

## 1 **Jesus of History**

- Module: Jesus
- Lesson 40

## 2 **Some Recommended Sources**

- Lee Stroebel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*
- William Lane Craig, *On Guard and Reasonable Faith*
- Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*
- Paul Barnett, "Is the New Testament Historically Reliable," in *In Defense of the Bible*, ed. by Steven Cowan and Terry Wilder
- Craig Keener, *Christobiography*

## 3 **Questions People Have About Jesus**

- Was Jesus of Nazareth a real person in history, or was he a fictional or mythical character made up by the early Christians?
- If there really was a Jesus, did he perform miracles and exorcisms as the Gospels report?
- Did Jesus really make messianic and divine claims about himself, and even if he did, why should we believe him?
- Was Jesus actually executed by crucifixion at the hands of the Roman authorities? Why does the way Jesus reportedly died make any difference?
- Did Jesus actually rise physically from the dead? Isn't the story of Jesus' resurrection a fabrication of early Christians borrowed from neighboring mystic religions and created long after his death? Why is the resurrection so important to Christians?

## 4 **What if Someone Told You the Mythical Roman God Mithras—**

- Was born of a virgin in a cave?
- Was considered a great itinerant teacher?
- Had twelve disciples?
- Promised his followers immortality?
- Sacrificed himself for world peace?
- Was buried in a tomb and rose three days later?
- Instituted a Eucharist or "Lord's Supper?"
- Was considered to be the Logos, Redeemer, Messiah, etc.?

## 5 **What Is The Most Reasonable Approach to the Gospels' Account of Jesus?**

- Skepticism (assumption of myth or falsehood)?
- Neutrality?

- Assumption of truthfulness?

## 6 Remember Things We Learned In Our Module on the Bible

- The reliability of both the text and content of the New Testament.
- The reasons we have confidence in the canon of the New Testament.
- The archaeological and extra-biblical support for the New Testament.
- The New Testament as historical as opposed to mythological genre.
- The conclusions of the “Third Quest for the Historical Jesus” (or the “Reclamation of Jesus” movement).
  - The contribution of Jewish scholars on the Jesus of the Gospels.
  - Jesus was a real, first century person, exhibited characteristics of a first century Jewish rabbi, made Messianic claims.

## 7 Why Is An Approach of Skepticism Unwarranted?

- The New Testament was written before there was sufficient time to erase the historical record.
- The genre of the Gospels is markedly dissimilar to that of folk tales, urban legends, myths, etc.
- Jewish methods of oral and written transmission of their history were highly developed to safeguard their preservation.
- The early church possessed safeguards to ensure the accurate preservation of the story of Jesus’ life and teachings.
  - Many eyewitnesses were still alive when the New Testament was written.
  - Apostolic authority was in place during the period the New Testament was written to ensure the message was faithfully preserved.
- The New Testament has a track record of historical reliability when compared with external historical sources and findings of archaeology.

## 8 About Historical Authenticity Markers (Criteria of Authenticity)

- Scholars look for markers to help validate the authenticity of an incident recorded in ancient literature (and in the Gospels).
- Markers serve as a sufficient but not necessary test of authenticity.
  - Sufficient—The presence of a marker is sufficient to enhance one’s confidence in the authenticity of a recorded event/incident.
  - Not Necessary—It is not necessary that a marker be present for a report to be accepted as authentic. The absence of a marker, or of all markers, is not an indication of inauthenticity.
- Employing these markers, along with much other information, the majority of contemporary New Testament and Jesus scholars consider the Gospels (and Acts) to be substantially reliable historical sources.

## 9 What Are the Authenticity Markers?

- Historical fit: The incident fits with known facts of the time and place.
- Independent, early sources: Incident is related in multiple sources that are temporally near the incident and don't rely on each other. (e. g. the passion narratives in the four Gospels)
- Embarrassment: The incident is awkward or counter-productive to the teller's intent or reputation. (e. g. Peter's denials)
- Dissimilarity: The incident is unlike Jewish ideas and/or unlike later Christian modes of thought or expression. The incident or belief is unlikely to have simply been made up by a Jew or early Christian living in first-century Palestine. (e.g. No first century Palestinian Jew imagined that a bodily resurrection could or would occur before the end of the age, or Jesus' use of the term "Son of Man.")
- Semitisms: Traces of Hebrew or Aramaic language appear in Greek text.
- Coherence: The incident fits with facts already established about Jesus.

#### 10 **Is the Jesus of the Gospels a Copycat?**

- The claim: Christianity borrowed its key beliefs about Jesus from other neighboring religions, e. g. ...
  - Dying and rising gods
  - Virgin births
  - Key events in the life of Jesus
- We will deal with the claim about dying and rising gods in our resurrection lessons.
- How do historical scholars view this claim of outside influence?
  - From the late 19th century to the mid-twentieth this was a fairly common view among scholars.
  - Modern scholarship now rejects the idea that early beliefs were borrowed from other religions, though they remain commonly believed in the popular culture.

#### 11 **Why Do Scholars Reject the Copycat Scenario?**

- Barring explicit evidence, it is a logical fallacy to claim that if two things are similar one must have caused the other. ("Correlation does not imply causation.")
- In most cases the chronology is wrong. Christianity predated the mystery religions from which it is claimed it copied its teachings.
  - Mithraism, though an ancient Persian myth, did not develop in the Greco-Roman world until the second century A. D., long after Christianity was well established and the New Testament was written.
- Paul, as a Jew, would have considered it anathema to consciously borrow from pagan religions.
- Early Christianity was highly exclusivistic. Any syncretism with other religions would have been immediately countered. (Thousands of early Christians died for refusing such syncretism.)

#### 12 **Why Do Scholars Reject the Copycat Scenario?**

- Unlike the myths, Christianity is grounded in history.
  - As we saw in our module on the bible, there is a marked distinction between myth and history.
  - Even if there were some points of similarity to the myths, that would not negate the fact that the record of Jesus is historical fact.
- Parallels that do exist in many cases are very possibly Christianity's influence on the pagan religions. (see #2 above)
- There is nothing like the resurrection in the ancient myths. (More on this in one of our lessons on the resurrection.)

### 13 Why Do Scholars Reject the Copycat Scenario?

- Many or most alleged similarities are fabricated, exaggerated, or insignificant. For example, consider the Mithras myth:
  - Born of a virgin?
    - No. Mithras emerged fully grown from a rock.
  - Born in a cave?
    - No. Further, the N. T. says nothing of Jesus being born in a cave. That is a tradition dating to the 2nd century.
  - Sacrificed himself for world peace?
    - No. Sacrificed a bull. The idea of world peace is reading Christian theology into Mithraism.

### 14 Why Do Scholars Reject the Copycat Scenario?

- (cont.)
  - A great itinerant teacher with twelve followers?
    - No. He was a god, not a man or teacher.
  - Promised immortality?
    - Insignificant. Most religions promise some sort of life after death.
  - Buried in a tomb and raised three days later?
    - No. There is no mention of his death, and therefore there is no reference to his burial or to a resurrection.

### 15 Why Do Scholars Reject the Copycat Scenario?

- (cont.)
  - Instituted a eucharist or "Lord's Supper"?
    - Insignificant. Most religions feature some kind of special meal.
    - The Lord's Supper is an adaptation of the actual Jewish Passover meal, which is a historical Jewish ritual, not a myth.
  - Considered the Logos, Redeemer, Messiah, etc.?
    - No. This is reading Christian theology back into Mithraism.

## 16 Two Developments in Recent Scholarship

### re: Names in the Gospels

- Why are some less significant people in the Gospels named while most are not?
- What can we learn from the frequency of various names in the Gospels and Acts?.

## 17 A. Why Are Certain People Named?

- Two general groups of people in the Gospels.
- Group 1: People we would expect to be identified by name, such as:
  - The disciples of Jesus.
  - Important women in the narratives.
  - Public figures. (Pilate, Herod, etc.)
  - Old Testament figures, genealogical lists

## 18 A. Why Are Certain People Named?

- Group 2: Lesser characters, such as those Jesus encounters only once. (e. g. the Centurion, Matt. 8:5; the paralytic, Mk. 2:3; the demoniac, Lk. 8:27; the boy with the bread and fish, Jn. 6:9)
  - Most of the cases in which Jesus heals someone and there is no further interaction with that person.
  - The vast majority of people in Group 2 remain unnamed by the Gospel writers.
- “The material common to the three Synoptic Gospels therefore shows an unambiguous tendency towards the elimination of names...” -Bauckham-
  - Therefore, when a Gospel writer identifies a person by name, they must have had a good reason for doing so.

## 19 The Unusual Naming of Individuals in the Second Group

- Each of the Gospel writers on occasion includes the names of a few individuals from the second group. (e. g. Bartimaeus, Mk 10:46; Jairus, Mk. 5:22; Simon the Leper, Matt. 26:6; Malchus, Jn 18:10)
  - Consider Rufus and Alexander, the sons of Simon of Cyrene (Mk. 15:21). Why was Simon mentioned by name, and more significantly, why were his sons mentioned?
  - Many commentators consider this Rufus to be the same one greeted, along with his mother (Simon of Cyrene’s wife), by Paul in Rom. 16:13. If so, this Rufus would have been able to testify to his father’s recollections regarding the crucifixion events.
- Bauckham argues that the best explanation for the unusual naming of individuals who typically would not be named is that these people were well known to the early church, probably as members.
- It is likely therefore, that the individuals who were named, but who otherwise would not have been, were known, possibly well known, to the church, and able to provide eyewitness testimony to particular events in the life of Jesus.

## 20 B. Frequency of Names in the Gospels

- Tal Ilan, a Jewish scholar, in 2002 published a database of every known Jewish name (male and female) in Palestine from 330 B. C. to 200 A. D.
- Her database is sourced from all relevant written and archaeological sources. (Josephus, Dead Sea Scrolls, New Testament, Masada, ossuary inscriptions, legal documents, early rabbinic sources, etc.)
  - It is now possible (for the first time) to know the relevant popularity of every Jewish name in first-century Palestine.
    - (e. g. Simon/Simeon, most popular male name, Mary, most popular female name, etc.)

## 21 **The New Testament and Palestinian Jewish Names**

- The comparative popularity of names reported in the Gospels and Acts coincides very closely with the comparative popularity we now know was the case in first-century Palestine. (e. g. There are eight different Simons in the Gospels/ Acts, six different Marys.)
- The information on name popularity in Palestine could not have been known by someone in the first or second century, even more so if they lived outside of Palestine. To so closely replicate the relative frequency of names, the writer of a fictional account would have had to have access to all the relevant documents, or a means of sophisticated polling or research about the first-century Jewish population in Palestine.
- The close correlation of the frequency of particular names in the New Testament with what we now know was the comparative popularity of names in first-century Palestine almost certainly could only have been accomplished by the truthful recording of actual historical events and people.

## 22 **Our Confidence**

- The claim that Christianity copied its accounts of Jesus' life from other religions or myths is demonstrably untrue and rejected by most historians today.
- We have a historically reliable account of Jesus:
  - A man who really lived in first century Palestine.
  - Many of the things he did are historically recorded in the New Testament and in some cases in extra-biblical literature as well. (That he went about teaching, had disciples, it was widely reported that he performed miracles and exorcisms, was crucified by Pontius Pilate, etc.)
  - He claimed certain things re: God and himself.
  - The records of his fate (death and resurrection) are highly credible historical accounts.

## 23 **Next Week:**

- Who is Jesus?