

WHICH JESUS? Evaluating The Current Offerings

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“WE WISH TO SEE JESUS.” These words are uttered in the Gospel of John by an anonymous group of seekers identified as “some Greeks” (12:20,21). Similar words are spoken today by uncounted numbers of people. The vast majority of these are committed Christians who hunger for a clearer sense of who Jesus Christ is and what he means for their lives. But many others seek Jesus as well, including the historically curious, the spiritually hungry and the openly skeptical.

And those who seek will surely find the contemporary marketplace offers an astonishing, even bewildering, variety of interpretations of the identity of Jesus. The problem for seekers of Jesus is to sort out what is genuine from what is spurious.

In many ecclesial circles, Jesus has been seen as a quietistic personal Saviour who offers individuals forgiveness of sins, a close relationship with a loving God and assurance of heaven. In some versions of popular evangelicalism there is also a vivid expectation that this same Jesus will come in the near future, on the clouds of heaven, to judge the world, punish the wicked and reward the righteous. Even so, this Jesus is generally aloof from real-world affairs in the present; his mission is a purely religious one: to offer hope for the afterlife.

In the last quarter of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st, however, the Jesus of popular evangelicalism has become more deeply enmeshed in conservative politics and nationalism. This Jesus often seems to come attired in red, white and blue as the inspiration and authorizer of the American empire. To be sure, he

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still offers salvation to those individuals who confess faith in his name, but he also serves as the spokesperson for a platform of “family values”, capitalist economics and a strong national defense policy. At the same time, we have witnessed an odd mutation of this figure in the preaching of a prosperity gospel, which invokes him chiefly as a provider of financial abundance and personal fulfillment. This Jesus — in contrast to the hard-edged culture warrior of the religious right — is a sweet and generous benefactor who desires to give material blessings to all who call on him.

Partly in reaction against such aberrant portrayals of Jesus, the religious marketplace also puts forward other, strikingly different representations of the figure who stands at the center of Christian faith. During the 1990s, a group calling itself the Jesus Seminar attracted much media attention by claiming to offer a new, more factually reliable account of the historical Jesus. Though many of their presuppositions and working methods have been widely employed since the 19th century, the Jesus Seminar members presented their cut-and-paste reduction of the Gospels as a historical breakthrough. They portrayed a strikingly non-Jewish Jesus, a laconic wandering sage who had no particular interest in Israel’s heritage or destiny, no interest in leading a new religious movement and certainly no aspirations to be regarded as divine.

In other circles, there has been an effort to rehabilitate the extracanonical Gnostic gospels as sources of insight into the identity of Jesus. These texts originated in a second-century religious and philosophical environment that regarded the material world as evil and the God of the Old Testament as an inferior, malicious power. In recent years, however, they have sometimes been read selectively to underwrite a form of individualistic, therapeutic spirituality. The Jesus of the neo-Gnostic revival is a mysterious guru who calls his followers to inner spiritual illumination and disengagement from the world.

Recent years have also brought us the startling popularity of the pulp novel *The Da Vinci Code*, which depicts a Jesus who was married to Mary Magdalene and produced children with her. According to Dan Brown’s potboiler, the real story of Jesus was

violently suppressed by the emperor Constantine in the 4th century in favour of a fictional divine saviour and a Christianity that denigrates sexuality and denies leadership to women. Despite — or perhaps because of — its flagrant distortion of historical information, and because of its suspicion of any notion of church authority, this book struck a nerve in popular culture. It offered a Jesus that many find compelling.

No survey of recent popular portrayals of Jesus would be complete without mentioning the Jesus of Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of Christ*. Gibson presents Jesus as neither teacher nor healer but as the passive victim of seemingly arbitrary and unending physical torture, which is somehow redemptive.

And of course, Jesus has also long been seen as a prophetic figure who stood against the religious and political authorities of his day, offering an example of nonviolent resistance. Many forms of liberation theology find in Jesus the inspiration for their preferential option for the poor, and movements advocating peace and justice for the downtrodden often look to Jesus as their inspiration and champion.

A New Project

In view of this profusion of conflicting images of Jesus in the church, in the academy and in popular culture, it is no wonder that the identity of Jesus might appear more elusive than ever. This confusing state of affairs led to the formation in 2003 of a new research project on the identity of Jesus. Under the sponsorship of the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, a diverse, interdisciplinary group of biblical scholars and theologians met twice annually for three years. Our discussions were spirited, candid and illuminating. Even though we disagreed on many points, by the end of the three years we all had the sense of converging vision. The results of our deliberations are published as a collection of essays in the book *Seeking The Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*.

Many scholarly presentations of Jesus operate on assumptions that resemble those of an archaeological expedition. The real Jesus is thought to lie buried beneath historical artifacts — texts and

traditions. The work of the Jesus Seminar is but an extreme example of attempting to get down to the actual Jesus of history by separating him from the church's Gospels and the church's creeds.

By contrast, the members of the Identity of Jesus Project came to believe that Jesus is best understood not by separating him from canon and creed but by investigating the ways in which the church's canons and creeds provide distinctive clarification of his identity. The church's ancient ecumenical creeds are not artificial impositions on scripture but interpretative summaries of biblical narratives offering us an overarching sense of the meaning of the whole Bible and of Jesus' place within that story. Further, if in fact Jesus was raised from the dead, he is alive, and it follows that he continues to speak and to act, to express his redemptive love for the world. It is therefore a basic element of the grammar of Christian faith that, in the wonderful image of Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Christ plays in ten thousand places".

But how do we recognize those places? And how do we know that the Jesus we encounter there is real? All claims about experiencing Jesus, we would suggest, must be tested for consistency with the testimony of scripture and the church's tradition. So, for example, the Jesus who is enlisted to support war or apartheid, or the Jesus who promotes wealth and ease to his followers, cannot be the same Person we know from the New Testament and the Eucharist. Such representations are flatly inconsistent with all that has been disclosed about his identity in the past.

Our project, then, had less in common with an archaeological expedition than with a pilgrimage. Pilgrims begin their treks from differing locations and require varying equipment, but they all hope to converge at a common destination. And as they travel, they are reliably guided by reports of those who have preceded them on the journey. In the same sense, our group worked with a variety of reports offered by the biblical canon, church tradition and contemporary experience.

This brief essay cannot do justice to the group's judgments about the sources and methods appropriately employed in seeking

Jesus, but we can at least identify the most important areas of broad consensus.

Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew. Though this point should be obvious, tragically it has not always been so. Any attempt to describe Jesus' identity must recognize that he was a historical figure who was very much a part of the Judaism of his day. The provocative title of one of our book's essays, by Markus Bockmuehl, gives special emphasis on this point: "God's Life as a Jew". Jesus' teaching and activity make sense only within the context of Israel's history and Israel's scripture. For that reason, his identity is forever bound up with God's people Israel. It is highly significant that his first followers acclaimed him as the Christ: the Messiah of Israel promised by the scriptures. Therefore, all attempts to set Jesus against Jewish law and tradition must be critically scrutinized, and all attempts to portray him as a non-Jewish figure must be emphatically rejected.

The identity of Jesus is reliably attested and known in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. The four canonical Gospels are the earliest extant accounts of the story of Jesus. These writings have been received as true and authoritative by the Christian church from the first centuries of Christianity. Their authoritative role was not artificially imposed by fiat of emperor or council at some late date; rather, they emerged from the life and worship of Christian communities in the first two centuries of the Christian era as definitive and reliable portrayals of Jesus. For this reason, these Gospels have unique importance for Christians seeking the identity of Jesus.

Further, *the entirety of the canonical witness is indispensable to a faithful rendering of the figure of Jesus.* We cannot see Jesus clearly by reading only one Gospel to the exclusion of the others, for their differing portrayals are complementary and essential to the wholeness of our understanding of this multi-faceted figure. Similarly, we cannot understand him rightly apart from the other writings in the New Testament, which grapple with the meaning of the story of Jesus and interpret his significance for the ongoing life of the community. Moreover, the Gospel stories themselves are

unintelligible apart from the larger and older body of scriptures that provide the historical, literary, and theological context for understanding Jesus. The New Testament writers repeatedly insist that the significance of Jesus' life, death and resurrection is to be interpreted "in accordance with the scriptures", by which they mean Israel's sacred writings: the law, the prophets and the Psalms (see, e.g., Luke 24:44 and I Cor. 15:3-5).

One corollary of the preceding two points is that *in order to understand the identity of Jesus rightly, the church must constantly engage in the practice of deep, sustained reading of these texts*. If Jesus is to be known through the testimony of the apostolic witnesses, one primary means of access to him will be through disciplined, faithful engagement with the texts through which that testimony is mediated. This sort of attentive reading of scripture can and must serve as a constant critical check on our tendency to make Jesus in our own image and thereby turn him into an idol to serve our purposes.

It follows also that *to come to grips with the identity of Jesus, we must know him as he is presented to us through the medium of narrative*. The New Testament discloses the identity of Jesus chiefly through telling his story, not through abstract dogmatic propositions or anthologies of his sayings. Rather than rendering a homogenized account of the New Testament testimony, we must pay careful attention to the distinctive ways the story is told by Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, and Hebrews. Even the letters of Paul and the letter to the Hebrews — probably the most theological documents in the New Testament — are rightly understood as reflective commentary on the story of Jesus as it comes into contact with the communities of his followers.

Many Generations of Christians

The trajectory begun within the New Testament of interpreting Jesus' identity in and for the church has continued through Christian history. For that reason, the creeds of the church and the interpretative testimony of the church's tradition must be taken

seriously into account. The identity of Jesus is disclosed partly through his impact on many generations of Christians who have served and worshiped him, as well as through the reflection of the church's great theologians who have thought deeply about who he is. One of the pervasive illusions of modernity is that we can dispense with tradition and replace it with more "scientific" modes of knowing. But Jesus' identity is inseparable from the accounts offered by the great cloud of witnesses who have known him before us.

Some Christians may fear that an emphasis on the wealth and diversity of traditional descriptions of Jesus compromises the gospel. Yet given the diversity of biblical witnesses to Jesus, orthodoxy actually demands that we speak about Jesus in more than one way. To privilege one part or another is to reckon with a diminished Jesus, a Jesus whose personal identity is less fully rounded than the complex Jesus offered by the diverse faithful witnesses in the Christian tradition.

Jesus is not dead; he lives. God vindicated Jesus Christ by raising him from the dead. The implications of this claim are enormous. First, it requires us to rethink what is possible and how God in fact acts in history. Second, it means that Jesus can be known not only as a figure of the historical past but also as the living Lord of the church and of the world. One of the challenges of understanding the identity of Jesus, then, is to discern the ways in which he is present and active in the world today. Third, if indeed Jesus' resurrection has foreshadowed God's ultimate new creation of all things, this means that our vision of the identity of Jesus remains filtered "through a glass darkly", awaiting the full final disclosure that will be accessible only eschatologically. But the resurrection has already given us the decisive clue to understanding and trusting the life-giving power of Jesus.

Because Jesus remains a living presence, he can be encountered in the community of his people, the body of Christ. This encounter takes place in many ways: in preaching, in the sacraments and in the community's life together in service. Such

claims are mysterious, but they are strongly grounded in both the testimony of scripture and the experience of the church across time. One way in which Jesus may be particularly experienced as present is in the experience of the poor and those who suffer, as suggested by Matthew 25:31-46.

One motif that repeatedly surfaced in our group's deliberations was the recognition that Jesus is a disturbing, destabilizing figure. In his own historical time he was a controversial figure who generated a movement that the guardians of order considered a threat to the status quo. For this reason, he was executed as a dangerous revolutionary. And it has remained true across time that Jesus' teachings and presence have a way of unsettling things, challenging privilege, calling people to radical and costly service. Wherever Jesus is invoked as the guarantor of an established order, we may rightly suspect that some sort of identity fraud is being perpetrated. The Jesus we know through scripture and the creeds does not leave us at ease; rather, he calls his followers to deny themselves and take up the cross. He teaches us that we are sinners and that we are called to actions of costly discipleship that bear witness to God's coming kingdom of justice in an unjust world.

Finally, *the identity of Jesus is something that must be learned through long-term discipline*. This is already suggested by the shape of the Gospel narratives, in which Jesus calls disciples who follow him for years without fully grasping who he is. Only after their extended exposure to him and after the shattering revelatory events of cross and resurrection do they even begin to grasp his identity. Likewise, we should not suppose that the identity of Jesus is something we can learn by reading one book, discovering one new ancient text or polling one panel of experts — including the experts who contributed to this project.

Learning the identity of Jesus is a costly lifelong process in which we grow under the tutelage of scripture and the church's disciplined practices of worship and service, toward a deeper comprehension of the Jesus we know now inadequately. As Paul describes his life of discipleship: "I want to know Christ and the

power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death” (Phil. 3:10). This is not a pilgrimage to be undertaken lightly or with impatience. One of the problems with many popular books and television programs about Jesus is that they neglect this costly call to discipleship as a prerequisite to knowing his identity. We come to know rightly insofar as we are conformed to the pattern of his life. And, as Paul well knew, that will cost us not less than everything.

The Gospel of John concludes with a twofold affirmation — an assurance that the testimony it offers is reliable and an acknowledgment that it is, of necessity, only partial: if all the things that Jesus did were reported, “the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (21:25). Thus, John’s telling of the story has no end. Nor does the pilgrimage of those who wish to see Jesus.