospels are filled with exorcisms, healings, and even miracles over nature. To the enlightenment rationalists, who had adopted the philosophical framework called “naturalism,” the notion of Jesus walking on water was preposterous. Naturally, the miracles of the gospels were considered to be errors in observation, a case where pre-enlightenment people saw phenomena, and without the necessary scientific knowledge available, relegated the occurrence to the realm of the

⁵⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁵⁶ *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet*, 4, quoting Richard B. Hays, “The Corrected Jesus,” *First Things*, May 1994.

⁵⁷ *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet*, 4. Lee Strobel lists some of the more serious reconstructions by scholars of late: “Jesus has been called an intellectual who spouted pithy aphorisms; a Mediterranean cynic leading a wandering band of proto-hippies; an androgynous feminist and ambassador of Sophia...a clever messianic pretender; a gay magician; a peasant revolutionary; and a Jewish Zen master” (Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007, 13).

supernatural. Great efforts were made to show how all of the miracles could be reinterpreted without breaking the laws of physics. But these efforts were blown out of the water by David Friederich Strauss and others who in the 19th century taught that the gospel accounts contain neither actual miracles, nor mistaken natural events, but myths. This was a way to say that the accounts were genuine in that they taught something of significance to the religious community but at the same time they were not actual miracles. In other words, the narratives were not meant to teach history but religious truth. Thus the gospels need to be demythologized so that we can do history and get back to the authentic Jesus.

Much work has been done since the 19th century. Scholars are now on what is called the third quest for the historical Jesus. However, we must take note that a good deal of work (perhaps most of it?) is done in determining which bits of the gospels are genuine and which are myth. However, there is a presuppositional bias that no one seems to notice: the liberals are approaching their task of reconstructing the historical Jesus based on an *a priori* dismissal of the supernatural. In fact, there is a built-in methodological agnosticism that confines the enterprise in an enlightenment, naturalistic straightjacket. The miraculous events are rejected outright or they are “interpreted” to gain the religious truth they were “meant” to convey. But is this rationalistic skepticism warranted? Does this mentality promote free investigation of the sources? Is it not arrogant to methodologically eject the worldview of the authors in order to discover the truth they “should have” written plainly? It all comes down to one simple question: is there a God? If there is a God, then it would be foolish to exclude the possibility of miracles from an historical investigation. However, if we are bound by the standards of *our* day to a historiography of naturalism, then even if miracles *did* occur, we will never take them into account when reconstructing the past. Here is a clear case where one needs to determine his or her presuppositions carefully before proceeding. I am not saying that one needs to believe that the Bible is inspired in order to use it as source material for doing history. What I am saying is that the text is innocent until proven guilty. The burden of proof lies on those who are all too quick to brandish their source-criticism scissors in an effort to cut away the supra-historical from the mundane to justify their methodology. If God exists, then miracles are to be expected and any historian who excludes that possibility (however remote) from his methodology, will necessarily recast history in his own post-enlightenment, rationalistic image.

Combining the Best from Both Paradigms

Once we grant that Jesus, like John, and the early Christians who followed him preached the imminent end of the age, we must also admit that this grand event has not happened (unless we embrace the preterist viewpoint). It is not the case that history came to screeching halt, that the Son of Man descended to punish the wicked and reward the righteous with resurrection, immortality, and

positions of leadership in God's kingdom. So where does this leave us? Is Jesus a failed prophet? Dale Allison concludes his book *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* with the following stunning paragraph:

And yet, despite everything, for those who have ears to hear, Jesus, the millenarian herald of judgment and salvation, says the only things worth saying, for his dream is the only one worth dreaming. If our wounds never heal, if the outrageous spectacle of a history filled with cataclysmic sadness is never undone, if there is nothing more for those who were slaughtered in the death camps or for six-year-olds devoured by cancer, then let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. If in the end there is no good God to calm this sea of troubles, to raise the dead, and to give good news to the poor, then this is indeed a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing.⁵⁸

In other words if the kingdom *never* comes, then in the end, Jesus falls into Josh McDowell's second category: "lunatic." But if it does come then "his dream is the only one worth dreaming" — the future Jesus preached about is the only future worth preaching about and it alone is that in which we should put our faith. But how can one know which is the case? How can someone know the future? What if a future event was projected into the past in order to demonstrate, in the middle of history, that this prophet was in fact validated by God? Resurrection provides this validation. If Jesus was raised from the dead then we too shall be raised at his coming (1 Cor. 15:22-23), but if not then "we are of all men most to be pitied" (1 Cor. 15:19) because our "faith is vain" (1 Cor. 15:14).

The liberal scholars have marvelously explained the historical context of Jesus and how his message about the kingdom fits into the world of first-century Palestinian Judaism. The evangelical scholars have shown through equally brilliant historical research that the hypothesis "God raised Jesus from the dead" is the best explanation for the facts. Is it possible to marry these two ideas? Are they really so disparate that they repel one another no matter how hard we cram them together? Surely if Jesus really did proclaim this grand future and say the sorts of things the gospels record, God would not expect us to just accept it all on blind faith. The resurrection is the event in which God vindicates His Son and lays the foundation for a movement to begin via the testimony of eyewitnesses of this miracle.

But what does this testimony mean? What is the significance for Jesus' kingdom proclamation? Paul insists to the Athenian audience that if Jesus is raised from the dead then he is the man appointed by God to judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:31). So can we hold the historic, biblical proclamation of the soon-coming eschatological kingdom in tension with the manifest reality of a two-thousand-year delay? Should we (like the evangelicals) reinterpret Jesus'

⁵⁸ *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet*, 219.

main message to be symbolic or spiritual and then focus on Christology instead? Should we (like the liberals) admire Jesus for his tenacity and compassion but in the end shrug our shoulders and say, “What a tragedy! He got it wrong”? Is there a middle ground? Can another solution be presented? It is my contention that we need to keep Jesus’ authentic kingdom message without resorting to “realized eschatology,” and at the same time agree with the eyewitnesses in saying that he was risen from the dead and therefore God has vindicated him. Though this “middle road” is narrow, can it be traveled? Surely there must be some solution that at once agrees with the resurrection and the apocalyptic message of Jesus.

A second area where we can benefit from both evangelical and liberal scholarship is the notion that Jesus is the Messiah. The term “Messiah” or “Christ” broadly means anointed but more specifically it means the anointed one to rule over Israel from the throne of David.

Not until after the fall of the Maccabean dynasty, when the despotic government of Herod the Great and his family, and the increasing tyranny of the Roman empire had made their condition ever more unbearable, did the Jews seek refuge in the hope of a personal Messiah. They yearned for the promised deliverer of the house of David, who would free them from the yoke of the hated foreign usurper, would put an end to the impious Roman rule, and would establish his own reign of peace and justice in its place. In this way their hopes became gradually centered in the Messiah.⁵⁹

However, in the evangelical system the title “Christ” is overwhelmed by the notion that Jesus is somehow God. Imagine someone who is both governor and president at the same time. Of course this is impossible (perhaps we should end the discussion there). Which title are people likely to focus on and talk about? The fact that this person is both is moot because to be president is a much higher office. So if Jesus is God *and* God’s anointed, which title is likely to fall by the wayside? Christ. However, for the liberals, it is not certain whether Jesus ever even claimed to be the Messiah or even thought of himself in this way. It is often argued that this title is just what the earliest Christians applied to Jesus. So on the one hand, the office of Messiah is virtually too meager for the second person of the Trinity, and on the other, it is too lofty a title for Jesus to have claimed himself. Here, as before, we walk the line between these two schools of thought. For us, who take the Scriptures, but not the Church councils, as reliable and trustworthy, there are several reasons for us to think that Jesus was a Messianic claimant.

⁵⁹ Joseph Jacobs and Moses Bittenwieser, “Messiah,” *Jewish Encyclopedia*, New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1906, 508.

Even though there are an overwhelming number of texts in the gospels in which the title Messiah⁶⁰ or its cognates (Son of God,⁶¹ son of David⁶²) are applied to Jesus, we will focus on Jesus' own self-understanding of his office, not the testimony of others. There are several independent lines of evidence which collude to show that Jesus understood himself to be the Messiah of Israel. Firstly, there is the account of Jesus with the Samaritan woman: "The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when that one comes, he will declare all things to us.' Jesus said to her, 'I who speak to you am he'" (John 4:25-26).

This is a clear claim to be the Messiah. However, many have puzzled over this because of the many other places where he is very hesitant to allow people to speak of him in this way (i.e. the Messianic secret).⁶³ Even so, we can surmise that Jesus was forthright with this woman because she was a Samaritan for whom the idea of Messiah was not as volatile. (Samaritans only believed in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible.) Since Samaritans had no dealing with Jews (John 4:9) it was unlikely that she would start spreading the news that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah.⁶⁴ Jesus knew that once people started telling others that he claimed to be the Messiah, the news would spread like wildfire, culminating in a serious confrontation with the powers that be.

The second evidence of Jesus' Messianic consciousness can be found in the passage containing the visit of John the Baptist's disciples. Their question was simple: "Are you the expected one, or shall we look for someone else?" (Matt. 11:3). John had apparently come to doubt that Jesus was "the one" while he was in prison and wanted to know if he had possibly gotten it wrong. "Jesus answered and said to them, 'Go and report to John what you hear and see: the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM'" (Matt. 11:4-5).

This response is cryptic yet affirmative. In this answer he conflated two classic Old Testament texts having to do with the Messianic age (Isa. 35:5 and

⁶⁰ Matt. 1:1, 16, 17, 18; 11:2; 16:16; 27:17, 22; Mark 1:1; 8:29; Luke 2:11; 4:41; 9:20; 23:2; John 1:17, 41; 7:31; 11:27; 17:3; 20:31.

⁶¹ Matt. 8:29; 27:54; Mark 1:1; 3:11; 15:39; Luke 1:35; Luke 4:41; 22:70; John 1:34, 49; 3:18; 11:27; 20:31.

⁶² Matt. 1:1; 9:27; 15:22; 20:30-31; 21:9, 15; Mark 10:47-48; Luke 18:38-39.

⁶³ Mark 1:25, 34, 44; 3:12; 5:43; 7:24, 36; 8:26, 30; 9:9; 14:61.

⁶⁴ Furthermore, when Jesus healed the demoniac from the country of the Gerasenes, he did not let him follow him and said to him, "Go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord has done for you and how he had mercy on you" (Mark 5:19). Again, this was the exact opposite of Jesus' usual pattern. Why the change of *modus operandi*? It was most likely due to the fact that this fellow lived in the Decapolis where Messianic rumors were much less threatening than in Galilee or Jerusalem.

61:1). He answered the question in a way that to the onlookers may not have been immediately recognizable, but to John there would be no question. Jesus believed he was the Messiah and he had proven it by doing supernatural, Messianic work right before their eyes.

The third affirmation comes at Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asked the question, “But who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:15). Simon Peter, in his finest moment, responds, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). Jesus does not diminish, reinterpret, or evade this but instead pronounces a blessing on Simon because “flesh and blood did not reveal this...but my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 16:17). But then, in the next breath, “he warned the disciples that they should tell no one that he was the Messiah” (Matt. 16:20). This incident fits with our previous remarks about the Messianic secret — Jesus did not want them to publish his claim to be Messiah, at least not yet.

The next line of evidence is powerful and provocative. Right after he warned his disciples not to tell others that he was the Messiah, Jesus told them about how he planned to go to Jerusalem and “suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day” (Matt. 16:21). When Jesus came to Bethphage (near Jerusalem) he sent his disciples to a nearby village to bring back a donkey for him to ride into Jerusalem. As Jesus rode into Jerusalem, an excited crowd gathered around him and cut branches from trees and spread them in the road along with their coats. As Jesus approached Jerusalem, they shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David; Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest!” (Matt. 21:9). The gesture had not been lost on the crowds. Jesus was enacting a prophecy:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, humble, and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the horse from Jerusalem; and the bow of war will be cut off. And he will speak peace to the nations; and his dominion will be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth (Zech. 9:9-10).

The Pharisees, in bewilderment, tried to restrain the fervor, saying, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples” (Luke 19:39). But Jesus replied, “If these become silent, the stones will cry out!” (19:40). This provocative entry into the city of the great king was a prophetic enactment which could only mean one thing: the one on the donkey understood himself to be the Messiah — the one to speak peace to the nations and to rule from sea to sea. But this is not all: there is still at least one more reason to think Jesus believed he was the Messiah of Israel.

After his arrest, Jesus came face to face with the high priest and was brutally pressured to confess or deny his Messianic claim. At first Jesus would not answer him but then Caiaphas put him under oath. “I adjure you by the living God, that

you tell us whether you are the Messiah, the Son of God!” (Matt. 26:63). Jesus’ response is clear: “I am; and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62). Here we have two eschatologically charged passages conflated together. The first is taken from the prophet Daniel and refers to the Son of Man who approaches the Ancient of Days on the clouds and is given “dominion, glory, and a kingdom” that will be over all nations and last forever (Dan. 7:13-14). The second reference is taken from one of the most Messianic Psalms in the Psalter — the one in which God’s man (David’s Lord) sits at His right hand until the time comes for him to stretch forth his strong scepter from Zion and rule. This one is destined to shatter the kings of the earth and judge the nations via military victory. So Jesus doubly affirms the high priest’s question. He answers in the affirmative and then brings together two Messianic texts to punctuate his response.

For these four reasons there is good evidence (if the gospels are indeed reliable history) to say that Jesus was a Messianic claimant, but there is still one last reason that needs to be mentioned: the sign. No one is left to guess why Jesus was crucified, for they spelled out his accusation in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek written on the sign above his head. “This is Jesus the king of the Jews” (Matt. 27:37). Apparently the onlookers interpreted this to mean Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, the Son of God.⁶⁵ There is no question. Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah (however reticent during his Galilean ministry) was fully expressed in his actions the last week of his life, which in the end culminated in this simple sign.

Jesus claimed to be the Messiah. The movement that was founded on the belief of his resurrection boldly traveled throughout the Mediterranean world (and beyond) to proclaim Jesus as Messiah. “And according to Paul’s custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah’” (Acts 17:2-3).

But what does it mean to be Messiah? Does this mean that Jesus is God? Certainly not! In fact, to call the Messiah God would be to confuse categories. As we have already noted, the term “messiah” applies to the one anointed by God to be the king of Israel. To say that God anointed Himself is to depart from the biblical narrative and superimpose upon it Trinitarian anachronisms. No, Jesus was not claiming to be God; he was claiming to be the Messiah *of* God who represented God to the people just like the judges of Israel and the Davidic kings who preceded him. The difference between Jesus and the Davidic kings, who ruled from Jerusalem before the exile, was that he was claiming to be the *eschatological* Messiah — THE Messiah — destined to rule on the throne of David *forever*.

⁶⁵ Matt. 27:40, 42-43; Mark 15:32; Luke 23:35, 37, 39.

Between these two powerful notions we can grasp a majority of the data contained in the gospels: (1) Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet of the eschatological kingdom and (2) Jesus was a Messianic claimant. Jesus is certainly more than this,⁶⁶ but not less. Jesus was not concerned with many of the things that we might think he would be from our twenty-first-century viewpoint. He did not tell people to “accept him into their hearts” so that they could “go to heaven when they die.” Jesus was not a Hawaiian-shirt-wearing mega pastor, who through seeker sensitive methodology befriended behaviorally challenged people and taught them to be nice to each other so that they could have a good afterlife. No, Jesus was *obsessed* with the coming kingdom and repentance in light of it! John Dominic Crossan clears up the confusion marvelously in his *God and Empire*.

We misunderstand ancient Jewish and/or Christian eschatology if we think it was about evacuating a destroyed earth for a new heavenly location. Instead, that transformation would take place here below on an earth transfigured from violence to peace...Recall, for example, that for Jesus in the Lord’s Prayer the Kingdom of God is about the will of God “on earth as in heaven.” The original mock-up for God’s earthly kingdom has been retained in heaven — like the model in an architect’s office — but the final construction site will be on the earth itself.⁶⁷

Jesus as Messiah proclaimed the Messianic message — the Kingdom Gospel — from town to town. His whole ministry, from the number of disciples he chose, to the exorcisms, to the healing acts of restoration, to his preaching and ethics, to his provocative acts the last week of his life — everything — was centered on his kingdom message and his role as Messiah! If we get this wrong we have missed Jesus. But at the same time, if we accept Jesus as a prophet of apocalyptic eschatology who proclaimed the Day of Yahweh as imminent, can we also say that Jesus is *not* a failed prophet? Obviously, more than twenty centuries later the kingdom has not materialized, the Son of Man has not descended, the resurrection has not occurred, but is there hope? Does not the resurrection vindicate Jesus as God’s prophet? Would God set His resurrection seal on Jesus if Jesus’ chief prediction was in fact false? Somehow, there is a way to believe in both the historic Jesus and the historic resurrection. How these work out is a matter for future inquiry. For now we must be content with holding these two well-documented facts without rejecting either and joining either the evangelicals or the liberals.

⁶⁶ A good case can be made that Jesus saw himself as the Suffering Servant of Yahweh spoken of in Isaiah.

⁶⁷ *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now*, 79.

Some Challenges to Our Movement

Any movement that hopes to survive must have its identity clear. Our very existence as an independent stream of theological thought depends on this. There is often a tendency to cozy up with the evangelicals because of the similarities we share with them regarding our mutual trust of the biblical documents and our faith in the resurrection of Jesus. However, we are *not* evangelicals, because of our rationalistic⁶⁸ rather than credal approach to truth. In other words we are repeatedly doing the Berean exercise (Acts 17:11) to *discover* truth rather than *confirm* what the creeds have “always” said. This process has led us to understand that Jesus was a human being; he is not the second member of the Trinity,⁶⁹ as well as many other truths.⁷⁰ So, since we are not evangelicals, does that mean that we are liberals? Again we have to say no. The liberals would reject us as quickly as we can say, “Jesus rose from the dead and I believe it because the Bible says so.” So who are we? At a foundational level, we are restorationists who are on a quest to understand and practice primitive Christianity. Our thesis is that the Church became corrupted in the second and third centuries when a remarkable shift occurred from Jesus’ apocalyptic paradigm to that of Hellenism. Hans Küng contrasts the Nicene version of Christianity with the earlier apocalyptic form:

If we take the New Testament as a criterion, we cannot deny that the Council of Nicea certainly maintained the New Testament message and did not Hellenize it totally. But it is equally beyond dispute that the council remained utterly imprisoned in Hellenistic concepts, notions and thought-models which would have been completely alien to the Jew Jesus of Nazareth and the earliest community. Here in particular the shift from the Jewish Christians’ apocalyptic paradigm to the early church Hellenistic paradigm had a massive effect.⁷¹

We are on an expedition whose destination is not a place but an understanding. We wish to peer back beyond this Hellenistic mutation to find what the early Christians believed and did. Then we need to sort out how to live for God in our post-enlightenment, post-modern, post-Christian, post-everything

⁶⁸ Here I use the term in the sense that it has been applied to the biblical unitarians of the 16th century who are often dubbed “evangelical rationalists” because they accepted the Scriptures as truth but then used reason (rationale) to discover truth.

⁶⁹ We do note (as before in footnote 35) that we do believe Jesus is God in the sense that he represents God to us and even functions as God (e.g., with regard to resurrection, cf. John 5:18-23). Other biblical instances wherein humans are rightly called God include Exodus 7:1; 21:7; 22:8-9; Psalm 45:6; 82:6; John 10:33-36.

⁷⁰ Ultimate salvation is contingent on perseverance; in death one sleeps until resurrection; in the end we will rule in the kingdom of God, etc.

⁷¹ Hans Küng, *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future*, New York: Continuum, 1994, 182.

culture. In this endeavor, we have much to learn; there are many unanswered questions.

We may not have all of the answers, but we do have *some* answers. The gospel of the kingdom and the creed of Jesus have been recovered (among other things). Shall we now hide them under a basket? May it never be! Let us speak to our neighbors, friends, college professors and families, and spread the good news. Let's publish articles in scholarly journals and get our books into the major bookstores. The world is in desperate need of the message of Jesus and the Apostles: that the one God of Israel has plans to fix up this place and He is going to do it through His anointed one, the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth, who is coming back to judge the living and the dead.