

Who was Jesus in the earliest New Testament records? Did the early believers invent Christianity?

Stephen Mitchell

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Email: Jesus.inHilandS@gmail.com

The New Testament books were written over a period of about 65 years. Did Jesus become Christ as the church changed over time? Look at the first 5 books written...



In this post, I will examine **the claim that the message of Christianity changed so much over its early years that we cannot be sure what is real about Jesus**. Specifically, we will look at the books of the New Testament that are considered the first written. These give us the earliest recorded Christianity. Does it record a different Jesus than those written later?

Can a religious message change over time? Certainly. Some years ago, I worked next to and became good friends with a Mormon. Mike explained to me that he was not the type of Mormon that we are familiar from Utah. He referred to himself as a “Reformed Mormon.” These Mormons believe that the Book of Mormon really came from an angel, just as the other Mormons do. However, they believe that Joseph Smith changed the message that he received. Wikipedia reports: “The “True Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints” or “True Mormon Church” was a denomination of the Latter Day Saint movement. It was founded in the spring of 1844 in Nauvoo, Illinois, by leaders dissenting from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.” It also reports “The church taught that Smith was a “fallen prophet”. This group was responsible for printing the Nauvoo Expositor, which was also critical of Smith and polygamy, leading to his death and contributing to the expulsion of the Latter Day Saints from Nauvoo.” This shows that 14 years after Joseph Smith penned the “Book of Mormon”, the group experienced a schism with sharp dissention over what the message was. Did this type of change occur in the early Christian church? We don’t have any books that Jesus wrote. How do we know we have the message that He gave?

The view of many modern historians and theologians is indeed that the church rapidly morphed from a Jewish sect following a Jewish charismatic leader to an international religion. In the process, many claim that the historical Jesus was transformed into Christ, a messiah figure that was very different than the historical Jesus. Over the last 200 years, many theologians have proposed “models” of how the movement that became Christianity developed. Recognize that I am neither a theologian nor a historian. I certainly have many gaps in my knowledge of the basis for the various models involved. However, I am familiar with models. Geologists develop many different kinds of models to integrate different datasets to form cohesive ways to explain nature. Some models are mathematical representations of the subsurface. Some take the form of a set of maps that represent the geologic setting and environment long ago. In each case, it is always important to keep in mind that the representation is not a fact. It is a model. Some models are better than others. Some may be highly accurate in some areas, while still being wrong in other areas.

It is certainly true that we have learned much about the 1st century in the last 200 years. Studies of the New Testament have contributed to our knowledge of it as well. Many modern Biblical scholars hold views of the development that vary sharply from the historic views. Here are some examples:

- The gospels were written late by anonymous authors who knew Jesus only from stories that had changed through time.
- The books of NT tell more about the needs and problems faced by the church when they were written than they do about Jesus. Marcus Borg (2012) says that the NT tells us what “*formative figures in early Christianity said in their time and place*”, and were not “*coming from God in a sufficiently direct way as to have a divine guarantee to be true*”
- Parts about Jesus were added and words were put in Jesus’ mouth to address later issues
- Christianity is more product of Paul’s theological views than those of Jesus.
- It is almost impossible to be confident of what Jesus did or said.
- The idea that Jesus was the Jewish messiah, let alone deity, was a concept that gradually arose after Jesus death. He never considered this himself.

I certainly recognize that there are elements of truth in some of these. For instance, the gospels are anonymous, though the early church was clearly convinced of who the authors were. The letters were certainly written to address specific issues that were current in particular churches. They don’t provide much biographical information about Jesus. It is also certain that Paul was important in the early church as the church came to understand the theology of this new covenant.

The modern attempts to define Jesus are in many ways similar to one carried out by Thomas Jefferson. He created a book often referred to as the “*Jefferson Bible*” in which he chose which parts of Jesus that he would believe. This description describes the process:

“The book best known as the Jefferson Bible is a collage of Gospel verses that Jefferson called “The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth,” which he completed at Monticello in 1820. Jefferson wanted to reduce the New Testament to the core of Christianity and believed he could do so by separating the life and teachings of Jesus from elements he considered to be later additions brought about by the misunderstanding of his followers – a task he felt was as easy as separating “diamonds from dunghills.” Using a pen knife and editions of the Gospels in English, French, Greek and Latin, Jefferson clipped around 1000 verses and pasted them together in a

bound book, intending to produce a coherent narrative of Jesus's ministry. As he hoped to reconcile Christian tradition with the evidence-based ideals of the Enlightenment, he had no use for the supernatural, and so the Jefferson Bible lacks such events as the virgin birth, miracles like turning water into wine, and even the resurrection. After Jefferson's death in 1826, the Life and Morals remained a family keepsake for decades before it was rediscovered by the US National Museum (the Smithsonian) and published soon after." (Peter Manseau quote from interview by John Turner, 2020) <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2020/09/the-jefferson-bible-an-interview-with-peter-manseau/>

It has often been observed that theologians' interpretations of the gospels usually tell us more about the writer than about Jesus. This was the case with Thomas Jefferson's model. Modern theologians certainly bring more to bear on their interpretations but they still can be wrong. Not all models are true. Most scholars would find many faults with Jefferson's model. Models are not better than the data they use. Commonly there are gaps in the data and uncertainty ranges in the inputs. Models integrate data together based on the understanding of the one who developed the model. Often the assumptions behind a model are hard to recognize or define.

New information now available related to the New Testament

Were the more recent views driven by new discoveries? If the modern scholarly understanding of the New Testament is different, what new data is available?

New Testament Texts

Earlier translations were based on texts that were received in the 1500s. The translations were good but we do have earlier texts available today. We have fragments of each of the gospels from the second century. For example, we have an almost complete text from c. 330–360 (Codex Sinaiticus) and others that are also early. Some of the proposals for when they were written have been disproven. There are variations in details but overall, today we can have more confidence that we have the original words in at least 98-99 % of the New Testament (Geisler, nd).

Dead Sea Scrolls

The discovery of ancient scrolls near Qumran in Israel excited the world. It has been called the greatest archaeological discovery ever. OT scholars were thrilled to find much older texts that basically confirmed the accuracy of the OT texts. They also provided large amounts of new information about Jews living between ~408 BC to 318 AD. There continues to be debate about who the writers were and how they fit with what we know about Jewish groups from this time period from other sources. It seems clear though that no part of the NT is disproven or even made questionable by the scrolls. They demonstrate that there were more groups in Judea and other things going on that were not known before. It provides a more robust view, but does not change the NT view, particularly of Jesus.

Other Archaeological discoveries

Many discoveries have been made that reflect on our understanding of the NT. Archaeological finds clearly support the historical accuracy of the NT in terms of customs, geography and in many cases individuals. Here is a list of some of the archaeological finds:

- Crucifixion victim from 1st century
- Simon Peter's house in Capernaum
- A small portion of the Gospel of John, chapter 18 copied on a piece of papyrus and dating to about 125 AD
- Boat from Jesus' time from the Sea of Galilee
- Pool of Siloam, where Jesus healed a blind man
- Pool of Bethesda, where Jesus healed a paralyzed man
- The Nazareth decree- an edict from an unnamed Caesar ordering capital punishment for anyone caught disturbing graves or tombs, dated to the first half of the 1st century AD (possibly a reaction to resurrection claims)
- Burial box of the high priest, Caiaphas from Jesus' trial
- Pontius Pilate: carved limestone with a partially intact inscription attributed to, and mentioning, Pontius Pilate. A ring mentioning him was found in 2018
- Inscription where the emperor Claudius refers to "*Gallio, my friend and Proconsul*", named in Acts 18 where he effectively saved Paul from a crowd.

What kind of discoveries might have been found? I can envision a different dead sea scrolls that tied to the early church and showed a very different faith. Perhaps they might have shown a group of potential witnesses to Jesus ministry without the resurrection. Perhaps the Christians might have had military objectives. Perhaps the locations in the Gospels or Acts might have proven totally wrong. Perhaps, Pilate would have returned to Italy before Jesus crucifixion. If we were living in the year 1800 and looking forward, we would not have known what all would come ahead. For all we would have known, nothing would ever have been found.

Bible scholars have much more knowledge of first century Greek, known as "koine", the common language of the Greeks after the close of the classical period. New discoveries have helped shed new light on older documents as well. That said, first century records are pretty rare. One of my skeptical friends confidently proclaimed that the failure to find accounts of Jesus' trial and resurrection among the Roman records brings the Biblical accounts into question. One of the problems with this theory is that no such records have ever been found, with or without accounts of Jesus. What we do have are a few historian's accounts.

The most important are the writings of the Jewish historian, Josephus. Writing around the end of the first century, he provides firsthand accounts of the culture and times of Jesus. He mentions Jesus and His brother, James, though giving little information about either. Josephus corroborates many cultural characteristics, people and places from the NT. He discusses John the Baptist and corroborates his death at the hands of Herod Antipas, though explaining the motive differently than the NT. More information on interpreting Josephus can be found here:

<https://bible.org/article/josephus%E2%80%99-writings-and-their-relation-new-testament>

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/portrait/josephus.html>

Modern scholars are thus now armed with more reliable texts, a better understanding of the ancient Greek language, new archaeological discoveries, and a more complete picture of the overall first century than ever before. Do they give a firm basis to reassess the authorship of the NT or meaning of Jesus or of how the church might have reshaped the story? Overall, the findings from archaeology and ancient literature tell us very little new about the historical Jesus or beliefs of the early church. The key questions that serve to separate historical views of Jesus and of development of the early church from modern scholarly views are not changed by the new material. If anything, the discoveries have tended to reinforce the accuracy of the NT books. It comes down to the internal clues in the NT books. These have been studied for 1900 years. We certainly do know more about the time period than earlier scholars did. In this case however, most of the difference in the models for the New Testament really just comes down first to the interpretation of who Jesus was (and who He **is**, if the historical view is correct.)

After all of the above discussion to set the scene, it is finally time to look at those earliest NT books. Conservative scholars date all of the NT books to within the first century. Unfortunately, we can't look at the copywrite date or carbon date any original manuscripts. Most scholars consider the last book written to have been the book of Revelation. What order the others were written in is a matter of debate. For instance, Marcus Borg wrote a book in 2012, entitled "Evolution of the Word: The New Testament in the Order the Books Were Written". As a scholar, he presents the books in an order that fits his model of the development of the early church. His view of Jesus as a scholar is far from that of conservative scholars. Although he continued to be an Episcopalian, his scholarly opinion deviated from traditional dates. Here is a link to a spreadsheet that lists the books in his order with his interpretation of their authors and dates and shows my own view, based typically in line with more conservative views. It also includes some comments about two rationales: [Evolution of the Word](#). Borg and many modern scholars reject the authors accepted by the early church. Regardless of the scholastic camp, some books are recognized by all to have been among the earliest.

For this post, I will look at these five: **Mark, I Thessalonians, Galatians, I Corinthians, and James**. Mark is recognized by most modern scholars as the earliest gospel written. I prefer to date Mark earlier than most modern scholars and will discuss this more later. I have included what were probably the three first letters written by Paul. Though many modern scholars reject Paul as the author of some of the other books, all recognize these three to have been written by Paul and written relatively early. I am also including the book of James because many conservative scholars consider it to have been written very early. The topics it primarily addresses do not impact the subject at hand, so it has little to contribute to this discussion anyway.

I am not going to use Luke-Acts directly, though they were also relatively early. Acts provides the only account for much of the early development of the church after the resurrection. Some authors claim that it is highly romanticized. For instance, Muslim author, Reza Aslan (2014) says this about Paul:

"The story of Paul's dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus is a bit of propagandistic legend created by the evangelist Luke; Paul himself never recounts the story of being blinded by the sight of Jesus."

Like most Muslim, Aslan rejects Paul's teaching. Such claims are interpretations that are typically lacking in any real data basis. The people, settings, customs and travels in Acts have much documentation and support from other sources.

I Thessalonians

Virtually all scholars agree that I Thessalonians was written by Paul and possibly his earliest letter preserved in the NT. Paul was highly influential in the development of Christianity for several reasons. 1) He was a tireless evangelist who planted churches across what are now Turkey and Greece. This involved great risks and many sacrifices but was very important to spreading the faith. 2) His theological teachings served to interpret Jesus and deepen the faith. 3) Beginning in Antioch, Paul was a leader in moving the faith from being a sect within the Jewish faith into a separate religion where grace and faith replaced following the Jewish Laws.

Date: 50 AD (Borg) – 51 AD (J McArthur) (*20 years after the crucifixion of Jesus*) Dating is based on chronology of Acts. It is interesting that some modern scholars are skeptical of Acts but all use its chronology.

General Description: Paul planted a church in Thessalonica in ca 49-50AD. He was forced to leave but continued to be concerned about the faith of this group of believers. The letter was written to address specific issues that had been reported to Paul. Paul's letters were written to be read orally to a group of believers (Witherington, 2008).

View of Jesus and relationship to Trinity: Jesus is called Jesus Christ (1:1). Messiah (Christ) is already a proper noun and part of His name. The resurrection is offered as evidence that Jesus will return (1:10). The letter refers to "*the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus*" (2:14-15). This is consistent with the gospel accounts. No other biographic details of Jesus' life are given. While the fully developed concept of the Trinity would not come for a long time, Paul referred to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (1:3-5). Jesus is clearly presented as God in this early book (possibly the earliest).

Driving doctrines: Jesus will return... be ready! Paul obviously expected Jesus soon when he wrote this letter (4:15, 5:2). He was concerned that some were not acting as Christians should in this situation. They were not prepared.

Church development: It was written to a "church", presumably a "house church", that met in a home. No organization details are given. Paul says that this church "*became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea*". This indicates that Paul held the Judean churches in high regard and considered them examples of what other churches should be like, in at least some regards.

Summary and other comments: The letter shows that the first churches focused on a gospel that included Jesus as fully divine. The resurrection was central. Jesus did not return in Paul's lifetime as Paul expected, but that does not impact the message. We often learn that the Bible writers were human. Paul's human view of the timing may have been off, but Jesus' timing is not. This book fits well with events recorded in the book of Acts, supporting the case that both are historically reliable.

Galatians

All scholars agree that Galatians was written by Paul and was one of his earliest letters preserved in the NT. Some consider it to have been an early doctrinal statement, a sort of preparation for the book of Romans. It was not addressed to a particular church, but was meant to be read by a set of churches in Galatia.

Date: 50-54 AD (Borg) – 49 AD (J McArthur) (*19-24 years after the crucifixion of Jesus*) Dating depends on whether the letter was written before or after the Jerusalem Council (~49-50 AD). Galatians describes the conflict over whether new Gentile believers needed to keep the law, but opinions vary as to whether the description is of the actual council (Acts 15) or an earlier related meeting. I suspect that Gal. 2:1-10 is describing the same meeting that Luke described in Acts, but written from Paul's perspective and to suit his immediate purposes in this book.

General Description: Paul was very concerned that some were turning away from grace and back to the Law. This letter contains a brief account of his salvation and more biographical information than most of Paul's letters. It is not always possible to be certain how it aligns with Luke's accounts in Acts but I see no significant conflicts. They are just two accounts written from different perspectives and for different purposes.

View of Jesus: Christ is again part of Jesus' name (1:1). Paul says that he received his gospel, not from men or through men but from "Jesus Christ and God the Father". This shows that Paul certainly considered Jesus to be God. The Holy Spirit is named as well (3:5). The resurrection is offered in the first verse... It was crucial! Jesus is "Lord Jesus Christ" in 1:3. He gave himself for our sins. This sounds like the crucifixion as portrayed in the Gospel accounts.

After listing the sins of the flesh, Paul reports, "*that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*" (5:21). Though Paul does not use the phrase "kingdom of God" as often as the synoptic writers did, when he did, it probably reflects the influence of the actual words used by the earthly Jesus in His teaching. Though Paul did not use many of Jesus' words as recorded in the Gospel, they come through.

Driving doctrines: Salvation is by grace through faith, not the OT Law.

Church development: Galatians names James, the brother of Jesus, Cephas (Peter) and John from the church in Jerusalem. Peter and John were prominent in the Gospels as well. Acts shows that James led the church in Jerusalem. Other sources confirm this as well. Galatians is consistent with the picture from the Gospels and Acts. There were sharp conflicts within the church as were recorded in Acts. Paul's account is perhaps more pointed than Luke's, but not contradictory. We see the apostles moving around and visiting the churches and often leading groups but no other details of local church organization are given.

Summary and other comments: If there were differences from views about who Jesus was or what He did that were held in Jerusalem or with other the disciples after the resurrection, they are not shown here. Paul certainly had opportunity to learn about the earthly time of Jesus from the eyewitnesses. Continued interaction with the eyewitnesses is shown by the visit of Peter to Antioch and Paul's visit to Jerusalem.

I Corinthians

This important book records Paul's Gospel and he includes more information about the crucifixion than in most places.

Date: 54-55 AD (Borg) – 55 AD (J McArthur) (24-25 years after the crucifixion of Jesus) All scholars accept this basic date.

General Description: The church in Corinth had many problems and Paul wrote to correct them, exercising his apostolic authority over this church.

View of Jesus: Again ... the "Lord Jesus Christ" is God over and over and in many ways. Jesus is the agent of creation. *"yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist."* (8:6). In I Cor 6:11, Paul refers to *"the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."*

Jesus crucifixion and the cross are shown as important and interpreted as key to the Gospel. I Cor 15:1-11 is the earliest account of the resurrection whose early origin is undisputed by all scholars. (I would suggest that Mark was written earlier, but this view is in the minority.) See my post here, regarding this report: [First Report of the Resurrection](#) It is still important to realize that this report is from an early church oral tradition that may have arisen within months of the resurrection. How does this report fit with the Gospels? Neither this nor the Gospels ever claim to be exhaustive. It is not always clear which Gospel accounts are referred to, but I don't see any contradictions.

Paul refers to the "Kingdom of God" (6:10). As in Galatians, this probably goes back to words from Jesus' teachings.

Driving doctrines: This early church needed to learn godliness. They had to understand the Gospel, its basis and how that would affect their life. They had to know what they believed was true and secure. Paul continued to talk about Christ's return, but perhaps as less imminent as in I Thessalonians.

Church development: We don't know how large this church was, but Paul ministered there for two to three years, based on Acts. The letter confirmed that the church observed a form of communion, if sometimes poorly, in I Cor 11:23-26. It is significant that Paul reports: *"For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you"*. The Lord's Supper is then described just as the Gospels report. In fact, some suggest that Paul was quoting the book of Luke. I would suggest that they were both quoting an early creed passed through the early church.

Paul reports *"And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?"* (12-28-

29". He does not report bishops (pastors) or deacons, probably because they were not present, though this is an assumption.

Summary and other comments: Paul's teaching to this NT church fit well with the Jesus of the Gospels. If the church created Christ, then this must have happened right after His death. The creeds in I Cor. 11:23-26 and 15:3-7 clearly arose very early. The Corinthian church was visited by Peter enough that some claimed to follow him. (1:12). This shows that they had opportunity to be exposed to eyewitnesses from a very early period, providing feedback to keep the story consistent.

James

This short epistle tells us that it was written by James, though it does not tell us more about him. The early church considered it to have been written by the brother of Jesus. It is addressed to "To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion". That is consistent with a writer from Jerusalem, where James, the brother of Jesus is reported by multiple sources to have lived and died. It is interesting that it was not universally accepted immediately. The Muratorian fragment (~170 AD) did not include James. The reason is uncertain. It is fair to conclude that there is some uncertainty about both the author and in particular the date, as reflected below.

Date: 80's AD (Borg) – 44-49 AD (J McArthur) (14-59 years after the crucifixion of Jesus) There are virtually no historical references in the book. Dating is based on either: 1. the perception of when such a message would have been written based on our model of church history or 2. Arguments from silence, such as no reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

General Description: The book is not a theological book, but rather very practical teachings about living the Christian life.

View of Jesus: "Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory" (1:1) God the father is referred to multiple times, but the Spirit is not. No other details are presented. That said, I see no conflict with the teachings of Jesus as presented in places such as the Sermon on the Mount.

Driving doctrines: The Christian faith should involve action. It is not just theory.

Church development: No details given.

Other comments: Regardless of when this book was written, the lack of details limits its impact on questions addressed here.

Mark

Most modern scholars of a wide range of perspectives consider Mark to have been the earliest Gospel written. I take the position that the Gospel was written 45-55 AD with 55 AD as likely. This is based on the Gospel of Luke being written in ~60 AD and using Mark as a source. I have written about Mark in some detail in this post: [Examining the Book of Mark](#)

Date: ~70 AD (Borg) – 50's AD (J McArthur) (20-40 years after the crucifixion of Jesus)

General Description: John Mark was known as a close disciple of the Apostle Peter and wrote the Gospel based on Peter's accounts. It was written to record Peter's story of Jesus. It was intended both to document Jesus life for early Christians and as a tool to use with non-believers. It was written to gentiles as evidenced by the times he explains Aramaic terms. It is the shortest gospel. As written first, it influenced those to follow as is particularly obvious for Matthew and Luke, who used it as a key source, often quoting it verbatim.

View of Jesus: From verse 1:1, it is clear that Jesus was recognized as the Messiah: *"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God"*. His divinity is recognized throughout. Both the Father and Holy Spirit are also named as distinct parts of God as well. One clear example where the deity of Jesus is shown is where He forgives sins (Mark 2:7-12). All recognized that only God could forgive sins. Jesus controlled nature, healed the sick, and ordered demons and they obeyed. All these were consistent with presenting Jesus as the hope of the world. Jesus told of a coming time when the Jewish temple would be destroyed and a time when Jesus would return with glory. He told them, *"But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come."* (13:32-33)

In Mark, Jesus often instructed individuals not to tell who he was (i.e. 1:34, 5:43, 7:36), but the people often disobeyed. In 1901, William Wrede proposed that this was Mark's interpretation. Oxford Biblical Studies put it this way:

"Wrede explained that Mark was giving not a historical account but a theological interpretation. It was impossible for Jesus' Messiahship to have been accepted until after belief in the resurrection. Then it was realized that Jesus had been the Messiah all along. But how was it that he was not recognized? The answer was that he had sworn people to secrecy—though the demons, being supernatural beings, recognized the truth (Mark 1: 24). When Jesus spoke in parables, Mark's view was that they were deliberately couched in language which concealed the truth"

This was an interesting theory, but there are simpler explanations for this aspect. Mark, for his own purposes, chose to accentuate this way that Jesus worked. Jesus recognized the risk that some would try to make him a military king. He exerted His own control on the timing. It is true that Mark had theological motives, but did he really have the power to reinvent Jesus? Even if the later dates are correct, eyewitnesses were available, visiting the churches and providing a feedback mechanism to correct errors.

Driving doctrines: Mark presents Jesus as messiah, the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. He emphasizes action and parables. The crucifixion narrative is the major event. It was probably part of the Christian oral tradition, but then Peter probably had a major part in shaping that oral history. It is much discussed that the gospel ends abruptly with the empty tomb, using the Mark 16:8 as the actual end. There are a number of theories about why Mark chose to do it this way or even could the original ending have been lost. In the end we don't know. It is all arguments for silence. In the end all we have is theories here.

Church development: This book tells us little about the church when it was written, but as a gospel account, that is not surprising.

Other comments: The earliest gospel account may be short, but it is packed with Jesus as the Creator in the flesh. It is not as theological as the Gospel of John or the Book of Romans but a very early view of Christ that tells the story from a vital perspective.

Discussion

If it is true that there have been no new discoveries, either as documents or other materials that call into question the accuracy of the NT writings, then looking at the first documents written in the Christian faith should show us whether the faith changed.

- Earliest writings all call the man from Nazareth – Jesus Christ, often with other exalted descriptors or titles.
- All fit with the chronology of the Gospel of Acts
- Few details of Jesus’ ministry are given in the letters.
- Both the letters and the Gospel of Mark show Jesus as crucified and resurrected
 - In each book, this is seen as central to the new faith
- Evidence for opportunities for eyewitnesses to correct errors and misrepresentation:
 - The letters show evidence of continued interaction with the eyewitnesses such as Peter, John and James the brother of Jesus
 - Connection to the church in Jerusalem is found where even more witnesses were available.
- The earliest account comes from the early creed recorded in I Corinthians 15. Here going back to a few years, if not a few months after the events, Jesus death and resurrection were reported along with eyewitnesses given that were alive and available to provide validation.

I suggest that the scholar’s initial view of who Jesus was, strongly shaped the scholar’s final interpretation. This included the view that the historical Jesus was very different from the Jesus Christ of the church. I understand that when a historian examines Jesus the same way as any other historical character, they will begin with the minimum that can be confidently documented regarding him. Consider someone other than Jesus. If there are miracles asserted, then the historian will be skeptical of them. If there are assertions that the person was more than human, they will typically assume error. Consider then Jesus. If Jesus really were God in the flesh, he would be difficult to fit into a normal mold. I do not know how each of the scholars arrived at their view of who Jesus was, but a different answer to this question would change the conclusions.

All of the earliest NT documents considered Jesus to have been God in the flesh. If that were true, the development of the church and its theology would have been very different than if Jesus were just a charismatic human leader who started a new religion. In both cases, the followers would have been

human, with human strengths and weaknesses, but if the Holy Spirit really was working through them, His presence would also be detectable beyond the normal human elements.

How have historians/theologians interpreted Jesus through the last century? Marcus Borg (1993) wrote an article that summarized different “scholarly” views of the historical Jesus through that time. Here are some that he named:

1. Albert Schweitzer, 1910, looked for the historical Jesus and came out with an “eschatological Jesus.” He was saying that Jesus saw himself as the fulfillment of the OT prophecies to restore Israel. That was what he meant by “the Kingdom is at hand”. Of course, the kingdom didn’t make it, so the human Jesus was a failure to him.
2. E.P. Sanders, 1985, saw Jesus as “a prophet and agent of restoration eschatology”. He again sees Jesus fail in his quest.
3. Burton Mack, 1988, saw Jesus as a “Hellenistic-type cynic sage.” As Jesus was from Galilee, he doesn’t think his thinking was all that Jewish. He was an itinerant teacher who taught wisdom that mocked conventional beliefs.
4. Elisabeth Fiorenza, 1983, saw Jesus as an egalitarian, anti-patriarchal wisdom prophet, a great defender of feminism.
5. Richard Horsley, 1985, saw Jesus as a “Elijah-type social prophet”, challenging the ruling elites.
6. Marcus Borg, 1984, saw Jesus as a “spirit person”, a mystic, a mediator or conduit of the power of the spirit to flow in the world. He was also a “subversive sage” and social prophet.
7. John Dominic Crossan, 1991, “Jewish cynic peasant with an alternative social vision”

These scholars reject the Biblical Jesus as something that arose later by the church, but each believed that they had been able to dig through and find out what he was really like. To me, they have found a Jesus that they wanted to find.

If a scholar wants to consider Jesus, the first century documents and church, how could they go about it? They must first deal honestly with the question of who is Jesus. In many cases, the unstated presumption is that he was not God, but just a religious leader of some variation. Starting from this presumption, finding history in the NT will involve eliminating a lot. If one were to come to the conclusion first that Jesus was God in the flesh, then the examination of those first documents will be very different.

Is the Jesus of the later books in the New Testament different than in these early books that I considered? Five books are commonly attributed to the Apostle John- The Gospel of John, I John, II John, III John and Revelation. Many modern scholars reject Apostle John as their author. Regardless, they were written in the first century (or some would say early in the 2nd century for Revelation). They all present a very exalted view of Jesus, particularly in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. Is it different than that the Apostle Paul presents? I think the views are totally compatible and complementary. As discussed by Craig Blomberg (2011), it is likely that John was familiar with one or more of the synoptic gospels and deliberately wrote his gospel to add additional information regarding

the ministry of Jesus and interprets his life theologically. I don't find a different Jesus in any of the later NT books.

Conclusion

In beginning this blog, I used the development of the Mormon church to illustrate that divergent views can develop quickly. I questioned whether or not this happened in Christianity. It seems that in this case, all of the earliest documents give a single coherent story of Jesus. It is not a one-dimensional view. We see Jesus from different perspectives but they add to the picture. The Christian faith says that God chose to reveal Himself to and through imperfect humans. The essential element of the faith seem to have arisen during Jesus ministry, His crucifixion and resurrection. Paul certainly brought the theological understanding to new depths, but not differently. The early eyewitnesses are never reported to have changed their story or invented Jesus differently. When such ideas arose, they came later and not from the apostles or other early disciples.

If Jesus was Jesus Christ from birth, God come to earth, His words were God's words. He had the power to ensure that His message would not be lost, though the message was carried by flawed humans. He had and continues to have the power to change lives. The Jesus of the New Testament was quite real, but He is very demanding. He calls for us to take up our cross and follow daily. He calls for us to abide in Him.

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