

Who on Earth was Jesus? – The Modern Quest for the Jesus of History

By David Boulton

Published by O Books 2008 (www.o-books.net)

I have often wondered where our Unitarian scholars are when it comes to being part of the vibrant discussion and research that is currently taking place on the above subject. Surely, when the quest took off in the seventeenth century Unitarians were right in the midst of this quest.

Although thoroughly researched and well presented this book isn't written for scholars but for the interested reader. In over 400 pages the author brings all his journalistic skills to bear as he makes accessible all that is going on amongst various scholars from several disciplines with different perspectives and conclusions. Comprehensive indexing allows those who wish to follow up on a particular writer easily select their future reading.

The first section sets out the historical development of interest in this subject beginning with Albert Schweitzer's *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, which concluded that Jesus in preaching of the end times was mistaken in looking for his own death to prove it. For quite some time this was taken as the last word but with the many discoveries of manuscripts and fragments since that time the apocalyptic (end times) perspective has been challenged and scholarship is alive and kicking.

The following section covers the large group of academic researchers and writers making up the Jesus Seminar in America, who have found the advent of the Internet, and opening up of the recently discovered documents and new gospels, enable them to share ideas across disciplines easily, needing only the occasional seminar where they can present papers. Many outside the Jesus Seminar do not approve, thinking that they are either too Christian or not Christian enough. They approached the question as to whether Jesus actually existed in a scholarly manner, using the rules of written and oral evidence, by examining the many texts in their context and then voting on each identified piece of text. The sayings were rated from red through pink and grey to black with only those that in the end they felt they could be sure of given a red. They were surprised to find that yes the evidence does support the idea that Jesus did exist. However, he didn't refer to himself as the Messiah, he didn't die as a sacrifice for the world and he didn't teach of an apocalyptic intervention but did teach of God's generosity and goodness as a model for human life in this life. I was disappointed to read that there were never more than six women in the Jesus Seminar.

The next section gives us those scholars who continue to see Jesus as prophet of the apocalypse. E.P. Sanders also has scholarly credentials but unlike the Jesus Seminar gives the synoptic gospels priority, and feels that the end of history was being

preached. The Catholics John P. Mier and Joseph Ratzinger research with eyes of faith the former seeing Jesus as mentor, message bringer and miracle worker, the latter saying we can only understand through faith in a transcendent, metaphysical supernatural God. N.T. Wright who became the Bishop of Durham writes for liberals seeing Jesus as the pivotal point of human history through examining the context. God doesn't exist outside history and any actions and interventions are human events that make history. The problem other scholars would have is the limiting of textual research to either the three synoptic gospels or just the four of the New Testament.

Adding to the vibrancy of this melting pot of current thinking are the Jewish scholars covered in the next section of the book. Geza Vernes, Hyam Macoby and Robert Eisenman. New material and different perspectives add breadth to the picture. Here we are given further insight into Jesus the Pharisee, Jesus the brother of James or Jesus the holy man like other charismatic and popular figures in the Jewish religion.

Other scholars argue that Jesus is irretrievable and is a Christian invention that has been going on since the second century when the Mythology of Jesus was established. William Wrede who died the same year as Schweiter's *Quest* was published saw Jesus as Mark's own creation, his gospel being a polemical fiction. Others, including Burton Mack who dropped out of the Jesus Seminar as he was obliged always to vote black, would agree. The story is seen as a new myth of origins with a synthesized Jesus being central to the new Christian cult which was being created.

All of the above is fascinating but the consequences of all this research and why it should matter to us is brilliantly pulled together in the final two sections. Whether it was because the weight of argument persuaded me that it matters or that it only confirmed my thinking that having an up-to-date understanding of what is being written now demonstrates the wide variety of perspectives that is helpful when I ask myself, as does the author, why does it matter what I think now?

Firstly the process of the divination of Jesus tells us more about the early church than it does about an historical Jesus and this has been and is both a theological and political process. Secondly the ambiguity of the kingdom sayings matter still. The two understandings of Jesus are not compatible. Christian, Jewish and Islamic apocalypticism, with the fundamentalists of each tradition facing up to each other is alive and well still. There continues the urge to 'purify the world through the annihilation of some category of human beings imagined as agents of corruption and incarnation of evil'. Do we choose this or the kingdom sayings in line with the wisdom tradition where the lion sits down with the lamb and swords are beaten into ploughshares – images of peace – 'an enabling dream that transcends language'.

Joan Wilkinson January 2010

This is the first fully comprehensive account of the debate between modern scholars on the Jesus of history before he became the Christ of faith. David Boulton surveys all the major schools of historical Jesus scholarship in turn: the liberal Jesus Seminar, the conservative 'New Questers' and the radical sceptics, covering over 30 experts. He lays out the sources, biblical, 'heretical' and secular, taking in the most recent discoveries and explaining where historians agree and disagree in recovering a credible portrait of the man behind 'the greatest story ever told'. David Boulton excels in this art, rendering the quest for the historical Jesus a nice walk through a colourful but orderly garden. His knowledge of the subject is enormous. Who was Jesus? Was He an Historical Person? Was Jesus just a great man, an amazing teacher, and a great prophet? Can He be found outside of biblical literature and confirmed in books of history? There is no legitimate scholar who denies that Jesus existed. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross was the culmination of His earthly ministry (Mark 15:21-41). It is the purpose of His life and the reason He was born. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Who do you say Jesus is? Is He simply a good teacher, a religious man of history? Or do you think He is more than that? Do you know Him personally? Question: "Who is Jesus Christ?". Answer: Unlike the question "Does God exist?" very few people question whether Jesus Christ existed. It is generally accepted that Jesus was truly a man who walked on the earth in Israel 2000 years ago. The debate begins when the subject of Jesus' full identity is discussed. Almost every major religion teaches that Jesus was a prophet or a good teacher or a godly man. The problem is that the Bible tells us that Jesus was infinitely more than a prophet, a good teacher, or a godly man. C.S. Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity* writes the following: "According to the Gospels, Jesus, who was born around 4 B.C., was able to perform supernatural feats such as healing a wide range of diseases by simply touching people or speaking to them. He supposedly also had the ability to walk on water, instantly create vast amounts of fish and bread, resurrect the dead, rise from the dead himself, calm storms and exorcise demons from people. The stories told about him have led many scholars to explore these questions: What was Jesus really like? Trying to understand what Jesus was really like is complicated by the fact that the earliest surviving texts that discuss Jesus date to the second century A.D., about 100 years after the life of Jesus" although, presumably they were copied from documents that date to the first century.