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The Search for Jesus

Some scholars are debunking the Gospels.
Now traditionalists are fighting back.
What are Christians to believe?



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THE GOSPEL TRUTH?

The iconoclastic and provocative Jesus Seminar argues that not much of the New Testament can be trusted. If so, what are Christians to believe?

By DAVID VAN BIEMA

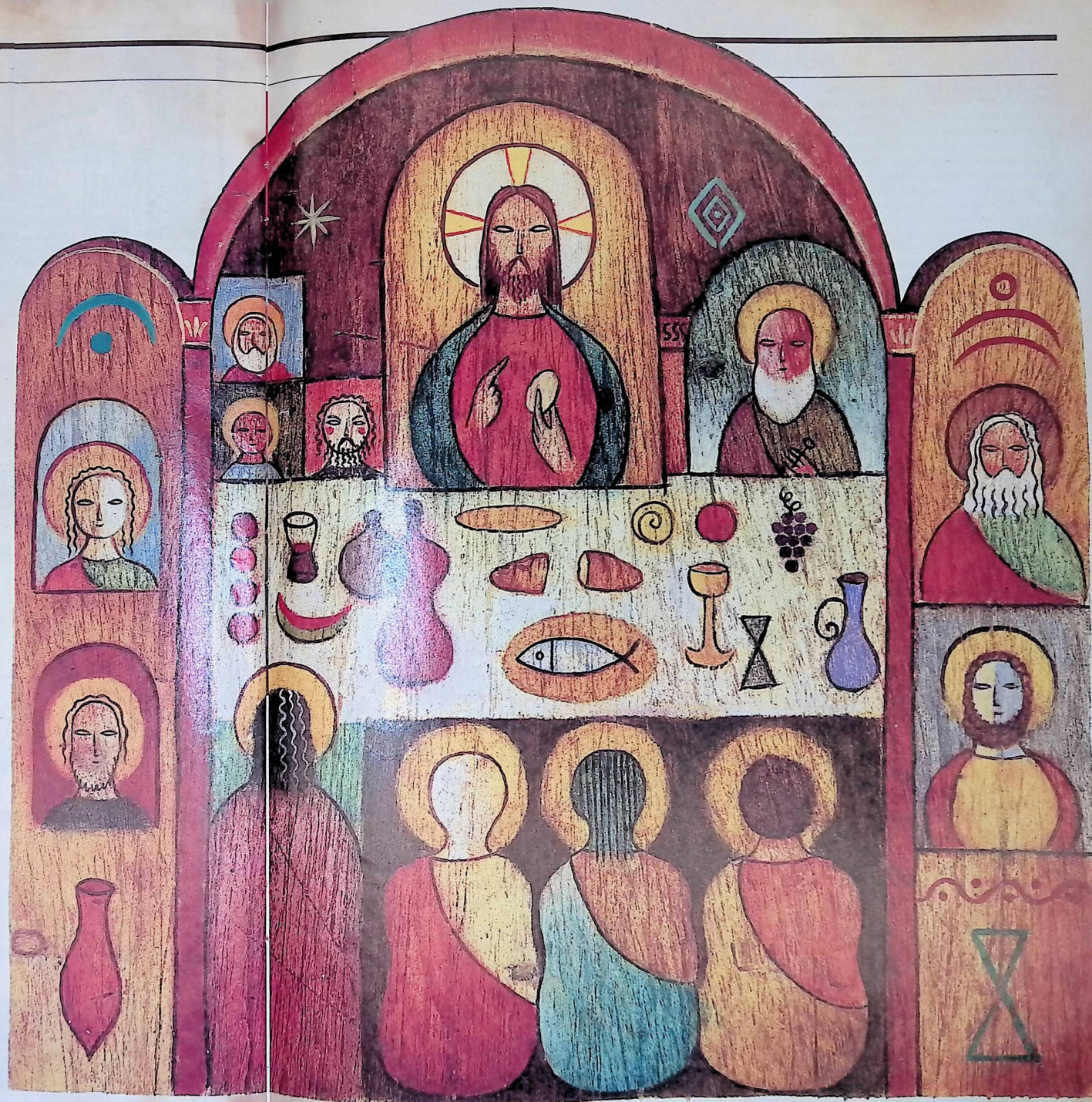


UDAS DIDN'T DO IT. OR AT LEAST THE CHARGES wouldn't stick. That was the decision of the judges (admittedly a little after the fact) in the Flamingo Resort Hotel Ballroom in Santa Rosa, California, late last year. Of course, there was testimony against him, primarily from Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But that foursome is notoriously unreliable: the judges at the Flamingo already had to throw out the Evangelists' testimony on the Nativity, the Resurrection, the Sermon on the Mount and any number of other cases. So, as regards the matter of Judas, although there was a good deal of debate—some people felt the evidence showed he did do it, some people felt he did it with help from other Apostles, some people felt he was simply a literary device—the 50 panelists assembled at the Flamingo agreed that it was highly unlikely that for 30 pieces of silver, Judas Iscariot kissed his master, Jesus Christ, and thus betrayed him to the authorities to be crucified.

Sacrilege? Well, the Jesus Seminar is at it again. It is Holy Week, and some 1.5 billion Christians around the globe are celebrating the Passion and the Resurrection of their Lord, who died on the Cross for their sins and rose on the third day. Simultaneously,

THE LAST SUPPER

The Seminar says Luke's verses are so laden with "Christianizing" propaganda as to be "beyond recovery"



however, a book called *The Acts of Jesus* is in the editing process. It will repeat the assertion, published by the 75-person, self-appointed Seminar three years ago, that close historical analysis of the Gospels exposes most of them as inauthentic; that, by inference, most Christians' picture of Christ may be radically misguided. That their Jesus, in fact, "is an imaginative theological construct, into which have been woven traces of that enigmatic sage from Nazareth—traces that cry out for recognition and liberation from the firm grip of those whose faith overpowered their memories."

The issue of the so-called historical Jesus is not exactly new: it roiled the consciences of European academics for 150 years and contributed to American Protestant schisms in the 1920s. But until recently, much of the current generation of churchgoers remained blissfully unaware of its tangles. No longer. In the past decade, iconoclastic and liberal biblical scholars have actively sought to publicize their views, breaking them out of the rarefied academic atmospheres where they have incubated. These radical exegetes have now stirred spirited rebuttals from conservatives and traditionalists who want to make sure the faithful hear their side of the argument. For example, the Seminar's 1993 book *The Five Gospels* has already provoked a savage counterattack by Luke Timothy Johnson, a New Testament scholar at Emory University and the author of the recently published *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. "Things of fundamental importance," Johnson thunders, "are being distorted."

But Johnson's book, specifically written on the same popular level as the Seminar's publications, has inevitably contributed to the issue's achieving a sort of pop-culture critical mass. Christological chatter pervades even the Internet, and dozens of other volumes on the search for Jesus are either just published or in the works. This week the cable channel Cinemax 2 will be running a program called *The Gospel According to Jesus*, which features celebrities and ordinary people reciting from a custom-tailored Bible. It is based on Scripture assembled by author Stephen Mitchell, who deleted many of Jesus' sayings and most of the events in his life, noting, "We can't be

sure of anything that Jesus actually said." Experts on all sides of the question are crisscrossing the country, debating before schools and congregations whose growing taste for the topic has surprised them. "You could be out there every week," marvels a circuit-riding scholar. Notes another: "There's an enormous appetite among ordinary churchgoers," who, he adds, "are very puzzled about what's going on."



THE BETRAYAL

The Seminar voted down Judas' traitorous kiss, believing it to be either unverifiable or a literary device. Some panelists theorize that other disciples may have helped Judas

Maureen Smith is puzzled. In February, HarperCollins, which publishes many of the competing visions, set up an Internet mailing list called Crosstalk. Although primarily for scholars wishing to continue the debate in cyberspace, it is turning more and more into a clearinghouse for the thoughts of troubled onlookers. "Clearly Jesus had to say more than we have on record," Smith, a seminary student, posted plaintively two weeks ago. "The very fact that there is a Sunday Jesus almost 2,000 years later... argues that what he said and did must have been pretty impressive." (Actually, it is exactly 2,000 years later. One of the few aspects

about the historical Jesus on which everyone agrees is that he was probably born around 4 B.C.) But Smith's concern is understandable. If the Seminar's claims are valid—that little can be known of the most basic elements of his life, let alone of the miracles—then on what is Christian belief based? And if believers insist on believing anyway, then whose example should they follow? Every new book, every new theory seems to wear away some long-cherished relic in this battle between faith and knowledge. Those who would come to Jesus' rescue must ask, Is it too late? Can that which has been rejected be restored?

For hundreds of years, most Christians would have found the idea of distinguishing between the Jesus one prays to and the Jesus of history a ludicrous one. Well into our half of the millennium, it was assumed (as it still is in America's expanding Fundamentalist and Evangelical congregations) that the Gospels, the *Acts of the Apostles* and Paul's Epistles were the best history of all: a Christian would no more consider asking whether Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead than question his status as the risen Messiah. But Martin Luther, in pioneering Protestantism, stressed that every Christian could and should establish his own relationship with Christ by the reading of Scripture. And from the 17th century on, Western civilization, which had previously understood itself according to faith, found a new way to apprehend the world: the precise calibration and cool skepticism of scientific rationalism. In time, scholars began to subject Jesus to the tools of historical and literary analysis.

There are, after all, four Gospels, whose actual writing, most scholars have come to acknowledge, was done not by the Apostles but by their anonymous followers (or their followers' followers). Each presented a somewhat different picture of Jesus' life. The earliest appeared to have been written some 40 years after his Crucifixion. Which was most accurate? Even Luther had a favorite Gospel (*John*) and appeared to regard the rest as less essential. And starting with the 1835 critique *The Life of Jesus* by David Friedrich Strauss, apostles of the new scientific method raised additional questions with increasing urgency: Might faith have caused the writers of all four Gospels to embellish on actual fact? Did the politics of the

early church cause them to edit or add to Jesus' story? Which parts of the New Testament were likely to be straight reportage rather than pious mythmaking?

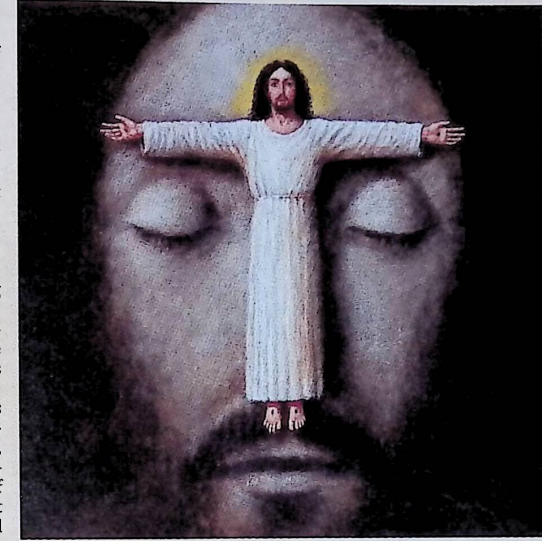
Depressingly few, the so-called higher critics found. There are only two or three references to Jesus in six pagan or Jewish sources, providing precious little corroborating data. Even if the standard for authenticity were agreement between the Gospels, there is less of that than one might imagine: the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan are just two of several parables that appear in only one version. By 1926, Rudolf Bultmann of Germany's University of Marburg, the foremost Protestant scholar in the field, threw up his hands: he called for a halt to inquiries regarding the Jesus of history. So unreliable were the Gospel accounts that "we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus." He advised good Christian scholars to concentrate on the Jesus of faith. But, as it turns out, they didn't.

The Jesus Seminar "was nothing new," says John Dominic Crossan, its co-chair, recalling the invitation he received from University of Montana professor Robert Funk to start the group. "I'd been working on the historical Jesus since 1969. What was new to me was his argument that there was an ethical necessity to let the public in on what [we] were doing." Crossan's voice still betrays the 62-year-old's origins in Tipperary, Ireland. He moved to America, joined the Servite order and was ordained in 1957. He left the priesthood to marry in 1968, but he admits his departure was probably inevitable owing to "constant trouble" over his biblical views.

Crossan was deep into what might be called the postmodern state of Bible studies. Experts had long considered sources for the Gospels undreamed of by Luther: passages from *Luke* and *Matthew*, for instance, that did not reflect the earlier written *Mark* but corresponded to one another were ascribed to a document known as Q, a bare-bones collection of sayings. In the 1980s, radicals took a large step farther. They suggested that only Q and similarly minimalist early documents, real and notional, might constitute authentic reporting; the rest of the Gospels was mostly tacked-on religious revisionism.

The new scholars sought to give voice to

the Jesus they detected suppressed beneath the dogma. They did not, however, all detect the same Jesus. Harvard's Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, has located a feminist paragon who saw God as Sophia (Wisdom) and himself as her spokesperson; Fiorenza contends the later church cloaked Jesus in the Christological garb as the Son of God. Crossan, relying heavily on the apocryphal Gospels of Thomas and Peter and the



THE RESURRECTION

Jesus' rising from the dead was blackballed by the Seminar, an unsurprising move since liberal scholars have always given that seminal miracle little credence

secret Gospel of Mark, has posited a "Mediterranean Jewish peasant."

As envisioned by Crossan in *The Historical Jesus* (and backed by his formidable scholarship), Jesus was concerned less with his Father's kingdom, as traditionally understood, than with bucking what the ex-priest has called "the standard political normalcies of power and privilege, hierarchy and oppression, debt foreclosure and land appropriation, imperial exploitation and colonial collaboration." This Tom Joad-ish Christ did not so much heal illnesses as cure false consciousness; his body was eaten by dogs at the foot of the Cross. Crossan has summarized

his message as "God says, 'Caesar sucks.'"

The skeptical scholars had well-developed views on the four traditional Gospels hardly in need of corroboration by committee. Yet Funk made what many found to be a compelling argument. At a time when the airwaves were full of televangelists touting the New Testament as God-inspired, inerrant (correct in all ways) and supportive of right-wing views, here was a channel for another viewpoint. "Bob Funk's Jesus is quite different from my Jesus," Crossan says. But both longed to get beyond what they saw as the prevailing attitude toward historical questioning: "Don't say it out in public, don't bring it into the churches."

The Five Gospels said it loud and proud. An introduction announced that "the Christ of creed and dogma, who had been firmly in place in the Middle Ages, can no longer command the assent of those who have seen the heavens through Galileo's telescope." The Seminarists circulated papers among themselves and met twice a year to vote on more than 2,000 separate pieces of scripture. They conceived a mediagenic means of voting: for each Gospel verse, each voter dropped a plastic bead in a bucket. The bead's color signified the scholar's opinion. The book quoted one participant's description: "Red: That's Jesus! Pink: Sure sounds like Jesus. Gray: Well, maybe. Black: There's been some mistake." *The Five Gospels* (the fifth one was Thomas) consisted of the holy text, likewise color-coded to indicate the Seminar's collated opinion of its authenticity.

The book listed positive and negative criteria employed before taking up the colored beads. The voters favored passages attested to by two or more sources. Since Jesus' culture was oral, not written, they assumed that shorter, punchier passages were more likely to be accurate. They also felt safer confirming idiosyncratic thoughts that ran against the social or religious grain of Jesus' day, involved role reversals or, in keeping with the style of the wandering wise men of the time, employed exaggeration, humor and concrete and vivid images. They preferred parables without explicit applications.

By contrast, they shunned passages that they felt represented post-Jesus rationalizing by his disciples. That eliminated

PALM SUNDAY

Before entering Jerusalem, Jesus said, "If any one of you would be first, he must be last..." The words, says the Seminar, superficially resemble his themes but also reflect church rivalries

most language used to contextualize or connect; borrowings from the Old Testament (including most of what Jesus said on the Cross); and sayings expressed in explicitly Christian terms. Also taboo were monologues by Jesus to which there could have been no witness, verses expressing foreknowledge of events after his death and any claims on his part to be the Messiah. And one final admonition: "When in sufficient doubt, leave it out."

And leave it out they did. According to the *The Five Gospels*, only 18% of the words ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels may have actually been spoken by him. John was eliminated completely; only one sentence in *Mark* met muster. Of the Sermon on the Mount in *Matthew*, the only words in red were "Our Father" and "Love your enemies," and four other brief sayings.

Last year the Seminar moved on from verses attributed by the Gospels to Jesus to descriptions of events. The as yet unpublished results were made available to par-



ticipants this month in a thick spiral notebook. The Seminar found all the Nativity descriptions to be inauthentic except for the name of Jesus' mother (Mary). No miracle working made the cut, although Jesus is generally credited with having healed some of the sick. He had a disciple named Mary Magdalene, entered a synagogue at least once and met some Pharisees. As regards the Passion and Easter: all descriptions of Jesus' trial are deemed inauthentic,

along with his Palm Sunday statement that he is the Messiah. On the authority of the Jewish historian Josephus, the Seminar records as historical the high priest Caiaphas' denunciation of Jesus to Pilate. When the next book comes out, the Resurrection, predictably enough, will appear in black print ("There's been some mistake").

Crossan's wish that the message reach the public was granted. It would be hard to find a newspaper in America that hasn't

done a story on the Seminar over the past decade. That's obvious upon reading Luke Timothy Johnson, who seems to quote most of them in his book-length, outraged response to the Seminar, *The Real Jesus*.

"People have no idea how fraudulent people who claim to be scholars can be," says Johnson. Study, graying, slightly owl-like, he teaches New Testament at Atlanta's Emory. Like Crossan, Johnson took priestly orders as a young man but gave up the

collar in order to marry. But Johnson never broke with the church, and as time went on, he became progressively more alarmed at the work of his fellow scholars.

Crossan and other liberal Jesus scholars, he believed, were exploring avenues "subtly contemptuous of the convictions of faith." As long as the debate had been quarantined in the corridors of the academy, he had held his peace. The advent of the Jesus Seminar, however, marked a major outbreak of what Johnson considered a dangerous contagion. "Americans generally have an abysmal level of knowledge of the Bible," he says. "In this world of mass ignorance, to have headlines proclaim that this or that fact about [Jesus] has been declared untrue by supposedly scientific inquiry has the effect of gospel. There is no basis on which most people can counter these authoritative-sounding statements."

So he provided one. With gusto. Over his book's 177 pages, he calls the Seminar "a 10-year exercise in academic self-promotion" and a "self-indulgent charade" and accuses Funk of "grandiosity and hucksterism." More substantively, not only does he find the Seminar wildly unrepresentative of scholarly consensus on the New Testament today; he thinks it "extraordinarily difficult" to avoid the impression that it is not hostile "to any traditional understanding of Jesus as defined by the historic creeds of Christianity."

The book's first part is devoted to a savage critique of the Seminar and its method-

ology. The group, writes Johnson, was "self-selected" not on grounds of quality of scholarship (he notes pointedly that one of its members is Paul Verhoeven, whose credit as director of the movie *Shogun* is far more recent than his Ph.D.), but on prior agreement on a goal. The goal, he maintains, is to discover a Jesus devoid of anything "mythical" or concerned with the actual possibility of a world to come, but reflective instead of the countercultural attitude favored by liberal academics. Although Johnson approves of some of the criteria the group applies to Scripture, he is derisive of its elimination of most long passages (members of oral cultures, after all, are renowned for memorizing epics) and fails to find a historical basis for its preference for quotes that flout the established order. Most important, he is dismayed by what he calls the Seminar's refusal to consider the Gospels' general "pattern" in favor of isolated passages. "What is left," he writes, "is a small pile of pieces."

Pieces which the unscrupulous can then reassemble as they see fit. Although it is impossible to prove any of the Gospels false, so little of them can be historically proved to be true, Johnson suggests, that by emphasizing that fact, scholars like Crossan and Funk have put themselves in the position of "jigsaw-puzzle solvers who are presented with 27 pieces of a thousand-piece puzzle and find that only six or seven of the pieces even fit together." A reasonable per-

THE SECRET LIVES OF JESUS CHRIST



Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever." That verse from the Epistle to the Hebrews has always been a little wistful, never a guarantee of theological peace even in the generations immediately following Jesus' ministry. The very division of the biblical canon into Old and New Testaments was the result of a ferocious debate over the nature of Jesus around the year A.D. 140. And as Christians multiplied, they would produce competing visions of Jesus, ranging from the Christ worshipped today to a tripartite Jesus who lived on the moon to a Jesus in Central Asia who merged with a Buddha and eventually inspired the naming of a Chinese dynasty.

THE SON OF WHICH GOD? Marcion, probably born around A.D. 85, was a formidable scholar of Scripture and a devotee of the teachings of St. Paul. A wealthy shipowner from what is now the Black Sea coast of Turkey, he made a large contribution to the struggling Christian community in Rome and then proceeded to enunciate his vision of Christ. The kind and good

Jesus, he declared, could not possibly be the Son of the implacably just, harshly rational God of the Jewish Prophets. No, that was the wrong God, merely the creator of this world. Jesus was the Son of an unknown and greater God, who out of completely unreasonable kindness and love sent his Son to deliver humankind from the legalistic master of creation. To buttress his beliefs, Marcion purged the miasma of texts Christians used as Scripture to form a "new" testament. In his eyes, it would be composed of the *Gospel of Luke*—the only account he trusted—and parts of 10 Epistles of Paul. No Prophets, no *Genesis*, no *Job*.

That scandalized Marcion's fellow Christians, who believed in a continuity of inspiration from Adam through Moses to Jesus. Not so, said Marcion, who deleted even Luke's accounts of the child Jesus. Jesus, Marcion believed, appeared fully grown in Capernaum to the fishermen who would become the first Disciples. The Christians of Rome promptly started to form their own canon, which included an "old" testament. They expelled Marcion from the church, handing him back his charity.

JESUS AND THE GNOSTICS Marcion started his own church, and his ideas inspired Christians delving into the theologies of *gnosis*, the Greek word for knowledge, which, as opposed to faith, they argued, was the true source of salvation. For many Gnostic Christians, Jesus only appeared to be man, for the God of this world is the master of matter, and Jesus could not defile himself by actually materializing. Indeed, he was spirit and only

seemed to die. Gnostic texts have Christ appearing to Peter as the Crucifixion is taking place, joyfully transcending all this world could hurt at him. The Resurrection becomes moot.

Gnostic cosmologies would overturn biblical traditions. The God of the Old Testament became evil incarnate. For if Satan could tempt Jesus with earthly power and riches, did that not mean that the world was Satan's to give? In time, Jesus would be the spirit of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, giving Adam and Eve a chance to escape from their dastardly creator with a taste of the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

THE MANICHAEAN CHRIST The idea of a conflict between the worlds of matter and spirit inspired Mani, a member of a Christian sect in 3rd century Mesopotamia. He saw the cosmos as divided between opposing forces: light and dark, good and evil, spirit and matter. Our age, he said, was chaotic because darkness had swallowed up portions of the light. But, he said, Jesus came into the world as part of a battle to distill light from the darkness. This dualistic philosophy was Manichaeism, and it would find adherents from North Africa to southern China.

Manichaeism's baroque mythology included a tripartite Jesus: Jesus the Splendor, who, long before the creation of the world, was sent to battle the voracious dark forces that had swallowed up the light; Jesus the Messiah, whose appearance revealed the extent of the unknown God's love for humankind; and, finally, the suffering Jesus, whose Crucifixion symbolized

not redemption but, rather, the suffering of light trapped in the material world. Jesus the Splendor lived on the moon, which waxed full each month as light was redeemed from the world and sent heavenward.

It was an astonishingly successful faith. St. Augustine was a Manichaean before converting to orthodox Christianity. Horrified Christian bishops would use the word Manichaean as a catch-all invective for all satanic heresies. Indeed, long after the Manichaean Church ceased to exist in the West, the Inquisition was established to put down rashes of what the Catholic Church saw as neo-Manichaeism.

JESUS THE BUDDHA The West, however, was not the only target of Manichaean missionaries. The religion flourished throughout Central Asia, where surviving texts preserve a Jesus who was merged with the Buddhist deity Maitreya, the Bodhisattva of the future, who, like Christ, will come at the end of the world. As the centuries passed, this Manichaean-tinged Maitreya would inspire millenarian revolts in China, one of which helped bring down the empire of Kublai Khan in the 14th century. The leader of the successful rebel coalition rewarded his allies of the "Bright" religion by naming the new regime after their faith—*Ming-chiao* in Chinese. And, thus, the opulent and imperious Ming dynasty, which later inspired Enlightenment philosophers in Europe with secularizing ideas, had a bit of Jesus buried deep in its heart.

—By Howard Chua-Eoan

son, he maintains, would "put those pieces together, make some guess about what that part of the puzzle might be about and then modestly decline overspeculation about the pieces that don't fit." Instead, "these solvers ... throw away the central piece ... and then bring in pieces from other puzzles [i.e., apocryphal manuscripts]. Finally, they take this jumble of pieces, sketch an outline of what the [whole thing] ought to look like on the basis of some universal puzzle pattern, and proceed to reshape the pieces until they fit the pattern." Inevitably, he writes, that pre-determined pattern is dictated by the puzzlers' sociological or political prejudices.

So disgusted is Johnson, in fact, that he, like Bultmann before him, counsels believers to ignore the search for the historical Jesus altogether. Does the Seminar condemn the Resurrection as unprovable? Rather than trying to assert the authenticity of the story of the empty crypt or backing up John's tale of Doubting Thomas, Johnson maintains that the Resurrection that has always mattered to Christians is the ongoing miracle, the "transforming, transcendent personal power" that marks the moving of the Holy Spirit in the hearts and among the communities of believers. "Christianity," he writes, "has never been able to 'prove' its claims except by appeal to the experiences and convictions of those already convinced. The only real validation for the claim that Christ is what the creed claims him to be, light from light, true God from true God, is to be found in the quality of life demonstrated by those who make this confession."

To which N.T. Wright replies: poppycock. "He kicks the ball back into his own net by mistake," Wright booms. "He's putting the clocks back to the 1890s, when the Germans said that all this historical Jesus nonsense shows we shouldn't be trying to find the Jesus behind the Gospels at all!"

Wright, who until recently taught New Testament at Oxford University, talks at his office in Lichfield, England, where he is dean of the 700-year-old Anglican cathedral. His is an influential voice in the debate; not only is his 600-page *Jesus and the Victory of God* eagerly anticipated by participants on both sides of the Atlantic, but he did an 18-city American lecture tour in 1995, and has similar plans this year.

On the face of it, he is Johnson's staunchest ally. Wright knows and likes Crossan—the two go drinking after their debates—but he calls his friend's latest book "radically wrong in almost every second thing it says." His own 40-page critique of the Jesus Seminar's work echoes Johnson's point regarding oral cultures and similarly questions the Seminar's snub of Jesus' apocalyptic, eschatological

side. Most important, he concurs that it is a mistake to "carve up" the New Testament and analyze the pieces separately. Wright believes the Gospels are more supportive than subversive of one another: "If I read about the Prime Minister in the *Telegraph*, the *Times*, the *Mail* and the *Guardian*, there are four different views, but that doesn't mean I don't have [a pretty good idea] of what the Prime Minister did."

"Jesus cannot be reduced to a wordsmith in the marketplace, spinning little aphorisms and telling funny stories," he announces. Building on previous work by the historian E.P. Sanders stressing Jesus' place within 1st century Judaism, Wright concludes that the Gospels provide sufficient evidence to deduce not just a wandering sage who was crucified for reasons unclear, but a prophet who announced a coming Kingdom of God and died for it; and that this framework in turn clarifies "dozens of examples where the details fall into place." Specifically, his book will state that Jesus' trial, the fact that he claimed to be the Messiah and his bodily Resurrection have sound historical basis.

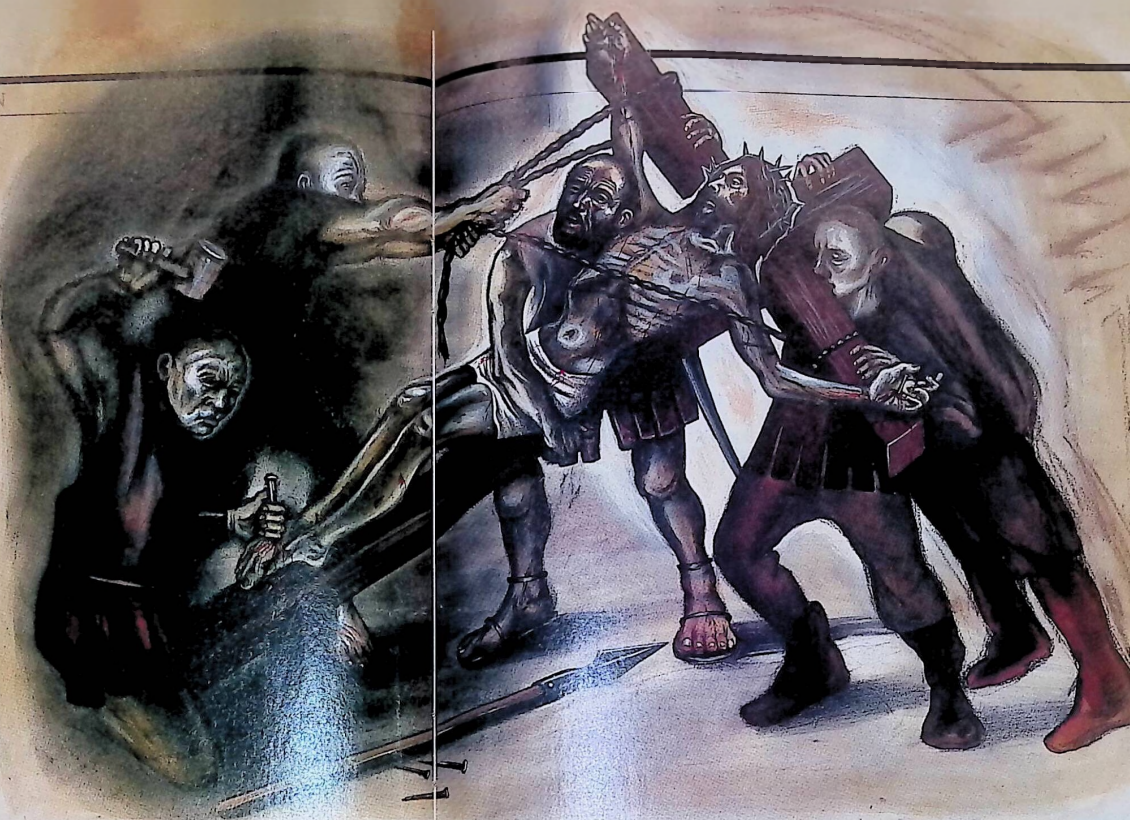
This, Wright points out, is in contrast not only to the findings of the Seminar but also to Johnson's conclusion, which he finds defeatist. "The street level of what Johnson is saying is, 'We can just believe the Bible and don't need to worry about it.' But it plays right into the hands of the Seminar, and there's a huge price to be paid for that. The challenge of the Enlightenment has always been, 'Oh, we know what Jesus was, and it shows Christianity was a mistake.' I'm trying to say, 'It's hard work, but if you stick with the historical enterprise to the bitter end, not only can you preach from it, but it's more powerful than what the Fundamentalists or the liberal reductionists offer.'"

"Take the Sermon on the Mount," says Craig Blomberg, a Baptist clergyman who considers himself a conservative Evangelical. "We know it's not a straight, stenographic account. When you look up those passages in *Matthew*, they can be read in a matter of minutes. Whereas a teacher who spoke to a large crowd like that might have held forth much of a day."

Most combatants in the historical Jesus

wars assume that at least one major American religious group is sitting them out. Traditionally, the Evangelical position on the New Testament was: It happened, and that's that. But the anthology *Jesus Under Fire*, for which Blomberg wrote a chapter, represents academic Evangelicalism's commitment to greater theological engagement and subtlety. He sketches out a position that, at least by its wording, may be easier for many Americans to accept than the statements by some of the topic's higher-profile jousters.

"The Christian view," he says, "has always been one that God's spirit was involved and created a degree of accuracy that would not have been there otherwise." Blomberg explains biblical inerrancy, long a defining tenet of conservative American religion, as follows: "When the texts are interpreted in accordance with their historical and literary context, what they say is true." That allows him to concede that the Sermon on the Mount might have gone on longer than the Gospels suggest, and also to credit the differences among *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke* and *John* to "omissions and



THE CRUCIFIXION

"Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit" is a revision of a Psalm verse, which the Seminar says shows how freely the Evangelists attributed words from other sources to Jesus

paraphrases" that were a natural part of an oral culture. Once that is settled, he believes the picture of Jesus that they present is fundamentally accurate.

Does he believe it on the basis of science or faith? Perhaps a combination. "I cannot demonstrate that every single word is true. No historian can do that with any ancient document. So a faith commitment comes into play with what's left over after historical study has proceeded as far as it can. You could say my belief builds on the direction the evidence is already pointing."

Blomberg says he is delighted that many "grass-roots" Christians are willing to take the Gospels' picture of Jesus totally

on faith, but points out, "The problem is that other world views and religions make the same claims as we do. To defend your view in the marketplace of religious ideas, you have to be able to give reasons for why you believe the Bible's claims about itself."

It is in this context that Blomberg, given his position on the religious/political spectrum, makes a remarkably friendly assessment of the Jesus Seminar. "People like Crossan," he ventures, "see themselves, though we might disagree, as holding out one way of salvaging something of Christianity lest the whole thing deteriorate into pure unbelief."

Perhaps so. Certainly, without ceding to it the banner of Defender of the Faith, some close observers of the Seminar claim that its members have moderated somewhat their tone of radical skepticism. The Rev. Bruce Chilton, a religion professor at Bard College in upstate New York and one of the group's more conservative members, says the Seminar has become progressively less "programmatic." Ten years ago, Chilton testifies, "for many members, there appeared to be an assumption that

we needed to read the Gospels as if they were popular novels produced in the 2nd century." After a decade of work, they feel the texts have more to offer. "There is more of Jesus showing through than there was at the beginning."

Just how much may be evident four or five years from now, when the Seminar puts out its book after next. At its last meeting, its members decided to take the words and experiences of Jesus that have survived its fear-some winnowing and attempt to construct from them a picture of the man. This will not be easy. They don't have much material to work with. Moreover, their areas of agreement, thus far, have largely been on the negative, and their respective rescued Jesuses vary considerably. "There could be hopeless disagreement," notes Crossan. But if they really do undertake the project, they may come out the other end with considerably more empathy for the four (16? 32? 64?) men who attempted the same trick two millennia ago. And there is a certain satisfaction inherent in building something up.

Gene Janssen's life has been largely defined by the Christian church. He is a devout member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and worked 18 years full time as a church organist. Now he's employed as a reference librarian and archivist for the ELCA publishing house in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Janssen has not heard much about the Jesus Seminar, but what he did hear, a year or so ago, was a little shocking: that they said the Resurrection of Jesus Christ was not essential to the faith; and that, in fact, the Resurrection may not have occurred at all.

To which Janssen responded with equanimity. "When I heard those statements," he says, "I thought, 'O-o-o-k-k-k-a-y. Well, that's interesting.' I'm not in that academic, seminary-trained world, and I think my faith is strong enough that the debate going on in that world doesn't frighten me. In fact, I think it's good. Perhaps we will all learn something we haven't known."

"I trust in the staying power of Christianity. Some really goofy things have happened in the past 2,000 years, but somehow, the core, the essence, of the Christian religion has survived."

"God always surprises us."

—Reported by Richard N. Ostling/*New York* and Lisa H. Towle/*Raleigh*

EYEWITNESSES TO JESUS?

A German scholar argues that three bits of papyrus are the oldest fragments of St. Matthew's Gospel

By JOHN ELSON



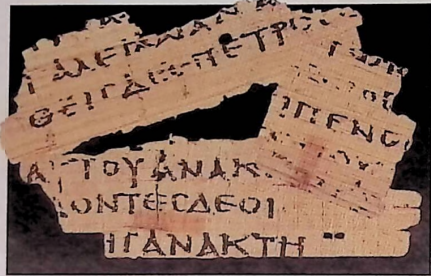
AS IT, AS SOME CLAIM, THE most important breakthrough in biblical research since the 1947 discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls? Or is it merely a scholar's over-hyped thesis, unsupported by solid evidence? These questions swirl about three tiny fragments of papyrus at Oxford University known collectively as the Magdalen Papyrus. Ragged-edged and dun-colored, they contain snippets of three passages from Chapter 26 of St. Matthew's Gospel in Greek script. For more than 90 years, the papyrus scraps had been housed at the library of Magdalen College, the gift of an obscure British chaplain who bought them at an antiquities market in Luxor, Egypt.

Specialists had long assumed that the Magdalen Papyrus was written sometime in the mid-to-late 2nd century A.D. Now, however, German papyrologist Carsten Peter Thiede has startled the rarefied world of biblical scholarship by arguing that the papyri are actually the oldest extant fragments of the New Testament, dating from about A.D. 70. Thiede's thesis, if correct, means St. Matthew's Gospel, as well as Mark's (on which it is based, in part), is not the secondhand account of Evangelists who were separated by decades from the Jesus of history. Instead, it reflects eyewitness testimony by near contemporaries of the carpenter from Nazareth.

Inevitably, Thiede's thesis has been sharply criticized by other experts who question both his credentials as a papyrologist and his methodology. Says Klaus Wachtel of the Institute for New Testament Exegesis at the University of Münster: "Thiede's paleographic arguments for an early dating are demonstrably untenable." The British scholar Graham Stanton

insists that "the case for a first-century date does not stand up to scrutiny."

Amplifying a learned article that he published in 1995, Thiede has marshaled his arguments in a new book called *Eye-witness to Jesus* (Doubleday; 206 pages; \$23.95), written with Matthew d'Ancona, a deputy editor and political columnist at London's *Sunday Telegraph*. As evidence of the fragments' early origins, Thiede notes that the handwriting on the Magdalen Papyrus is in a style known as uncial, which began to die out in the middle of the



THE MAGDALEN FRAGMENTS

Thiede has built tantalizing theories based on the long-ago gift of an obscure British chaplain

1st century. A second clue to the manuscript's origins is its format. The three fragments are from a codex, a primitive kind of book in which writing is found on both sides of the papyrus. (On a scroll, by contrast, only one side is used.) Contrary to the views of most biblical scholars, Thiede argues that codices were widely used by 1st century Christians, since they were easier to handle than scrolls.

One of Thiede's findings has intriguing implications. In three places on the Magdalen Papyrus, the name of Jesus is written as KS, an abbreviation of the Greek word Kyrios, or Lord. Thiede contends that this shorthand is proof that early Christians considered Jesus a *nomen*

sacrum (sacred name), much the way devout Jews emphasized the holiness of God's name by shortening it to the tetragrammaton YHWH. Thus the perception of Jesus as divine was not a later development of Christian faith but a firm belief of the early church.

New papyrus discoveries, Thiede believes, will eventually prove that all four Gospels, even the problematic one ascribed to John, were written before A.D. 80 rather than during the mid-2nd century. He argues that a scroll fragment unearthed at the Essene community of Qumran in 1972 almost certainly contains a passage from Mark's Gospel and can be accurately dated to A.D. 68. In Thiede's opinion, recent research has established that a papyrus fragment of *Luke* in a Paris library was written between A.D. 63 and A.D. 67.

Thiede believes his early dating thesis will force New Testament scholars to re-examine their assumptions about the Gospels. Instead of being theological constructs about the Christ of Faith, written long after the events they record, the Evangelists need to be seen as authentic biographies, based on eyewitness accounts.

"For nonbelievers, [the early dating theory] may mean nothing," says Thiede, who is an observant Anglican. "Certainly these findings are not going to force anybody to become a Christian. But the testimony of eyewitnesses of Jesus' generation does make [the Gospel] more credible, at least as a historical account."

Critics respond that Thiede has vastly exaggerated the significance of his early dating theory. Since some, although not all, scholars believe *Matthew* may have been written around A.D. 80, what real difference does a marginally earlier date make? As for the accuracy of eyewitnesses, J. Keith Lincoln of Leeds University points out, "Just because the [writers] are bystanders and observers doesn't mean they are getting the correct view. In some cases, a period of reflection and discussion might end up with a better and more historical document."

To Thiede, any evidence that the Gospels reflect eyewitness testimony matters a great deal. As he writes, "If the Gospels are more authentic than we thought, then perhaps the gap between the Jesus of history and the Christ of Faith is not as great as academics have claimed and Christians feared." Apparently the age-old battle over the truth of Scripture, far from being over, has just begun.

—Reported by Barry Hillenbrand/London and Bruce van Voorst/Bonn

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