

Christianity and Postmodernism

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Preface

Postmodernism is the new philosophy that characterizes the close of the second millennium. It is an avant-garde intellectualism making significant inroads into the western universities, and beyond that, the mainstream of western culture. Its symptoms are wide-ranging, and it includes such buzzwords as *political correctness*, *multi-culturalism*, *literary deconstructionism*, and *historical revisionism*. Like most jargon, the buzzwords are barely intelligible to the average person. Nevertheless, the practical effect of the postmodern movement is far more extensive than generally perceived. The pursuit of truth in western culture has a long history, and postmodernism is the latest trend in defining it.

This series of studies will attempt to address postmodernism and the challenge it offers to the historic Christian faith, but more than that, the challenge it offers to the entire understanding of truth in western civilization. It is probably not too much to say that the development of truth concepts in western civilization has been inextricably intertwined with the Christian worldview, and this is so even for those who have made no claim to Christian faith. Postmodernism poses a general challenge to conventional concepts of truth, and more particularly, to Christian concepts of truth.

It remains to be seen whether or not this new mode of thinking will radically affect the mainstream of western culture in the next millennium, but if it does, the face and presentation of Christian truth claims will be affected drastically. No contemporary Christian leader can afford to be uninformed about this new trend. Pilate's question to Jesus, "What is truth?", remains the defining question for all existence and meaning. May God help us each to find the answer in the One who is the way, the truth and the life!

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The Western Search for Truth

The western concept of truth is that truth is what corresponds with the actual state of affairs. A judgment is false when no such correspondence exists. The challenge for western thinkers has always been the task of demonstrating when one's judgment actually corresponds with reality itself (epistemology). It can be assumed that some reality actually exists, and most westerners agree that some level of truth about this reality can be known. All sorts of criteria have developed over the centuries to verify truth, but the most important in western thought has been logic. Logic stands behind all systems of deduction, induction, experimentation and semantics. Logic is the arbiter of mathematics, instinct, human feelings, sense perception, intuition, custom and tradition. Logic pays attention to coherence, contradiction, correspondence and verification. Symbolically, western logic says:

A is not non-A.

Syllogistically, it says:

If A equals C, (major premise)

And if B equals C, (minor premise)

Then, A equals B. (conclusion)

Western thinking rejects the notion that all possibilities co-exist at the same time. Some categories are mutually exclusive, and the existence of one category means the exclusion of its opposite. For instance, a human cannot at the same time be both fully male and fully female. A solid is not at the same time a liquid or a gas. One cannot travel both east and west at the same time. Of course, such categories depend upon careful definition, but given precise definition, all possibilities cannot co-exist simultaneously.

Non-western thought forms, on the other hand, may embrace self-contradiction. Hindu sages, for instance, affirm that all possibilities co-exist simultaneously without excluding or compromising each other. Opposites do not exclude, but complement each other, and the universe is totally unrestricted and has infinite freedom. Western logic as well as the Bible rejects the notion of such boundlessness.

The Western Journey

If the western idea of truth (and the Christian idea as well) is that the correspondence of a truth claim to reality must be demonstrated by verification and non-contradiction, it must also be pointed out that western thought has more than a single criterion by which to assess a truth claim. Some criteria, like instinct and

intuition, are immediate. Some, like custom and tradition, are social. Others, like consistency, hypothesis and testing are philosophical and scientific. For Christians, there is also the category of revelation, that is, the belief that God has disclosed himself in event and Scripture, and most clearly, in the incarnation of his Son. Still, all these criteria work within the basic worldview that truth corresponds to the actual state of affairs, and if some things are true, then opposite things are not true.

The western cultural journey toward this consensus has roots in Greek philosophy, especially Plato and Aristotle, and in the Hebrew Bible. To the Greeks we owe the systematic approach to logic, inference and categorization. To the Hebrews we owe the idea that truth has moral worth, not merely practical significance. Good is not the same as evil, and truth is not the same as error. Throughout the history of western civilization, thinkers have explored and adjusted their ideas about truth. In the Renaissance, Greek logic was revived on a grand scale. With the seventeenth century intellectual revolution, the western world began moving from a concern for the purpose of natural events to their processes. Medieval thinkers, for instance, had tried to discover the purpose of every entity within the universe as God's creation. Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers, on the other hand, were concerned about the mechanism of the universe. They wanted to measure velocity, mass and time as well as describe natural processes.

Many, if not most of the early scientists, such as Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Newton, Pascal and Boyle, were Christians. Their exploration of the universe was based on their belief that it was orderly, intelligible and predictable because it was created by a God of order and of truth. It never occurred to them that their research and results might be incompatible with Christian faith, for all truth was God's truth. Later scientists, of course, continued this exploration of the processes of the universe, but increasingly they did so without the assumption of God's existence or his maintenance of the universe. Many thinkers adopted Deism, that is, the belief that if there is a God, he is more of a prime mover who sets natural laws in motion and then remains aloof than he is a sovereign Being who daily rules in the affairs of the world. More and more, western rationalists indicted Christians, the Bible, and the church as instruments for exploiting the masses. Still, both rationalists and Christians were operating from within the same basic viewpoint that truth is what corresponds to the actual state of affairs. The rationalist criticism of Christianity was that it wasn't true. Christian apologists, for their part, asserted that it *was* true, and both sides attempted to demonstrate their claims using the same basic truth concepts and criteria of correspondence.

Enter Postmodernism

Postmodernism rejects both Christianity's and rationalism's concepts of truth.

It rejects, not merely Christianity's truth claims, but the entire notion of truth as it has been traditionally understood in the west. At stake are not only the Christian faith, but also, the way westerners understand history, literature, science, health, education, law and humanness. If modernism was a rejection of traditional Christian thought, postmodernism is a rejection of both.

The Question of History

History, as traditionally understood, is a record of what has happened. The prehistoric period of human civilization is divided from the historic period by the production of written records. Prior to about 3000 B.C., there is very little in the way of texts, so while the date of the transition can be debated, about 3000 B.C. is a generally accepted approximation for the transition from the prehistoric period to the historic period.

The Traditional Base of Historical Inquiry

Traditional historiography depends upon written texts, the literary criticism of these texts, the archaeological data which intersects with the texts, and the selective process of identifying those people, events and ideas of the past which have had significance for shaping culture in the various branches of the human family. About a half-century before the time of Jesus, Julius Caesar wrote a history of his war in Gaul while actually there, leading his legions in battle. In 1 B.C., a man named Hilarion wrote a letter from Alexandria to his wife Alis concerning her pregnancy. In more modern times, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn recorded the stories of the Russian prison camps in *The Gulag Archipelago*. All of these are historical texts, but not all have the same significance. Caesar's conquest of Gaul and the deep spiritual and sociological effects of the Russian labor camps had sweeping effects for many people. Hilarion's letter did not. Part of the historian's task is to evaluate significance among the historical data.

Of course, historians have never been content to accept any texts uncritically. The historical value of Homer's memories about Crete and Mycenaean Greece needed to be balanced against the archaeological evidence of the Linear B tablets. The work of the Roman historian Tacitus carries more historical weight than, say, *The Sacred History of Asklepios*. Textual transmission, literary genre, underlying sources, and subsequent editorial work all require considerable interpretive skill. Often, the record of "what happened" has been intermingled with exaggeration, embellishment, mythology and propaganda. Still, given the proper safeguards in handling texts, historians have been generally optimistic that many if not most of the significant people, movements, ideas and events of history could be objectively known.

Two important assumptions lie behind traditional historiography. One is that language corresponds to reality (sometimes called "the picture theory of language"). Language is adequate to identify, describe and evaluate objects outside the observer/writer. There can be a true relationship between a word and the object in the world to which it refers. Hence, historical texts could provide truthful if limited descriptions of past people, events and ideas. It was possible to recover the intent of the original observers/writers through the texts they produced. To be sure, the modern reader of ancient texts must take into consideration figures of speech, idioms, cultural context and the like. When Sennacherib describes himself as "the king of the world" in the Prism of Sennacherib, the modern reader accepts this as an obvious exaggeration. However, when on the same prism he claimed to put the city of Jerusalem to siege during the reign of Hezekiah, an event that directly parallels texts from Isaiah 36-37 and 2 Kings 18-19, historians were confident that they could say such an event "really happened."

The second assumption was that the stuff of history is worked out in a cause and effect continuum. As such, historians searched for the forces that impelled humans toward their great undertakings as well as the reasons for their successes and failures. In his *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon sought to demonstrate that the disintegration of Rome was the result of a process involving time and nature, the barbarians and the Christians, the abuse of raw materials, and Roman domestic quarrels. Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* aimed at encouraging the French to benefit from the American experience of republican government. The cause/effect relationship in historical events and the extrapolation of wisdom for the future was fundamental to the historian's vision.

Out of this discipline, historians sought to know the past with the end in view of avoiding the same failures in the future. The philosopher George Santayana's dictum, which became especially famous when it was strung up at the pavilion of the People's Temple in Guyana, summarizes this ideal: *Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.*

Postmodern Approaches to History

Postmodernism rejects both these underlying assumptions of traditional historiography—that language is adequate and that causes and effects can be objectively known. First, postmodern thinkers abandon the search for the author's intention, concluding that it cannot be retrieved. They are skeptical about the belief that language is adequate for accurately describing objects in the world. In their view, language does not correspond to reality in any sort of one-to-one relationship, since it is shot through with all sorts of cultural biases and personal idiosyncrasies.

Language is subjective, not objective. It is autonomous.¹ Hence, meaning cannot be derived by searching for the original author's intent, but rather, meaning lies in the mind of the reader. Thus, as Sheridan Gilley of the University of Durham writes, "One of my research students recently attended a history conference at which *everyone agreed that there was no such thing as truth in history* (emphasis mine). This skepticism reflects a current so-called 'postmodern' philosophical mood, which is increasingly opposed to any objective idea of truth outside ourselves, preferring to see 'truth' as a contingent and relative thing that we make rather than discover."² In this view, the past is entirely irrecoverable, bias is inescapable, objectivity is impossible, and histories, as postmodernist Keith Jenkins puts it, "are merely the intellectual expressions of the self-interest of the individuals, groups and institutions which produce them. All we can do, on the basis of agreed rules about the use of evidence, is to invent or impose on our materials the truth which suits ourselves."³

If language is not adequate to express historical truth, it naturally follows that the effort to find real knowledge about the past, the attempt to assess the causes and effects of historical movement, or the possibility of gaining wisdom for the future is an exercise in futility. For the postmodernist, the historical effort is nothing more than subjective theorizing and ideological self-interest. Again, to use the words of Mr. Jenkins, the postmodernist seeks to dethrone all histories with "certainist pretensions". Postmodern thinkers claim to have "broken the fetters of logic" by subordinating logic to social, psychological, political and cultural considerations. In doing so, they believe they have achieved "a new freedom of communication" so that discourse is now open, honest, sincere, politically sensitive and historically conditioned. Traditional historiography was assessed by how well the historian's claim fit the facts and was logically consistent. Postmodern historiography assesses the historian's claim by how sincere he/she appears. No one has the edge because of education or experience; anyone can teach anything, including history, to anyone else. If Jane or John Doe says such and such about history, she or he speaks as a woman or a man, a Native-American or an unemployed person, a grandfather and so on. There is no such thing as universal truth, but there is a universal tolerance of all ideas. Because one person's view of history flatly contradicts someone else's view does not mean either is wrong.⁴ As Vaclav Havel, President of the Czech Republic described it in his speech at the Occasion of the Liberty Medal Ceremony in Philadelphia on July 4, 1994, "We live in a postmodern world, where everything is

¹E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, "Structuralism and De-Construction," *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (London: SCM Press, 1989) 224-239.

²S. Gilley, "History Without Morality, History Without Truth," *History Today* (Vol. 46 May '96) pp. 11-13.

³Gilley, 11.

⁴G. Englebretsen, "Postmodernism and New Age Unreason," *The Skeptical Inquirer* (May/June 1995) 52-54.

possible and almost nothing is certain."⁵

At no point is the postmodern approach to history more radical than in assessing the significance of historical people, events or ideas. Since the idea of universal truth has been replaced by a multitude of local truths, all of which are subjective and relative to social, psychological, political and cultural influences, every person's history is as valid as that of his/her neighbor. A Jew believes the Holocaust occurred and claims to have actually been incarcerated in the death camps of World War II; a neo-Nazi denies that it ever happened and says the whole story is a grand hoax. For the postmodernist, there is truth for the Jew and truth for the neo-Nazi. An African-American writes to an archaeology magazine to complain about the depiction of Queen Nefertiti as white-skinned, asserting that "Egyptians are a black race of people;"⁶ Frank Yurco, expert on Egyptology for Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History, responds that ancient Egyptians ranged from very dark (Nubian brown) to very light (Mediterranean brown) and various ranges in between. Based on the Nefertiti bust excavated at Tel el-Amarna, which still retains the original paint of the ancient sculptor, Nefertiti was probably light-skinned.⁷ For the postmodernist, both historical claims have equal validity. Each person's opinion is based on cultural bias and personal idiosyncrasy. As Leon Wieseltier says in *The New Republic*, "Race, in America, has become epistemology: There are white truths and black truths, but there is no truth."

The Christian and Historical Study

The impact of postmodern theories on the task of history has profound implications for Christianity. Christianity has always been an historical faith. From the ancient politics of Israel to the travels of St. Paul, the beliefs and ideas of Christianity have been intertwined with the notion of real history that can be known. The central event of the Christian faith, the life and death of Jesus, happened during the jurisdictions of Augustus, Tiberius, Pilate, Herod and Caiaphas (Lk. 2:1; 3:1-2). For Christians, if the Jesus event did not really happen, the Christian faith is an absurd hoax (1 Co. 15:13-18).

Examples of the clash between traditional historiography and postmodern historiography are instructive. The excavation of Tel Dan has been ongoing for several years, and in July 1993, archaeologist Avraham Biran and his team uncovered an inscription with the phrases "House of David" and "King of Israel," subsequently dated to the 9th century B.C. In the midst of a debate among some

⁵V. Havel, "Post-Modernism: The Search for Universal Laws," *Vital Speeches of the Day* (Vol. 60 Aug. 1, 1994) pp. 613-615.

⁶Mrs. Joan P. Wilson, "Queries and Comments," *BAR* (May/June '89) p. 18.

⁷F. Yurco, "Were the Ancient Egyptians Black or White?" *BAR* (Sept/Oct. '89) 24-29, 58.

scholars about whether or not anything in the Bible prior to the Babylonian captivity can be accurately confirmed, this basalt fragment was historically significant. To be sure, skeptics had long doubted the biblical record, since they believed it to be a mythology composed centuries after the proposed events. Now, however, an actual piece of material evidence from more than 800 years before Jesus carried the oldest extant reference in Semitic script to the name Israel.⁸ This, along with the similar inscription on the Moabite Stone (Stela of Mesha), is considered to be of great historical significance.⁹

Postmodernists were not slow about offering a response, especially since the theory of an actual ancient Israel as old as the 9th century B.C. was (in their view) doubtless a political construction conjured up to bolster Jewish rights to occupancy in Palestine. So, British scholar Philip Davies countered that the significance of this inscription was all wishful thinking, and that King David "was about as historical as King Arthur."¹⁰ A more traditional historian and archaeologist countered that Davies' claims represented a "deconstructionist" approach to Biblical traditions (deconstructionism being a primary literary-critical technique of postmodernism). Davies was not to be taken seriously.¹¹

Even more recently, the same sort of conflict between traditional historians and postmodern historians occurred over the Siloam Inscription. This inscription, which most scholars date to the reign of Hezekiah of Judah (727-698 B.C.), was written off by two postmodern scholars in *Biblical Archaeologist* (Sept. 1996) as a Hasmonean text no older than 152-37 B.C. A number of experts in paleography and archaeology combined to refute this theory on scientific grounds.¹² However, if all ideas have equal validity, there are no winners here.

The revision of history according to the postmodernists' subjective agenda creates a paradox. On the one hand, postmodernism makes belief in Christian ideas less objectionable than modernism which rejects Christianity altogether. After all, if everyone's "truth" is equally valid, one cannot criticize another no matter what they believe. Criteria for determining truth or falsehood no longer exist. On the other hand, postmodernism removes all certainty from historical inquiry and cuts the nerve of even the barest of absolute truth claims. In a religion which is grounded firmly in a sense of history (and arguably the only one of its kind among world religions), it would change Christianity from a religion based on historical reality independent of

⁸Editor, "'David' Found at Dan," *BAR* (Mar./Apr. 1994) 26-39.

⁹A. Lemaire, "'House of David' Restored in Moabite Inscription," *BAR* (May/Jun. 1994) 30-37.

¹⁰P. Davies, "'House of David' Built on Sand," *BAR* (Jul./Aug. 1994) 54-55.

¹¹A. Rainey, "The 'House of David' and the House of the Deconstructionists," *BAR* (Nov./Dec. 1994) 47.

¹²J. Hackett, F. Cross, P. McCarter, Jr., A. Yardeni, A. Lemaire, E. Eshel, A. Hurvitz, "Defusing Pseudo-Scholarship," *BAR* (Mar./Apr. 1997) 41-50.

the believer to a religion based on solipsism. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn may well be right when he says that "behind these ubiquitous and seemingly innocent experiments of rejecting 'antiquated' traditions there lies a deep-seated hostility toward any spirituality. The relentless cult of novelty...conceals an unyielding and long-sustained attempt to undermine, ridicule and uproot all moral precepts. There is no God, there is no truth, the universe is chaotic, all is relative, 'the world as text,' a text any postmodernist is willing to compose."¹³ Historical validity that is established by the sound of sincerity and convincing rhetoric opens wide the door for mass manipulation. Better to struggle against the skeptics of modernism who say Christianity is not true than the thoroughgoing relativism of postmodernists who say everything is true.

Postmodernism and the Christian Truth Claim

As we have seen, the connection between history and Christianity is crucial. Christianity without a firm foundation in history is not the same Christianity as that of the apostles and first Christians. If history is merely a happy hunting ground for postmodernists in which to read their own subjective agenda, then the character and essence of Christianity can be reshaped to fit any model whatsoever. In the broader sense, all religious thought, Christianity or otherwise, will be relegated to the ephemeral categories of "truth for you" and "truth for me," but in the end, no absolute truth at all.

Furthermore, the open-ended epistemology of postmodernism means that all religious belief is equally valid. True to the postmodern ideal, everyone can be a theologian. Self-designed theologies of angels, spirituality, near death experiences, cults, the occult, eastern meditation—in short any religious imagining whatsoever—all share the same standing. There are no criteria for determining absolute truth or superiority among the various truth claims. In the interests of tolerance, all ideas are given equal value. No religious authority can command the field. Objectivity is impossible. Universal truth claims are absurd. Anything other than appreciation for cultural diversity is arrogant, imperialistic, exclusivistic, dehumanizing and bigoted, the only recognizable sins. The postmodernist sees religious truth, just as all other truths, to be the subjective creation of the person who believes it. To attempt to apply historical criteria, reason or material evidence to the religious discussion, or worse, to accept any traditional religious authority as final, is to lapse into the imperialistic sins of western civilization. Consider the distance between the first three statements and the last one:

¹³A. Solzhenitsyn, "The Relentless Cult of Novelty and How It Wrecked the Century," *The New York Times Book Review* (Vol. 98 Feb. 7, 1993) pp. 3ff.

You shall have no other gods before Me (Exodus 20:3).

He who sacrifices to any god, other than to the LORD alone, shall be utterly destroyed (Exodus 22:30).

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

I believe we must rethink these views much more radically. The idea that Christianity, or even the Biblical faiths, have a monopoly on religious truth is an outrageous and absurd religious chauvinism. It is astonishing that even Christian liberals and radicals fail to seriously question this assumption... This means that true revelation and true relationship to the divine is to be found in all religions (Rosemary Reuther, 20th century Feminist Theologian).¹⁴

The Historic Christian Faith and Postmodernism

If we have fairly stated postmodernism's approach to religious thought, it should come as no surprise to see a reconstructed Jesus who fits the paradigm of special interest groups. A number of these reconstructions are already on the market. Take, for instance, the work of Barbara Thiering, an Australian archaeologist who reconstructs the life of Jesus on supposed relationships between the canonical gospels and the Dead Sea Scrolls.¹⁵ According to Thiering, Jesus and John the Baptist were key figures in the Qumran community, John the "Teacher of Righteousness" and Jesus the "wicked priest." Treating all the historical texts as cryptograms, Thiering reveals that Jesus argued with John over purity rituals, was crucified, but did not die, since the appearance of death was merely the result of slow-acting poison. After his burial in a cave at Qumran, Simon Magus crawled through a tunnel bring Jesus a purgative which enabled him to evacuate the poison and recover. He then began what we know as the Christian church. This reconstruction not only found its way into print by a major publisher, it was aired on public television as a scholarly documentary.

Another example is the work of John Spong, the Episcopal bishop famous for his gay advocacy. Spong's retelling of the birth of Jesus¹⁶ reveals what "really:

¹⁴As quoted in D. Clendenin, *Many Gods, Many Lords* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 59.

¹⁵B. Thiering, *Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Unlocking the Secrets of His Life Story* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992).

¹⁶J. Spong, *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992).

happened: Mary, a teenager, was raped.¹⁷ Aquarian views about Jesus suggest that during the eighteen silent years between his childhood and public ministry, he traveled to India, sat at the feet of the gurus, through enlightenment discovered his godhead, and returned to Palestine to preach his Christ-consciousness.¹⁸ John Dominic Crossan, the co-chair of the self-acclaimed "Jesus Seminar," offers yet another reconstruction of Jesus, this time as a Peasant Jewish Cynic who offers a social critique of established structure and hierarchical power.¹⁹ In short, Jesus was himself the first postmodernist! And, as Crossan states in typical postmodernist fashion, "If you cannot believe in something produced by reconstruction, you may have nothing left to believe in!"²⁰

In all these postmodernist reconstructions, it is hard not to see a militant resistance to the historic Christian faith, its canonical documents, and its historic creeds. The reconstruction of Jesus has led to a reconstruction of early Christianity.²¹ Such reconstructions call into service not only the canonical books of the New Testament, but more and more they rely upon the noncanonical works of gnostic writers and others who were marginalized in the early church as heretics. Thus, the search is on for new ways to make Christian history more compatible with postmodernist goals. It is almost axiomatic that the biblical writer's point of view is thought to be irrecoverable, since authorial intent is irrecoverable, or wrong, since the biblical writers wrote out of a patriarchal social construct. Thus, the tragic stories of Hagar, Tamar, the unnamed woman in Judges 19 and Jephthah's daughter must be retold in a new way, for as Phyllis Trible states, "...to subordinate the suffering of the four women to the suffering of the cross is spurious. Their passion has its own integrity..."²² Trible feels entirely justified in taking the messianic passages of the suffering servant or the eucharistic words of Jesus and applying them to these women:

She was wounded for our transgressions; she was bruised for our iniquities.

¹⁷Another retelling of the story along the same lines can be found in J. Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

¹⁸For exposes of this theory, see D. Groothuis, *Revealing the New Age Jesus: Challenges to Orthodox Views of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1990) and R. Rhodes, *The Counterfeit Christ of the New Age Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990).

¹⁹J. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

²⁰For a critical treatment of all these "lives of Jesus," and especially of the Jesus Seminar, see Luke Timothy Johnson's *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996).

²¹One of the more well-known is Elisabeth Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroads, 1984).

²²P. Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

*A woman of sorrows and acquainted with grief.
Her body was broken and given to many.
My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken her?*²³

While Tribble's concerns about injustice are appropriate, the meaning she attempts to derive from these texts are her own, not the intent of the biblical authors. This tendency to ignore or reject authorial intent and replace it with a contemporary agenda is typical of postmodern method. Such techniques will continue to be used, for as Pam Milne states, "After 200 years of feminist biblical scholarship, the task of changing the Bible from a sword used against women to a ploughshare used by women in our struggle to achieve equality and to have our humanity recognized is not yet finished."²⁴ The Bible must be approached with a "hermeneutic of suspicion," that is, with the assumption that its authors were misogynists and male chauvinists, and therefore, "...the antiwoman perspective of the Bible seems to place them [women] in the dilemma of choosing between accepting the authority of the Bible or respecting themselves as whole human beings."²⁵ Because of the overwhelming misogyny of Western religious traditions (i.e., Christianity), women can never again give an unquestioning commitment to the existing religious hierarchies or institutions of the Christian church.²⁶

Theological feminism, of course, does not stand alone. There are any number of other theologies that employ the same methods, including liberation theology (which aims at supporting third world emancipation from western imperialism),²⁷ gay theology (which aims at supporting gay rights and elevating the gay lifestyle as an acceptable alternative),²⁸ and so forth. What they have in common is postmodern literary technique which divorces authorial intent from contemporary meaning.

The Appeal of Eclecticism

While postmodernists resist the historic Christian faith, they have no hesitation about borrowing elements of Christianity so they may be joined to other streams of religious thought. So long as Christian ideas do not require superiority over other religious ideas, they are welcome. Postmodernists hope to glean what is best from all

²³Tribble, 8, 36, 64, 92.

²⁴P. Milne, "Feminist Interpretations of the Bible: Then and Now," *Bible Review* (Oct. 1992) 38-43, 52-54.

²⁵Milne, 54.

²⁶M. Tolbert, "Protestant Feminists and the Bible: On the Horns of a Dilemma," *The Pleasure of Her Text: Feminist Readings of Biblical and Historical Texts*, ed. A. Bach (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1990) 45-67.

²⁷For a survey of liberation theologies, see S. Gundry and A. Johnson, *Tensions in Contemporary Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1976) 325-434.

²⁸J. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980).

religions without following any one of them exclusively. Sincerity is more important than what is believed. So, for instance, when this author was taking a graduate course in Hinduism at the University of Detroit, the Hindu professor repeatedly attempted to explain the Hindu viewpoint with Christian paradigms. In explaining the Hindu concept of undivided wholeness, he explained that the universe was like the Christian concept of the body of Christ. One class assignment was to write a paper explaining the common viewpoints between the Hindu Scriptures and the biblical Torah.

The appeal of eclecticism is that it eliminates religious debate. The scandal of traditional Christianity is that it fosters debate over religious truth claims. The postmodernist says all religions are true in their own way. The traditional Christian says only one religion is true. The Christian church cannot be both catholic and eclectic at the same time. The church catholic contends that there is only one way to God, Jesus Christ, and seeks to bring the whole world to this confession. The eclectic church contends that all roads lead to God, and all religious expression is valid.²⁹ Religious eclecticism is a western counterpart to the Hindu claim in *The Bhagavad-Gita*, where Lord Krishna says, "Even those who are devotees of other Gods, and, full of faith, worship them, they worship only Me..." (*Gita*, 9:23). For postmodernists, such latitude is a breath of fresh air. For traditional Christians, it is the death knell of biblical faith.

The Jesus Seminar

The publication of *The Five Gospels: A Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (Macmillan, 1993)³⁰ has given "naysayers" considerable grist for the debunking-Jesus mill. A group of maverick, liberal scholars convened in 1985 to form what is popularly known as "The Jesus Seminar." Applying the techniques of literary criticism to the sayings of Jesus, they proposed to ascertain which sayings had historical authenticity. This new edition of the gospels is the result of their work.³¹

²⁹D. Bloesch, *Faith & Its Counterfeits* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1981) 85-86.

³⁰To the average Christian, the term "five gospels" may sound strange. The fifth one is the apocryphal Coptic Gospel of Thomas, a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus and preserved by a Gnostic-Christian group in Nag Hammadi, Egypt. This "gospel" was probably produced in about 140 A.D., though our ancient copies of it date from about the mid-fourth or early fifth centuries. It was discovered in Nag Hammadi, Egypt by archaeologists as part of a library of ancient Gnostic texts. Gnosticism was a heresy strenuously resisted by the church fathers, because it mixed a variety of Greek philosophical ideas with Christian teaching.

³¹For non-conservative summaries of their work from different perspectives, see M. Borg, "What Did Jesus Really Say?" *BR* (Oct. 1989 Vol. V, No. 5) 18-25 (liberal scholars perspective); S. Lowe, "What Jesus Did & Did Not Say," *Moment* (April 1994) 40-43, 72-75 (Jewish perspective); R. Watson, "A Lesser Child of God," *Newsweek* (April 4, 1994) 53-54 (popular journalist perspective).

Background

The broader background of this effort derives from the rationalism and skepticism of the 18th century in Europe called the Enlightenment. The barriers to progress were believed to be coming down, and external authorities, such as the Bible, the church, the state, and so forth, were an offense against human nature. Literary criticism also developed from these same concepts, and since that time, skeptics have called into question the historical reality of people as diverse as Socrates and Shakespeare. From the mid-nineteenth century through the present, literary criticism has become increasingly more radical, moving from the traditional norms of authorial intent, to documentary isolationism, to the notion that all meaning is in the mind of the reader alone. It was to be expected that the Bible would receive the same critical analysis.

Earlier in this century, some scholars adopted a view of the Bible which distinguished between two kinds of history. One was the history of actual event, and the other was the history of mythology which gave meaning to the event but which may or may not have been actual. Closely associated with this trend was the idea that there could be areas of the Bible which were theologically true whether or not they really occurred. Space-time history was thus separated from theological truth, and the intelligentsia was well on its way to "demythologizing" the Bible.

The upshot of these various trends resulted in an opinion that the historical Jesus and the theological Jesus need not be the same. Further, the records of Jesus in the canonical gospels were the *developing tradition of the early Christian community*, not the objective accounts of eyewitnesses. Thus, literary criticism had to be applied to the stories of Jesus in order to discover what real history, if any, lay behind the gospel accounts. Since these scholars accepted the idea that the gospels were embellished accounts shaped by the prejudice, theological agenda, and fragmented memory of the early church, they set about trying to extricate from the gospel accounts what might be actual event and what might be simply the embellished adaptations of the early church. They developed the hypothesis that the gospel stories come to us in layers of tradition, more or less like an onion. Only as these layers were peeled back to the core could one find out what Jesus really said or did.

The Jesus Seminar

The Jesus Seminar follows in the tradition of this kind of literary criticism. It focuses specifically on the sayings of Jesus in the four gospels and the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas. Scholars from this critical tradition use various criteria to evaluate Jesus' sayings. Here are the most important of them:

- **Multiple Attestation:** This criterion states that if a saying of Jesus is found in

more than one "layer" of tradition, it has a better chance of being historical (i.e., if a saying is found in Mark, Q and Thomas).

- **Distinction from Developing Tradition:** This criterion states that if a saying of Jesus seems to be part of the developing tradition of the church, it is probably not authentic. For instance, the sayings of Jesus in which he claims to be divine must be discounted, since it is believed that this level of self-consciousness on the part of Jesus must have been the fabrication of a Christian community who came to believe that he was the Son of God.
- **Environment:** If a saying does not fit into the environment of Jesus' own time and place, it must be discounted. Thus, Jesus' statement that "all foods are clean" (Mk. 7:19b) must be discounted, because it is believed that the issue of kosher food for Christians post-dates Easter.
- **Distinctive Form:** If the saying of Jesus is cast in the form of a parable or aphorism, it has a better chance of being authentic. However, if such a saying functions to teach Christian doctrine or Christian morals, it should be discounted, since it is believed that Jesus only used parables to assist his hearers in experiencing a new point of view, not for establishing doctrine or morals.
- **Dissimilarity:** This criterion says that if what Jesus ostensibly said is dissimilar to what was currently found in Judaism (i.e., unique), it has a better chance of being authentic. If, on the other hand, his saying can be replicated in the Hebrew Bible, Jewish tradition, any category of known concern in the early Christian communities, or some other source contemporary with the early church, it should be discounted (i.e., it may have been borrowed from these sources by the early church as it embellished the memory of Jesus).
- **Coherence:** This criterion attempts to assess whether or not a saying of Jesus seems compatible with the gospels' overall picture of Jesus. If not, then it may be discounted.

Obviously, any saying of Jesus which is accepted as authentic by the scholars of The Jesus Seminar must pass quite a battery of criteria³². It is not surprising, then, that of the 518 sayings attributed to Jesus from various sources, canonical and otherwise, only some 17% are given much chance of authenticity. Of these, only 2% are accepted as almost certainly authentic. As such, Jesus never claimed to be divine, never claimed to be the messiah, had no notion that he was uniquely God's Son, and never commissioned his disciples to convert the world in his name. To the question,

³² The 164 scholars who are part of the group voted on each of the 518 sayings. After discussion and debate, they cast their votes with small wooden balls: *Red* = Yes, almost certainly; *Pink* = More likely 'yes' than 'no'; *Gray* = More likely 'no' than 'yes'; *Black* = Almost certainly not. These same four colors are used in the new scholars' version to demonstrate their voting outcomes.

"What did Jesus *really* say?", the answer is, "Not much."

For Reflection and Discussion

The first thing that should be evident is that the results of The Jesus Seminar are not based on hard evidence (such as, manuscripts), but rather, abstract literary theory. Whether or not Jesus actually said what the Gospels attribute to him cannot be determined by such methods, even by experts. It takes as much faith to believe in the theories of literary criticism as it does to believe in the accuracy of the four evangelists. Unfortunately, some media reports (the *Detroit Free Press* being one of them), have implied that the issue is, in fact, one of hard evidence. Such reporting is inaccurate and misleading. The famous issue of the reality of William Shakespeare follows along similar lines. Some theorists, on the basis of literary criticism, have concluded that Shakespeare was really Francis Bacon. Can such a theory be proved? Hardly. That there are forgeries and plagiarized documents in history, no sane person would disallow. That there are embellished records in history, we all know. However, if we treat all ancient records with sufficient skepticism, we may as well throw history to the winds. Historical revisionists and deconstructionists seem headed in that direction. This direction leads to not merely a skepticism about the Bible, but about all history and all literature³³.

Following are pertinent questions that surface in view of The Jesus Seminar's reconstruction of Jesus.

1. If the results of The Jesus Seminar are accepted, what does such an acceptance suggest in terms of the canon and authority of Scripture?
2. Already, The Jesus Seminar seems to have become a tool in the hands of some special interest groups (i.e., biblical feminists, eclectics, those concerned about anti-Semitism, those advocating political correctness). Is it possible that the scholars involved have extraneous concerns and are less than objective in their quest?
3. With the avalanche of data in our technological west, we have become more and more dependent upon experts to evaluate truth for us. Are there dangers in this dependency upon experts? What impact do the experts have on either Christian or non-Christian people?

³³ A sustained rebuttal of the Jesus' Seminar and its methodologies by world-class biblical scholars can be found in Candler School of Theology's (Emory University) Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins, Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996) and in the Dean of Litchfield (formerly professor at Oxford and Cambridge Universities), N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) and *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

From Jesus to Christ

"Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."

John 20:13

The PBS Presentation

During Holy Week 1998, PBS aired a four hour special in four parts which purported to be a scholarly examination of the life of Jesus and the origins of Christianity. To be sure, it was conducted by biblical scholars with genuine credentials, but it was hardly an even-handed presentation. The selected scholars offered a more-or-less monolithic viewpoint that was seriously at odds with the stated record of the Bible as well as at odds with other biblical scholars who, while equally qualified in the academy, do not share the skepticism and revisionism of the presenters.

Part 1 examined the life of Jesus in the context of the Greco-Roman world, the possible influences from his early life in Nazareth (near Sepphoris), the Judaism of his day, his life, and his death under the Roman administration.

Part 2 explored the period of the earliest Christians, tracing the spread of Christianity through the time of Paul and up until the Jewish revolt against Rome.

Part 3 addressed the writing of the gospels from about AD 70 to AD 100. It employed current literary-critical technique to examine how and why the gospels were written.

Part 4 explained how Christianity separated from Judaism, Rome's opposition to the Christian movement, and the eventual acceptance of Christianity as Rome's official religion in the time of Constantine.

Enlightenment Background

The PBS Special followed an approach to the study of Jesus that goes back a century and a half. Its roots lie in Protestant classical liberalism, a post-Enlightenment methodology for studying the gospels which began among German theologians and gradually spread throughout much of Europe and America.

The Enlightenment was a matrix of ideas including a rejection of medieval superstition (and supernaturalism in general), an optimism about human freedom and its potential, a rejection of religious violence (i.e., Protestant-Catholic wars, witch hunts, inquisitions, etc.), a pronounced skepticism regarding any certain knowledge of God (via Hume and Kant), and a positive exploration of new horizons in science

and math (concepts of natural law, the Copernican theory, and the elevation of reason as the arbiter of all knowledge). One outcome of Enlightenment thought was the emergence of certain principles that became the framework for western intellectualism, such as:

The Principle of Reason: There is a fundamental order/structure in the world which corresponds to the rational structure of the mind (Immanuel Kant).

The Principle of Nature: The universe is governed by certain unvarying natural laws which may be discovered and understood by human reason (Newton).

Principle of Autonomy: Autonomous human reason is the arbiter of truth rather than any external authority, such as, tradition, the Church, or Scripture.

Principle of Harmony: The universe has an over-arching order, and thus, ethics should be derived in harmony to this order.

Principle of Progress: Scientific method discovers nature's laws and will ultimately provide ways of applying these laws to every area of life.

The goal of modern thought, as described above, was to know the universe, master it, and create a better world. Post-Enlightenment thought was very optimistic about the achievement of such a goal.

Protestant classical liberalism adopted the principles of the Enlightenment and applied them to the study of religion, theology and Scripture. This acceptance of the Enlightenment framework meant an end to the traditional way of approaching the Bible, since external authority (the Church, Christian tradition, the Bible) no longer held the final voice. The Bible was believed to be a human document to be approached with the same literary-critical tools as any other human document from the past. Its statements were not exempt from the scientific, historical, and sociological tests that were applied to all other ancient writing. Hence, Protestant liberals, in their effort to combine modern intellectual respectability with Christian thought, began a "search for the historical Jesus." This search was an attempt to discover what truth about Jesus could be derived from the Bible by applying the techniques of modern critical study to the gospels.

The Search for the Historical Jesus

The historical-critical assumption is that the interpreter of the four gospels cannot directly go back to the historical Jesus without piercing the layers of tradition that separate the modern reader from the Jesus who actually lived and died. These layers of tradition are bound up in the gospel record itself, shaped by oral forms, preaching rhetoric, and later historical situations. The story of Jesus has been distorted by the biases, concerns, preferences, intentions and reactions of the evangelists who wrote the gospels. Furthermore, the life-setting of the Christian

communities to whom the gospels were written shaped the story of Jesus by the communities' own historical tensions, heresies and enemies. In the end, Adolf Harnack spoke for most liberals when he suggested that Jesus as he really was (the "kernel") was overlaid by considerable distortion (the "husk") which must be peeled back by modern historical-critical techniques (history, archaeology and literary criticism). Given the Enlightenment rejection of the supernatural, it is not surprising that part of the dispensable "husk" of the gospel story included Jesus' miracles and predictions about the future.

In short, Jesus had to be reconstructed. This reconstructed Jesus became the object of faith and the norm for the Christian life among liberal Protestants. That norm, in its simplest form, was the universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of all humans. The most valuable part of the story of Jesus was his ethical life and teachings, rather than his death. The notion that Jesus had to die to propitiate God's anger against human sin sounded too much like the vengeful, blood-thirsty deities of paganism, surely not a loving God who was compatible with the enlightened mind. The story of the resurrection, like other supernatural parts of the gospels, was either denied outright or reinterpreted as a myth with existential meaning (but not historical veracity).

The classical liberal (reconstructed) Jesus, while he was not divine, was believed to be an ethical model for individuals and society. Though he was a human like the rest of us, he was very "God-conscious" and called upon his followers to be God-conscious as well (Schleiermacher). The message of Jesus was about the kingdom of God, a perfect social order in which people turned away from selfishness and turned toward humanity (Ritschl). Christian discipleship must be lived out practically in socially progressive ways following the ethical imperatives of Jesus about love for one's neighbor. Following the pattern of Jesus, Christians should work at educating the uneducated, feeding the poor, and healing the sick via the advancements of modern medicine (Rauschenbusch and Schweitzer).

While the early liberal "lives of Jesus" resulted in various reconstructions, ranging from Jesus, the good religious teacher (Fosdick), to Jesus, the deluded apocalyptic fanatic (Schweitzer), no single reconstruction held the field. Eventually, the effort to reconstruct Jesus was largely given up in favor of a mythological interpretation which relegated his real life and ministry to the unknowable past (Bultmann). However, more recently liberal thinkers have once more resumed the task of trying to discover who Jesus really was. The most well-known of these efforts is the so-called Jesus Seminar which we discussed in the previous chapter. Contemporary reconstructions of Jesus include the hypotheses that the death of Jesus was a plot by his disciples to drug him and then "stage" his resurrection (Schonfield), that Jesus was the wicked priest of the Qumran documents who opposed John the

Baptist, the Teacher of Righteousness (Barbara Thiering), that Jesus was a charismatic sage who attempted a counter-cultural renewal movement within Judaism by critiquing the 'politics of holiness' (Marcus Borg), that Jesus was a Jewish peasant cynic who preached a vision of counter-cultural egalitarianism (John Dominic Crossan), or that Jesus was a wisdom teacher who set in motion a social experiment by bringing together various loosely-associated wisdom groups and cults (Burton Mack).

The Slant of the PBS Presentation

The PBS presentation generally followed the standard historical-critical approach (i.e., the reconstruction of Jesus) that is now standard in most American and European universities. It assumes at the outset that the texts of the New Testament cannot be accepted at face value. This methodology, following the lead of classical Protestant liberalism, assumes that the four gospels reveal not the historical Jesus, that is, Jesus as he actually lived, but rather, the embellished memories of Jesus that were overlaid by theological concerns, personal viewpoints, reflections springing from later tensions that developed between Christians and Jews and/or Christians and Greco-Roman ideologies, and so forth. The goal of this approach, as discussed above, is to peel back the layers of accumulated tradition (the husk) so as to get to the truth about the real Jesus (the kernel).

Several things are axiomatic in this interpretive method. First, based on Enlightenment skepticism and philosophical empiricism, such things as miracles and the supernatural are automatically disregarded as incompatible with modern thought. Second, none of the gospels were written by eye-witnesses or depend upon eye-witnesses. The testimony of early Christians that the Gospels of Matthew and John were written by two of the Twelve Apostles, that the Gospel of Mark was written based on the eye-witness accounts of Simon Peter, another apostle, and that Luke was written based on personal interviews of eye-witnesses who personally knew Jesus (cf. Lk. 1:1-4) is discounted altogether. In place of this traditional viewpoint, the theory is advanced that the four gospels were written several decades after the actual life of Jesus, they were composed by unknown second (or even third) generation Christians who probably never knew Jesus personally, and the records depend on the enlarged oral tradition that gradually developed as well as on some (hypothetical) written documents containing some of the sayings of Jesus. Third, readers of the four gospels cannot go back to the historical Jesus without peeling back the layers of tradition. The way to peel back the layers of tradition is by examining the *sitz im leben* (German for "life setting") of the evangelist(s) and the communities to which he/they wrote. Fourth, the gospels passed through several preliminary stages before reaching the form in which we know them, either as earlier

shorter documents that were later combined or as editions edited by later hands than the original hand. Finally, the contemporary "quest for the historical Jesus" often carries a strong sociopolitical agenda, such as political liberation or social egalitarianism.

The timing of the PBS presentation to coincide with Holy Week, when Christians traditionally celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, was intentional. It was also intentional that Jesus' resurrection, which from the beginning has been the central event for Christians, was bluntly ignored. Luke Johnson of Emory University offers a penetrating analysis of such productions.³⁴ First, he says, there is an emphasis on the scholarly credentials of the presenters, which sets them up as authoritative experts in the field. Second, the presentation purports to offer some new and provocative insight into the meaning of Jesus not previously discovered in the past two millennia of Christian history--an implied judgment that "your education has been neglected." Third, a new reconstruction of Jesus is offered which generally denies the apparent meaning of the gospels and the traditional interpretation by the Christian church. Finally, Christians are called upon to reexamine their faith in light of the new truth by the experts.

This presentation purports to be neutral, that is, it purports to come from neither a position of faith nor a position of antagonism. However, it assumes certain commonly accepted conventions from the liberal religious academy, such as:

- ♦ The historical records of Jesus in the gospels are a mixture of genuine history, later embellishment, personal perception and traditional shaping.
- ♦ The common perception that Jesus was condemned to death by the Jews is politically and historically suspect; he was condemned and executed by the Romans. The perception of the Jewish role in the death of Jesus has had the unfortunate consequence of anti-Semitism, anti-Judaism and, ultimately, the Holocaust. Either directly or indirectly, the latter is to be laid at the feet of the Christian movement.
- ♦ The phenomenon of Christianity is a product of historical cause and effect in a closed worldview, that is, no allowance is made for supernatural direction other than what can be explained by historical causation.
- ♦ The images of Jesus coming from the gospels, while somewhat similar, are often conflicting, and over them are superimposed the personal idiosyncrasies and beliefs of the gospel writers which may or may not reflect real history. Some sources which lie outside traditional Christendom, such as the Gnostic literature which was rejected by orthodox Christianity, offer valid contributions to the meaning of Jesus as well.

³⁴ L. Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996).

- ♦ Religion, by definition, is evolutionary. Christianity is no exception. The Christian faith is a product of many years of human reflection about Jesus rather than a divine revelation from God about his Son. The title of the series, "From Jesus to Christ," reflects this evolutionary perspective. It suggests the question in the following form, "How did a religious reformer like Jesus come to be accepted as the Messiah of God?"

Resources

The academic resources behind this series include professors of religion from major universities and graduate schools (e.g., Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Boston, University of Texas, Claremont Graduate School, etc.) as well as archaeologists, feminists, theologians and scholars of ancient Near Eastern history. Many of the resource persons are well-known in scholarly circles and have produced academic works about Jesus and the New Testament. John Dominic Crossan, for instance, is one of the primary leaders in the so-called Jesus Seminar. Elaine Pagels is a well-known feminist theologian. Helmut Koester is an expert in Greco-Roman culture and religion. However, without exception their works tend to be skeptical of traditional Christian views, and many of them offer novel and innovative interpretations that are hardly representative of the larger body of biblical scholars. John Dominic Crossan, for instance, has already produced works asserting that historicity can be claimed for only the barest minimum of the narratives in the canonical gospels, that most of the reported events "never happened," that the gospels must be viewed as novelistic fictions, and that early Christianity is the root of anti-Semitism.³⁵ Elaine Pagels, who specializes in Gnostic literature, has argued that the notion of Satan was a development of the early Christians in order to demonize those of whom they disapproved, such as, Jews, Pharisees, and heretics.³⁶ Wayne Meeks, less radical than either Crossan or Pagels, at least agrees with those scholars who deny Pauline authorship to 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, 1 Timothy, Titus and 2 Timothy, even though each of these letters claims to be by Paul and the early church believed them to be by Paul.³⁷

What is particularly striking is that there is a notable absence of any alternative viewpoints among the presenters, which in turn implies that the presenters speak for all biblical scholars. Evangelical scholars, conservative Roman Catholic scholars, or even non-evangelicals who are more reserved in their assessments were given no

³⁵John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus? exposing the roots of anti-semitism in the Gospel story of the death of Jesus* (Harper San Francisco, 1995); see also his works *The Historical Jesus* (1992), *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography* (1994), and *The Essential Jesus* (1994).

³⁶Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* (Random House, 1995).

³⁷Wayne Meeks, ed., *The Writings of St. Paul* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972).

voice. It is not that such scholars are unavailable: N. T. Wright from Oxford University, Luke Johnson from Emory University, Raymond Brown of Union Theological Seminary and I. Howard Marshall from the University of Aberdeen are a few of the many such scholars who would take serious exception to the PBS reconstruction of Jesus. Even though evangelical scholars also belong to the Society of Biblical Literature (the academic society for biblical studies) and even though they teach at most of the prestigious universities in America and Europe, their viewpoint was absent altogether. It can at least be said that the resource people were erudite, and their presentation sheds some light upon the cultural milieu of the formative period of Christianity. At the same time, none of them accept the Bible as divinely inspired, historically accurate, or as holding any final authority for what people should believe about Jesus or the apostles.

The New Quest for the Historical Jesus

As mentioned earlier, this presentation fits with a relatively new movement to rediscover the "real" Jesus. It is apparent (in this viewpoint) that the "old" Jesus of traditional Christianity is hopelessly misinformed. This new movement has produced a variety of sociopolitical interpretations of Jesus, such as, Jesus the Gay Activist (Bishop John Spong), Jesus the Pauline invention (A. N. Wilson), Jesus the Liberator of Women (Elaine Pagels), and Jesus the illegitimate child who broke through to spiritual enlightenment after his troubled relations with his family (Stephen Mitchell).

The old quest for the historical Jesus (19th century) was largely theological. Generally, it concentrated on ethics and the meaning of the kingdom of God in the modern world. It concluded that Jesus, while not divine in the traditional sense, was one who pointed men and women toward God. The new quest is almost entirely sociopolitical, concluding that Jesus was a sort of post-modernist who was a couple millennia ahead of his time. Neither of these conclusions show Jesus to be what the earliest Christians claimed him to be--God the only Son who came from the Father's side (Jn. 1:18).

Discussion Questions

1. In light of the modern attempts to reconstruct Jesus, what is the significance of traditional conclusions about the canon of Scripture, the inspiration of Scripture and the infallibility of Scripture?
2. How might modern America's dependence on "experts" affect the way such reconstructions are accepted?
3. The PBS Special was more on the order of a soft-sell than a Christian-bashing session. How might this style of presentation affect the way it was received?
4. How might such a presentation shape the way an average non-religious

American thinks about Jesus? If such viewpoints as advocated in this television special became generally accepted, what might this mean for conservative Christians and their place in contemporary society?

5. What challenges does this kind of presentation offer to your faith, and how do you respond?

N. T. Wright: a Paradigm for Orthodoxy

Jesus Historiography

Given the methods used by the Jesus Seminar and the PBS Special presenters of "From Jesus to Christ," both of which followed in the footsteps of classical liberalism and its efforts to reconstruct Jesus (often in the image of a contemporary political or sociological model), the question should be raised: how do responsible scholars treat the story of Jesus without doing violence to the gospels? It should be known that there are world-class biblical scholars teaching at the most prestigious institutions in the world who would take serious exception to the truncated, revisionist approach of the Jesus Seminar and the PBS presenters. Already we have mentioned Luke Johnson at Emory University. Another is N. T. Wright.³⁸ In his academic publications as well as in his popular level video series, *Jesus, the New Way* (The Christian History Institute), Dr. Wright takes the more balanced approach of a scholarly examination of the times surrounding Jesus to show how his message of the kingdom fit into the push and pull of politics and theology in the first century. Due to the discoveries of both material evidence (archaeological) and historical documents, contemporary scholars are in a better position today to fill in the background of Jesus' era than at any time in recent history. Dr. Wright does this on several fronts.

Wright's Basic Approach

In the first place, Dr. Wright does not adopt the popular historical-critical model of treating the gospels like an onion "from which one peels numerous outer layers to get at the core--and then discovers that there is none."³⁹ Rather, he convincingly argues that the gospel witnesses passed along relatively intact the traditions about Jesus, and while there is evidence of limited editing, the passing of

³⁸See his works *The Original Jesus: the Life and Vision of a Revolutionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); *Who Was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996). Dr. Wright, formerly of Oxford University and now the Dean of Lichfield Cathedral in England, is widely recognized as one of the foremost New Testament scholars in the world.

³⁹B. Witherington III, "The Wright Quest for the Historical Jesus," *The Christian Century* (Nov. 19-26, 1997) 1075-1078.

tradition without distortion better fits what we know about how the Jews handled tradition. The historical-critical habit of treating the traditions about Jesus as though they were on a par with the preservation of ancient legends, such as, Homer's *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey*, is inadequate and misleading. The gospels material was committed to writing no more than a generation after the events actually occurred and, in fact, they were written while eyewitnesses were still alive to corroborate the material. So, Wright rejects the historical revisionism and reductionism of scholars like John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg as tendentious and agenda-laden.

What Wright argues is that the traditions about Jesus fit extremely well into what we know of the structures of early Judaism, particularly the structures of Torah, temple, territory and ethnicity. It is within these structures as they interplay with the story of Jesus that his work shines. In the video series, which was made for the layperson as opposed to the specialist, Wright offers insight into this Jewish background.

The Jewish Setting for Jesus

Wright places considerable weight on the Jewish hope for a repetition of the Maccabean victory in 167 BC. The oppression by the Romans that followed the brief period of Jewish independence was similar in many ways to the Jewish oppression under the Syrian Greeks, and therefore, the hope remained alive that what had happened once might happen again. This hope lay behind the Jewish resistance movement.

Resistance against Rome was as much religious as it was political. Minor and major revolts against Rome are scattered across the decades of the period immediately before, during and after Jesus. These revolts include those of the brigand Hezekiah (40s BC) and the refusal of Pollio and Samaias to pledge their oath to Herod (20 BC). It also includes the refusal of over 6000 Pharisees to pledge oath to Herod (10 BC), the Eagle incident of Judas and Matthias, who tore down the Roman eagle at the temple gate in which more than 2000 insurgents were crucified (4 BC), the messianic movements of Simon and Athronges at about the same time, and the census riots led by Judas the Galilean (AD 6; cf. Ac. 5:37). Flavius Josephus details several incidents under Pilate (AD 26-36, cf. Lk. 13:1). Later, there was the execution of the brigand Tholomaeus (AD mid-40s), the execution of the prophet Theudas at about the same time (Ac. 5:36), the crucifixion of Jacob and Simon, sons of Judas the Galilean (AD 46-48), and the Passover riot in which 20,000 Jews were killed (c. AD 50). Still later were Felix's purge of the Lestai with many crucifixions (AD 52-60) and the revolts of the Sicarii and an Egyptian Jew (c. AD 60). Finally came the First Jewish Revolt (66-70 AD) followed by the Second Jewish Revolt under Bar-Kochba (AD 133-135). That Jesus should have been regarded by some as

a revolutionary is not to be doubted.

The typical Jewish way of describing the intervention of God in history was through apocalyptic literature. The style of apocalyptic, which began in the Old Testament prophets, was to describe current events in the symbolism of great beasts. This style is clearly evident in the Book of Daniel, and in the period shortly before the birth of Jesus, the "beast" of Rome had arisen. Also characteristic of apocalyptic, however, was the firm conviction that Yahweh would intervene. He would judge the nations and elevate Jerusalem as the capital of the world. So, the Jews awaited the coming of God's messiah who would bring this vision to reality.

In order to prepare themselves for God's intervention, the Jews concentrated on preserving the temple, keeping the Torah, and maintaining their Jewish identity. They were God's people, and they would never compromise their spiritual standing by lapsing into the patterns of the pagans. Separation was paramount.

Among the movements anticipating the intervention of God were the Essenes (Qumran). While there is still ongoing debate about the relationship between the Essenes and Qumran, most scholars connect them. The Dead Sea Scrolls offer the vision of a community at odds with the temple and waiting for God to intervene as the divine victor in a mighty eschatological war between the "sons of light" and the "sons of darkness."

The classic tension between prophet and king is apparent in the ministry of John the Baptist. Since the period of Elijah, the prophets of Israel had been the "troublers" (to use Ahab's description) who offered a balance of moral power to the unrestrained power-mongering of ancient kings. Herod and John the Baptist fit that pattern exactly. John predicted that the earthly power of Herod would be replaced by God's kingdom--and that God's kingdom was just on the horizon. The crowds were excited and eager, since what John predicted as what they had been hoping for all along.

When Jesus began preaching after John's imprisonment and execution, he continued John's message about the coming of God's kingdom. However, while his words about the coming of God's kingdom were surely what the Jews wanted to hear, the character of this coming kingdom did not fit the popular image. Jesus paid little attention to the current hopes for political freedom. He did not condemn the Romans, and he did not seem a very likely candidate to inherit the mantle of Judas Maccabeus. Yes, Jesus said, the kingdom was arriving—but his vision for the kingdom was markedly different than popular expectation.

Jesus and the Kingdom

In locating the story of Jesus in the context of first century Palestinian Jewish life, N. T. Wright emphasizes the sharp contrast between the kingdom of God as

anticipated by the Jews on the one hand and the kingdom of God as preached by Jesus on the other. The Jewish ideals of purity and sobriety were redefined by Jesus. Rather than ritual, racial, physical or class purity, Jesus advocated purity of heart. Rather than severity and grim separatism, Jesus advocated celebration and inclusion. He attended banquets and weddings (the ancient equivalent of parties), and he associated, often at meals, with those who were ostracized by most devout Jews, such as "sinners" (those careless about legalistic righteousness), prostitutes, tax collectors (perceived as collaborators with Rome), and the sick (ritually unclean and perceived as under God's judgment). He depicted God as accepting into his kingdom all who wanted to be there, regardless of their religious credentials.

Jesus' parables, according to Wright, were coded stories about the coming of God's kingdom, showing what the kingdom would be like. However, they were more than this, too, for they were coded stories retelling the history of Israel. In these stories, he was saying that the history of Israel, which began with Abraham and stretched down through the centuries, was reaching its climax. All that the prophets had predicted was now in the time of its fulfillment.

Jesus' sermons offered a new understanding of the Torah. Rather than rigid and stringent external standards, Jesus called for mutual forgiveness, acceptance and inward reform.

Most Jews of the first century were committed to the revolutionary coming of God's kingdom by war or politics. This is apparent from the many resistance movements culminating in the first and second Jewish revolts. The Jews were looking for a new Judas Maccabeus, or better, a new David. Jesus, by contrast, advised the Jews to "repent and believe in me," that is, give up their revolutionary agenda and accept a new vision for God's kingdom.

Wright puts considerable emphasis on Jesus' message as the "real return from exile." When the Jews returned from Babylon nearly six centuries earlier to rebuild Jerusalem, they met with disappointment and despair. To be sure, the temple was rebuilt and the community renewed. However, the prophets' glowing promises for restoration were never realized. Even at the time of Jesus' birth the people were still those looking for "the redemption of Jerusalem" (Lk. 2:38) and the "salvation" of Israel (Lk. 1:68-75). Jesus' message was that the real return from exile was to be interpreted in spiritual, not political, terms. Yes, God's kingdom was coming, but no, it would not come by revolution. In fact, the way of the sword was the path to disaster.

Some of Jesus' symbols can only be described as shocking. By choosing twelve apostles, Jesus boldly took the initiative to begin a new Israel. The symbolism of the number twelve could hardly be missed! By touching and healing lepers, Jesus demonstrated that in God's kingdom purity was achieved by a divine act

of healing, not by punctilious legal observances. By personally offering forgiveness for sins, Jesus demonstrated that the temple system of forgiveness was obsolete. By violating Sabbath taboos, Jesus demonstrated that separatism was not the way to God.

Jesus clashed with virtually all the key Jewish symbols, including family loyalty, the holy land as a sacred possession, the legalistic approach to Torah, and the temple as the highest symbol of God's presence. He challenged his followers to become the light of the world, the true calling of Israel, and to do this they would have to accept a new understanding of all the old symbols.

Jesus' Self-Consciousness

One of the most important questions regarding Jesus concerns his self-consciousness. Did Jesus know that he was God's Son, the Messiah, the King of Israel, and if so, how early was he aware of this special identity? Traditionally, of course, the gospels seek to demonstrate that Jesus was fully conscious of his special identity and mission, and in fact, that this self-consciousness began very early (Lk. 2:49). Without exception, each gospel recounts sayings of Jesus in which he explicitly claims conscious messianic identity. In Luke, Jesus identified himself as the fulfillment of the anointed one of God predicted by Isaiah (Lk. 4:16-21). In Mark, while Jesus is careful to keep his special identity a secret from the crowds at large (Mk. 1:25, 34, 44; 3:12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26), and in fact charges his own disciples with keeping the secret (9:9), he has no hesitation in accepting acclamation from non-Jewish people (5:19-20). His divine sonship was authenticated at his baptism (Mk. 1:11) and again at the transfiguration (9:7). Jesus pointedly claims messianic identity at his trial (Mk. 14:61-62). The truth of his identity was discerned by a Roman soldier at the cross (Mk. 15:39). A climax in Matthew's gospel is Peter's declaration of faith that Jesus is the Messiah, God's Son (Mt. 16:16), while John's Gospel is replete with self-identifying references (Jn. 4:25-26; 5:17-18, 22-23; 6:35; 8:12, 58; 9:5; 10:11, 14; 11:25, etc.).

In spite of such abundant affirmations about Jesus' self-consciousness in the gospels, Protestant liberalism has for the last century and a half seriously questioned the legitimacy of these claims. Rather than accept the sayings of Jesus on their own merit as faithful recollections by eyewitnesses, critical scholars have urged that these identifications are in reality the later faith of the Christian community which has been retrojected back into the mouth of Jesus. Jesus didn't really say most of these things, but the later Christians believed such things to be true, so they felt justified in putting such words in Jesus' mouth. A standard university text illustrates the point: *Did early Christians...simply make up material and attribute it to him [Jesus]? The answer is 'Yes'...* This sort of creativity is attributed to the early Christians' belief that

*the Spirit of God spoke through inspired humans or that the Lord spoke directly to them--and thus [they] could honestly attribute to Jesus things which came to them from some source other than his pre-crucifixion teaching.*⁴⁰

N. T. Wright does not engage in this sort of anachronism. Rather, he seeks to demonstrate that Jesus, in both word and symbolic action, deliberately claimed messiahship. To be sure, he shows that Jesus wanted to distance himself from the popular concepts of messiahship that were laden with militaristic expectations. At the same time, Jesus used symbolic actions, such as his entry in Jerusalem on a donkey and his cleansing of the temple, to focus on his claim to messiahship. Even the role of John the Baptist was important in this regard, since Jesus claimed John was the expected Elijah to come (cf. Mal. 4:5-6; Mt. 17:11-13), and Elijah's appearance was the last great sign before the appearance of the messiah. While avoiding political questions, such as the issue about paying Roman taxes, Jesus plainly told his followers that he was the "stone" predicted by Daniel which would triumph over all the kingdoms of the world. At his trial, Jesus was mostly silent except to the direct question if he was the messiah, to which he said, "Yes!" He underlined this affirmation by quoting Psalm 110 and Daniel 7, both of which speak about a victorious champion who would be seated at God's right hand. This victor, Jesus directly implied, was himself!

Not only the words of Jesus, but also his actions--actions which were deeply imbued with symbolic meaning--claimed self-consciousness. Jesus knew who he was and what he was doing. Those whose eyes of faith looked deeply into his claims and actions also knew, just as the man born blind exclaimed to his interrogators: *Now this is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing* (Jn. 9:30-33). The reply of the Jewish authorities approximates the sentiments of the skeptical scholars: *You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!*

Why Did Jesus Die?

There are two distinct sides to the question, "Why did Jesus die?" One is historical, the other theological. The same two sides, in fact, may be explored in all the great salvation events of the Bible, including the migrations of Abraham to Canaan, the exodus of Israel from Egypt, and the return of the Jews from Babylonian exile. Historically, one inquires about the motives, social and political circumstances, surrounding culture and history of such events. Theologically, one

⁴⁰E. Sanders and M. Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: SCM Press, 1989) 138-139.

inquires about the Bible's interpretation that goes beyond mere historical indications, allowing one to see the event from God's vantage point behind the scenes. It is doubtful, for instance, that Cyrus the Great believed himself to be a tool of Yahweh in allowing displaced peoples to return to their homes in 539 B.C., but the Book of Isaiah claims that Cyrus would be the "anointed of the LORD" in this action (cf. Is. 45:1). Similarly, it is doubtful that Pilate, Herod and Caiaphas had any sense that they were acting out God's purpose when they condemned Jesus, even though the apostles later claimed that their actions were foreordained by God (Ac. 2:23; 3:17-18).

Traditionally, Christians have focused primarily on the theological side of the question as it is answered for us in the New Testament letters, particularly by Paul. "Christ died for our sins," Paul announces (cf. Ro. 4:25; 1 Co. 15:3; Ga. 1:4). The historical side of the question looks at the Sanhedrin, Pilate and Roman law to address the question of why Jesus died. Many of the avant-garde reconstructions of Jesus in the late 20th century have flatly denied the apostolic interpretation of the death of Jesus. They have made the death of Jesus out to be an accident that Christians later either misconstrued or creatively imbued with meaning that was not there originally. They doubt Jesus' self-consciousness. They doubt that Jesus thought of himself as the messiah. They doubt that he expected to die. For the most part, such reconstructions assume that since Jesus did not expect to die, his followers were left to imagine their way to a theology that explained it. However, as Wright cogently points out, if Jesus was Dominic Crossan's *Jewish Peasant Cynic*, for instance, he was hardly a threat to the Roman Empire. Why would the Romans kill such a person? If he was John Spong's *Gay Activist*, he would hardly have been noticed by the Romans. Greek homosexuality had been known for centuries, but it was not a capital crime in Rome. If Jesus was Elaine Pagels' *Liberator of Women*, his death can only have been incidental to his life. However, one of the bedrock historical conclusions that is virtually impossible to skirt is that Jesus was crucified under the Roman Prefect Pontius Pilate. This event is not only the burden of the canonical gospels, it is also acknowledged in extra-biblical literary sources, such as Josephus, Thallus and Tacitus.⁴¹ If Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate as an enemy of the state, there must be some better rationale than that he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

N. T. Wright seeks to demonstrate that the record of Jesus' death in the gospels is the most plausible historical explanation. From the standpoint of the Sanhedrin, Jesus was crucified because he denied the legitimacy of the temple and the validity of the current Jewish revolutionary hope. (We may remember that not long after, a

⁴¹For specific examination of these sources, see M. Harris, *Three Crucial Questions About Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 13-29.

young Grecian Jew named Stephen was lynched for the same reasons, cf. Ac. 7). From the standpoint of the Romans, Jesus was crucified because Pilate's insecure position as governor would be threatened if word got back to the emperor that he had released a prisoner who claimed to be a rebel king. This is not only the most historically plausible explanation, it is exactly what the gospels themselves claim! Far from being imaginary history, the gospels fit perfectly with what we know of first century politics on the part of both Romans and Jews.

There is, of course, the question as to just what Jesus himself was thinking when he made his last trip to Jerusalem. Did he expect to die, and if so, why did he think it was necessary? Here, Wright turns to the last supper in which Jesus took the regular symbols of the Passover meal and gave them new meaning. Traditionally, the Passover was a celebration of God's historical liberation of Israel from the pagans of Egypt. However, Passover was not only a look at the past, but also a hope for the future. Would not God do it again, this time freeing his people from the dreaded oppression of Rome? In the meal, however, Jesus demonstrated that the real meaning of Passover was not about freedom from Rome, but about freedom from sin. He saw his own approaching death as bound up with the fate of the nation. God's judgment on Israel, which Jesus symbolically acted out when he cleansed the temple, would be poured out on him first. He would take the part of the suffering servant, who by his death would deliver his people from exile and become a light for the world. The great enemy to be faced was not simply Rome, but the Satan who stood behind Rome. Worse, this same dark power stood behind Israel's fascination with political liberation, her hope for military superiority and her dependence upon the temple system.

In the end, Jesus died to save even the rebels. He knew that the present course of the nation would bring it into a disastrous confrontation with Rome, leading to the destruction of the Jewish land, temple and holy city. So, he chose the cross to invite this judgment on himself and to show that the victory of God was not the way of the Caesars nor the way of the Jewish revolutionaries who, while they hated Rome, were still trying to achieve victory by Roman means. God's victory was in the forgiveness of sins, and Jesus' death demonstrated his willingness to identify with those sins and, through his death, to give freedom.

Was Jesus God?

Is (or was) Jesus God? Did he think of himself as God and teach as much to his disciples, or was this thought developed by the early Christian communities? These questions provoke two entirely different answers, even among those who claim the name Christian. In the post-apostolic church, formulations of Christian faith which were put as baptismal questions eventually led to the formulations of the

ancient Christian creeds. These creeds, particularly the Nicene Creed, were intended to state unequivocally that Jesus was divine. He was ...*begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.* Clearly, the early church believed that Jesus was divine, and the doctrine of the Trinity is the formal way in which the church expressed this belief.

However, it is equally clear that Jesus never directly said, "I am God." Furthermore, it is more the exception than the norm to find direct and simple equations between Jesus and God in the New Testament documents, though such equations do occur (cf. Jn. 1:1; 20:28; 1 Jn. 5:20; Ro. 9:5; Phil. 2:6; Tit. 2:13; He. 1:8; 2 Pe. 1:1). Consequently, liberal Protestantism over the past couple of centuries generally adopted the opinion that Jesus was more of a pointer toward God than God himself. Though they still recited the ancient creeds, often they did so for traditional reasons, not reasons of faith.

In the gospels, however, Jesus did appropriate to himself descriptions and actions that implied that he was divine. He forgave sins (Mk. 2:5-7), he claimed to be Lord of the sabbath (Mt. 12:8//Mk. 2:28//Lk. 6:5), he claimed to have been in heaven with the Father before his incarnation (Jn. 3:13; 6:62; 16:28), he claimed a relationship of love with the Father before the creation of the universe (Jn. 17:24), he claimed to possess a unique and complete knowledge of the Father (Jn. 1:18; 6:46; 10:15; 17:25), and he claimed an interpenetration between the being of the Father and himself (Jn. 10:30; 14:8-11; 17:11, 21-23). Especially in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus repeatedly is depicted as using the *ego eimi* (= I am) sayings which directly reflect upon Yahweh's self-proclamation in the Torah (Ex. 3:14; cf. Jn. 4:26; 6:20; 8:28, 58; 13:19; 18:5, 6, 8). Protestant liberals have tended either to downplay such deity-laden expressions, or else, in the style of the Jesus Seminar, have denied that Jesus said them at all. It is commonplace in many circles to assess such sayings as pious fictions invented by the early church.

In seeking to address the question about Jesus' deity, Dr. Wright approaches it from the standpoint of the first century Jewish person, a strict monotheist who believed in the message of the prophets that Yahweh would someday come and redeem his people. For a Jew to listen to Jesus at all, it would not have done for Jesus simply to have stood up and said, "I am God," nor do the gospels portray Jesus as saying such a thing. Rather, Jesus expressed his self-identity in symbolic ways--coded acts and language that, if taken seriously, implied that the promised coming of Yahweh was being fulfilled in the career of the prophet from Nazareth. His final trip to Jerusalem was just such a symbol. It said that the coming of Yahweh to the temple in Jerusalem, which was the depth of Jewish hope, was being accomplished when Jesus himself rode into the city on the back of donkey. Before the Jewish authorities,

Jesus directly implied that the coming of Yahweh to Jerusalem and the exaltation of the Messiah as sharing the very throne of God were soon to be fulfilled before their very eyes (Mt. 26:64//Mk. 14:62).

The question of when Jesus' self-consciousness was fully developed may not be answered entirely, but it is clear that in his public ministry Jesus committed himself both to do and to be what only Yahweh could do and be. Jesus' followers gradually came to understand this during his ministry, and the Jewish authorities, also, realized what Jesus' words and actions implied. Hence, they accused him of blasphemy, because he "a mere man, claim(ed) to be God" (Jn. 10:33).

The resolution of the question about Jesus' identity, then, hangs not solely upon the opinions of Jesus' followers nor upon the blasphemies of which Jesus' enemies accused him. Rather, it hangs upon what happened after Jesus died. No Jew could ever have claimed Jesus as the true Messiah, far less the incarnation of God, if the end of his story was crucifixion on a cross. Crucified messiahs were pretenders, at best, for they certainly did not fulfill the prophetic promises of redemption from exile for which Israel hoped. By the time of Jesus, already several Jewish "messiahs" had been crucified. There would be several more after him! The real question, then, is what would happen after Jesus' crucifixion, which leads directly to the claim of resurrection. According to the gospels, it was the resurrection, not merely the crucifixion, that led the followers of Jesus to accept him as the Christ of God.

Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?

Did Jesus bodily rise from the dead? Since the earliest periods of Christianity, the Christian claim for the resurrection of Jesus has stood in sharp contrast with the response of skeptics. The gospels, Paul and the other New Testament writers put the resurrection of Jesus as the crowning event in the Jesus story. The early creeds of the church do the same: "...the third day he rose again from the dead" (The Apostles' Creed). However, many alternative theories have been offered, some of them appearing in the pages of the New Testament itself, and others cropping up throughout history, the most recent within the past few decades. Following are some of the most popular skeptical rebuttals for the Christian claim that Jesus rose from the dead:

The women made it up or were confused... This skepticism was first exhibited by the apostles themselves when the women returned from the tomb on Easter morning (Lk. 24:9-11).

His disciples stole the corpse... This explanation was offered almost immediately by the temple authorities, an explanation that became popular within Jewish circles (Mt. 28:11-15). The same explanation, or at least a variation of it, has been offered at various times by others, some in the period of the early

church⁴² and some in more recent times.⁴³

While resurrection is possible, Jesus' resurrection wasn't... This seems to have been the position of Saul of Tarsus before his conversion. The notion of a crucified messiah—one under the curse of Yahweh (Dt. 21:23) but anointed by Yahweh—made no theological sense.

Resurrection is an absurd category... This was the reaction among the intellectuals of Athens when they heard Paul preach (Ac. 17:32).

The disciples were hallucinating... They were under such duress during the frightful events of the past few days that they imagined a resurrection. It was real to them, but it was not historical.

The disciples went to the wrong tomb... Where Jesus was buried, there were several tombs. When the women came, they were not sure of the place. The young man (later thought to be an angel) tried to tell them that they were at the wrong location, but they were frightened and misunderstood him.⁴⁴

Jesus swooned, but he didn't really die... This explanation, offered several times, suggests that Jesus was taken down from the cross alive and survived. The cool grave and aromatic spices helped resuscitate him, an earthquake allowed him to get out, and he managed to procure a gardener's outfit, which is why Mary thought he was the gardener.⁴⁵

The disciples fantasized the resurrection out of their deep grief and fond memory of Jesus... Here the suggestion is made that the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus were not historical events, but they were internal struggles in which faith won out over doubt. The resurrection was a subjective vision, not an objective fact.⁴⁶

Wishful thinking... Here, the disciples supposedly read the Hebrew scriptures concerning resurrection and concocted the story of Jesus' resurrection.

The idea of resurrection was telepathic communication... After death, Jesus was caught up into a higher dimension of reality that nevertheless enabled him to communicate with his disciples by parapsychological means.⁴⁷

⁴²This seems to have been the position of Celsus against whom Origen argued, cf. Origen, *Against Celsus*, II, LVI.

⁴³H. Reimarus, *The Goal of Jesus and His Disciples*, trans. G. Buchanan (1778 rpt. Leiden: Brill, 1970).

⁴⁴K. Lake, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1912).

⁴⁵H. Schonfield, *The Passover Plot* (New York: Bernard Geiss and Associates, 1965); Barbara Thiering, *Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992).

⁴⁶R. Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. H. Bartsch (London: S.P.C.K., 1953); J. Weiss, *Earliest Christianity* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959); M. Enslin, *The Prophet from Nazareth* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961); S. Endo, *A Life of Jesus*, trans. R. Schuchert (New York: Paulist Press, 1973).

⁴⁷M. Perry, *The Easter Enigma* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959).

One by one, Wright addresses these various theories and points out their historical improbability. If the women made up the resurrection story or were confused, as the apostles first believed, why did the apostles later change their minds? Isn't the retort that the corpse was stolen just the sort of "damage control" one might expect from authorities who were intent on silencing Jesus and his followers? Since Saul could not accept Jesus' resurrection for theological reasons, why did he radically change and become a champion of the resurrection story? If the disciples were hallucinating or fantasizing, how is it that they all hallucinated and fantasized the same thing—and on a number of occasions at the same time? As for the "wrong tomb" theory, it would have been simplicity itself to check again. Why assume that the disciples were so naive and incompetent that they wouldn't even look a second time? Among so many people involved, surely someone knew which tomb was the right one! The swoon theory, on the other hand, does not take seriously the process of Roman crucifixion in which professionals were trained to successfully execute people, not bungle the job. Of the various other messianic figures who were executed in the decades preceding and following Jesus, the standard reaction of devoted followers was to either hide or find a new leader. Jesus' disciples did neither. They boldly proclaimed that Jesus was alive, and furthermore, they were willing to put their own lives on the line for what they believed! Long ago, Origen pointed out men do not usually risk their lives in defense of a lie!⁴⁸

So, in the end, the most historically plausible explanation for the faith of the disciples and the rise of Christianity is that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead! Jesus had been transformed! His resurrected life had both continuity and discontinuity with his former life. He was not longer limited by space, but he could eat bread and fish as before. He could appear and disappear at will, yet the disciples could touch him, too.

As Jesus' disciples reflected on the meaning of his resurrection, they drew some further conclusions. Theologically, Paul came to understand that the idea of a crucified messiah was not a contradiction in terms, especially if the executed messiah was innocent. To be sure, he was under the "curse of God," as are all crucified victims, but his suffering was vicarious so that he bore God's curse in behalf of others (Ga. 3:13). The Jewish hope of resurrection, which began in the prophets (Isa. 26:19; Eze. 37 ; Dan 12:2-3) and was reinforced by the Jews' intertestamental literature (2 Macc. 7:7-14, 20-23; Wisdom of Solomon 2:21--3:9), had been inaugurated in the resurrection of Jesus, who was the first-fruits (1 Co. 15:20-23). His resurrection guaranteed the hope of resurrection for all God's people at the end (1 Co. 15:50-54)!

⁴⁸G. Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: 1975) 133.

Final Thoughts

Our survey of postmodern theory and its impact upon basic disciplines in our society helps us to understand the paradigm shift that has been occurring for the past several decades but reaches a crescendo in the 1990s. In concluding this series, we hope to do more than just describe a cultural shift, however. As evangelical Christians, our calling within what Paul calls a "crooked and depraved generation" is to "shine like stars in the universe" as we "hold out the word of life" (Phil. 2:15-16). Postmodernism deliberately attacks the concept of absolute truth (something true in all times and places) and the belief in ultimate truth (the idea that the God of the Bible is himself ultimate truth and higher than all other truths). In the name of tolerance and the autonomy of individual perception, postmodernism decries what it holds to be the imperialism of Christian truth claims. Of course, Christianity is not postmodernism's sole target. Postmodernism equally attacks modernism and what it perceives as the strangle-hold of western epistemology with its dependence upon logic, historical perspective, language adequacy and science. In fact, the pervading agnostic tone of scientism and the emptiness of a mechanistic universe have been primary goads prodding the postmodern agenda. How, then, should Christians respond?

In part, Christians must concede that there is some truth in the postmodern critique of mechanistic science and imperial ethno-centrism of western culture. A universe determined by natural forces without mind, cause, reason, conscience or purpose dehumanizes everyone. The exploitation of third world people groups by westerners who seek to make money at the expense of others is despicable. At the same time, there is a great hypocrisy in the postmodern movement, for in fact, postmodernism practices its own form of imperialism when it seeks to reduce or even eliminate such basic concepts as absolute truth and ultimate truth. Further, the postmodern condemnation of western civilization is far too sweeping. To be sure, westerners are guilty of their share of exploitation (and leaders in the third world are not exempt from the charge of exploitation of their own people), but westerners have also brought tremendous advancements through science, medicine, and even technology to much of the non-western world. Evangelical Christians also believe that the message of Christ has contributed in deep ways to the betterment of many people groups. The naive notion that non-westerners are better off if left to themselves is more an emotional than a cognitive statement, and it does not even square with the full range of opinions in the third world itself. At a religious level, if followed to its ultimate conclusion, postmodernism will further marginalize Christians who are unwilling to adopt the subjectivism inherent within the postmodern worldview.

Christianity in the Greco-Roman "Postmodern" World

One of the striking things about contemporary postmodern thought is its parallelism with the religious shifts occurring in Greco-Roman culture in the first century. Christianity was born and spread during a period of tremendous religious flux not unlike our own. The first Christians faced not only the different theological schools of Judaism, but a bewildering mixture of Hellenistic mysticism, oriental cults, Stoic ethics and the traditional pantheons of Greece and Rome. From the time of Augustus Caesar, the Roman emperor was hailed as a divine savior-king. Temples were erected in his honor, sacrifices were offered, and incense was burned on altars all over the empire. At the same time, the Romans were fascinated with foreign religion. Mithraism, an outgrowth of Persian religious devotion, became a favorite with the common people and soldiers. Mesopotamian astrology, in which the stars and planets were believed to possess power over human affairs, gave rise to formulae by which one could ward off evil, drive away pain, and avoid accidents. Magic formulae that invoked the names of a myriad of deities in order to procure happiness were common. As religion mushroomed, philosophy declined. As kingdoms rose and fell, people of every class became more interested in life beyond death. The mystery religions flourished in which participants could share in the secret life of the gods and goddesses. The cults of Osiris (Egyptian god of the underworld), Adonis (fertility god), Cybele (mother-goddess of life), Dionysus (god of wine), Demeter (goddess of grain), and Asklepios (god of healing) promoted various forms of private rituals, initiations, festivals, sacramental ceremonies, obedience requirements, and secret disciplines.⁴⁹

Into this religious flux the apostles preached the message of Christ crucified and risen from the dead. Paul states the situation succinctly in 1 Corinthians 8:5-6:

For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords'), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

As the apostles continued to reach out into the Greco-Roman world with the message of Jesus, their worldview collided with the multi-cultural views of the Roman world. They did not hesitate to claim absolute and ultimate truth, and the center of this truth was Christ crucified (1 Co. 1:20-25). When opportunity presented

⁴⁹H. Koester, *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982)183-204; H. Kee, F. Young and K. Froehlich, *Understanding the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973) 16, 21, 23-36; E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 197-237.

itself, Paul was not backward about setting forth the Christian message in the marketplace of ideas, as he did in Athens (Ac. 17:16-31). Far from accepting every human being as basically good, the Christian message declared that every human was inwardly depraved, and the whole world was guilty before God (Ro. 3:9-19, 23). Nothing could have been more politically incorrect or unpopular. The Christians also declared, however, that God loved these wayward humans to the point of sending his own Son to die in their behalf as a substitutionary atoning sacrifice for their sins (Ro. 5:6-8; 1 Jn. 2:2). It was the resurrection of Jesus from the dead that demonstrated the truth of the Christian proposition (Ro. 1:1-6). If the resurrection of Jesus really happened, then the message about Jesus was true. If the resurrection did not happen, the whole Christian proposition collapsed upon itself (1 Co. 15:13-23).

Whatever else may be said about the earliest Christians, they were not interested in tolerance for its own sake. The religions of the Greco-Roman world were part and parcel of the kingdom of darkness (Col. 1:13-14), and those who embraced the Christian faith turned from their idols to serve the living God and wait for his Son from heaven (1 Th. 1:9-10). The accoutrements of their past pagan associations were burned (Ac. 19:18-20), for the apostles preached that man-made gods were no gods at all (Ac. 19:26) or else were simply fronts for demons (1 Co. 10:20-21). The message of the cross of Jesus was a scandal and an offense (1 Co. 1:23; Ga. 5:11). Its messengers were considered the scum of the earth—persecuted, slandered, brutally treated and dishonored—a spectacle to the whole universe (1 Co. 4:9-13). To the Jews the apostles argued from the Torah and the Prophets (Ac. 28:17-27), and to the Greeks they preached the story of Jesus (Ac. 28:28-31). Their message was greeted with sneers from some (Ac. 17:32) and violence from others (Ac. 19:27-34). Through it all, the apostles refused to soft-pedal their message (Ro. 1:16). Most of them died as martyrs.

Jesus' advice to his disciples is instructive at this point. At the first, when he sent them out he plainly told them they would be like sheep among wolves. "Therefore," he said, "be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Mt. 10:16). Still, on the night of his betrayal, Jesus frankly warned the apostles that the world would hate them because of him (Jn. 15:18-21). Yet some would believe in him through their message (Jn. 17:20-21). In the world, Christians cannot be truly at home. They are "strangers" in this world (1 Pe. 1:1), for they are citizens of another (Phil. 3:20-21).

The boldness of the apostles and exclusivity of their message was not the only factor, however, in the Christian overture to the world. The first Christians were not combative by nature, and their rule was "as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people" (Ga. 6:10). Their response to unjust punishment was to follow the example of their Lord: when he suffered, he did not retaliate or threaten (1 Pe. 2:18-23).

Their attitude toward civil authorities was submissive (Ro. 13:1-7; 1 Pe. 2:13-17). Their aim, insofar as it was possible, was to live at peace with all and to overcome evil with good (Ro. 12:17-21). They were to let no debt remain outstanding except the debt to love one another and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Ro. 13:8-10). The highest ideal was faith expressing itself in love (Ga. 5:6). These same ideals must remain central for Christians in our contemporary postmodern world.