

Why I do not accept the *New Testament* as a reliable source of the teachings of Jesus

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While I do not consider myself a Christian in the traditional sense, I do have tremendous respect for the teachings of Jesus, whoever he may have been. And that is the problem: when we look closely at the situation, we're not really sure who he actually was, what he actually did, and what he actually taught some 2,000 years ago.

Whoever he was, Jesus was clearly an extraordinary figure, so it seems well that we should trouble ourselves to get clear about his extraordinary message. "We must concern ourselves with working it out," as New Testament scholar, James Robinson puts it, "if we do not wish ultimately to find ourselves committed to a mythological Lord."¹

Over the past century, there has been much interest by scholars in establishing the "historical Jesus," that is, getting a factual description of him and his message, in distinction to the large body of unsupported traditional belief that has grown up around him over the ages. The main source of information about him is, of course, the Gospels of the *New Testament*. It is this source that modern Christianity bases its understanding of the teachings of Jesus. I find, however, that I am not comfortable with these Gospels as a reliable source about him. I am not a scholar of ancient scripture, but here is how the reliability issue looks to me on the face of it:

1. Hearsay is inadmissible.

Nothing in the Gospels was written by Jesus himself. He didn't even edit or approve what was written. I have had some experience with news reporters quoting what I have said in their articles on the basis of notes they took when I was speaking. I have no doubt that they believed they were reporting accurately. There was no reason for them

to do otherwise. However, when the story came out in print, the facts were inevitably skewed in some way. This is essentially why our commonly accepted standards of reliability exclude hearsay evidence. All of what is written in the Gospels is hearsay.

2. Time degrades memory.

The Gospels are not on-the-spot transcriptions of the words of Jesus as they were spoken. There were written after the fact— not later in the day or the next day, but 40-120 *years* later. How much credibility should we put in the accuracy of memory that old? Granted, there have always been those with phenomenal memory, and perhaps even those who make it their business to be a society's memory and who can remember such accounts accurately. We might also grant that the inaccuracies of recall may be of minor significance. But to me, it's unsettling. We have no way of knowing how accurately the teachings of Jesus were remembered.

3. Pseudepigrapha – false authorship

There was a fashion at the time for people to write something and attribute its authorship to someone else, usually a famous person, in an attempt to give one's writing more credibility. Such writings are called pseudepigrapha—"falsely inscribed." That custom makes authenticating authorship problematic. We would like for the Gospels to have been written by authoritative sources, but we don't know who *actually* wrote them, or what qualified them to render a reliable account. The situation is not reassuring.

4. There were no eye-witnesses.

Of the four supposed writers of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, only John was supposed to have been an actual witness. But, was he? The *Gospel of John* seems to have been written 90-120 years after the fact, eliminating John as its actual writer. That means that none of the Gospels were written by eye-witnesses nor their presumed authors, and that is the conclusion drawn by most scholars of *The New Testament*. Thus the Gospels fade even further into the unreliable territory of hearsay.

5. Oral transmission favors what makes a good story.

As the record of Jesus and his teachings wasn't written until long after the fact, it was originally transmitted orally—as retold stories. Among those who study the oral transmission of information, it's well known that when a story is retold, the teller will inevitably, if not even deliberately, distort the story in order to make it more interesting. The teller will highlight certain aspects of the story by filling in detail where there was none to begin with, and by leaving out detail thought to be incidental or not contributing to the point being made. Certain aspects of the story are exaggerated or at least accentuated in order to give it more audience appeal. For the teller, it may be a simple matter of honest, logical supposition, but the process is nevertheless imaginative. If the teller is not interested in accurate history but only in telling a good story, then a more active creative process occurs. The audience is certainly part of this process, because the audience rewards a good storyteller. The audience at the time of Jesus was one predisposed to the mystical and the magical, and thus elicited such stories about Jesus. Of course, all these problems get magnified when a story is retold by subsequent storytellers, a well-known effect in the game of “Telephone.” Granted, there may have been those who were trustworthy in retelling stories of Jesus faithfully. I feel uneasy, though, about accepting the reliability of spiritual teachings from storytellers.

6. Language, culture, and time are formidable barriers.

Anyone who has spent much time in another culture knows how communication barriers abound. All cultures hold their own particular worldview, which is represented by various symbols—words, gestures, customs, metaphors, stories, and myths. We are *very* far removed from the time and place of Jesus. Today, we have a vastly different worldview and use a much different set of symbols to represent that worldview. Trying to piece together a highly unusual and complicated story from a distant foreign culture, with limited and faulty documentation, *and* from the perspective of our modern symbology—some 2,000 years after the fact—seems pretty audacious to me. No doubt that we miss the mark by a wide margin.

7. Lost in Translation

Anyone acquainted with another language recognizes that there is virtually no exact correspondence between even the common words of two languages. Also, because languages differ in their implications about the nature of reality, as well as in what is to be made explicit, translators necessarily find themselves in the awkward position of having to interpolate an author's intended meaning. Translators unavoidably, even if unintentionally, introduce distortion into an author's intended meaning because it is filtered not just through translators' beliefs and perceptions, but also through their agendas. We get *The New Testament* only in translation—*twice*: Aramaic to Greek, then Greek to English (except for *The Gospel of Luke*, which was originally written in Greek). Unfortunately, we do not have any of the original Aramaic documents to check accuracy with. Speaking as a scientific linguist who has worked in a translation office, I feel discomfort with two-generation translation.

8. Lost by Copying

Anciently, of course, there were no printing presses. What was written was written by hand. The parchments on which the writings were made deteriorated with use and age, and had to be recopied—manually. The reality is, accidentally or intentionally, copy error happens. The originals are now entirely gone. What survives today is the result of multiple generations of copies—copies of copies. Careful comparison of the various old manuscripts that we now have does reveal copy errors, though it is impossible to assess how much distortion has been introduced by such error.

9. The disciples themselves didn't get it.

A hearer's unconscious filtering and misperception is a much more serious source of distortion than hearsay, bad memory, translation, copying, or storytellers. The teachings of Jesus were radical—beyond the grasp of his disciples. There are many references in the record to their inability to understand his message. What he taught and what they understood are likely two different things. Jesus couched his public message in allegory and metaphor, which effectively hid it from those ready to stone him for blasphemy. But even in his private teaching, all that the disciples seemed capable of hearing was what their prior beliefs predisposed them to. Jesus went well beyond those beliefs, and

consequently, I believe, his essential message was lost on them. Through their record, we don't get it either.

10. The books were cooked.

Another important source of distortion of Jesus and his teachings came in the fourth century AD. Roman Emperor, Constantine, had an empire of pagan groups and several, disparate Christian sects that had been growing in popularity, strength, and in disruptiveness. In order to keep his empire under control, Constantine employed a proven strategy for wielding power: he had a single, mandatory religion created for his entire empire. Though he himself was not Christian, he decreed that the religion of his realm was to be Christian. However, at the time there was no consensus on what constituted Christianity. He therefore convened at Nicea a council of leaders from the various Christian sects of the time, and commissioned them to settle their differences and to codify the result. This the Council did, through a difficult and factious political process, creating a dogma codified as The Nicene Creed, or commonly, “the credo,” which has been the litmus test of Christianity ever since. As it turns out, however, the credo is suffused with representative mythic imagery from the ambient Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, and Roman mythologies of the empire.^{2,3}

At the time, there were many “gospels,” or records of the teachings of Jesus, floating about, perhaps as many as a hundred. At the conclusion of the Council of Nicea, all those gospels save four were systematically collected and destroyed. The remaining four were those that best supported the conclusions of the Council. They were further doctored to generally harmonize (though they still don't, exactly), and then canonized as the Gospels we now have in *The New Testament*. Today, of course, we have found a few surviving copies of other gospels that didn't make it into the Bible, and they do differ from the canon in important ways. But we still do not know how reliable these other gospels are, and we'll never know what we're missing.

The upshot is that much of core Christian belief today comes not from the actual teachings of Jesus, but is literalized pagan mythology, such as: Jesus as a divinity—the son of a virgin mother and “only begotten” of God; Jesus as an intercessor with God and savior of humankind; the eating of his flesh and drinking

of his blood as a sacrament; the sacrifice of his life as an appeasement for our sins; further notions of our guilt, salvation or damnation; sacraments as necessary for salvation; and the authority of a priesthood (i.e., the Church). Each one of these elements are derived from multiple antecedents in pagan mythologies.* It seems to me that those beliefs were superimposed onto the image of Jesus for the greater glory and power of church and state, but are not authentic.

In my estimation, the above impediments taken together make the *New Testament* a dubious document at best from which to draw any definite conclusions about the teachings of Jesus—moreover, spiritual conclusions about God and ourselves.

What about modern sources of Jesus' teachings?

The position that *The Book of Mormon* is an independent corroboration of Jesus as a divine redeemer fails in that it merely echoes the very paganism enshrined by the Council of Nicea.

Seth, the nominal source for Jane Roberts, has commented on the historicity of Jesus. According to Seth, the surviving concept of Jesus is actually a composite of perceptions of three Jewish mystics of the time: one called Jesus, John the Baptist, and one other. Through distortions introduced by oral transmission of the buzz created by these radicals—stories feeding an audience hungry for the miraculous—ideas about these three coalesced over time into the single iconic image that survives today as “Jesus.” —An interesting proposition, though perhaps impossible to validate with normal means.

However, there are other modern sources of possible interest that do not seem tainted by myth. The outstanding example is *A Course in Miracles*, published in 1976. Here the spiritual intelligence is so compelling that one stretches for a comprehensive perspective. The *Course* teaches the essential non-dualism and ephemeral ego taught by the great mystics of all spiritual traditions. Not surprisingly, The *Course* contains hardly any of what would be recognized today as core Christian belief. To my mind, that is another indication of the failure of *The New Testament* and the tradition of the Christian church to bring us the essential Jesus.

Fitting to the historical Jesus, however, the *Course* employs a non-western, spiral rhetorical form and is occasionally even poetic. It offers an ingenious daily practice for the correction of misperception, which leads to direct experience, or “awakening.” The *Course* is, however, rather dense for most readers, including myself. (Many have gained access through Gary Renard’s, *The Disappearance of the Universe*.)

Jesus seems to have spoken to others in our time as well. I recognize that it is tempting to dismiss such accounts, but when they are corroborated by the great mystics, when they offer profound, transcendent spiritual intelligence, they merit our attention. In my opinion, *Dialog on Awakening* by Tom Carpenter and *Love Without End* by Glenda Green are two such examples.

I still do like to read “Jesus” in the *New Testament*. An extraordinary, enlightened spiritual intelligence does occasionally shine through. I value the *New Testament*, but cannot accept it at face value. I approach it cautiously, and treat it more as mythic imagery. Like Thomas Jefferson, I highlight the best and cut the rest.

Despite the best of our intentions, getting the ground truth of Jesus sorted out from *The New Testament* may well be an impossible aspiration.

1. James M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus*. (Studies in Biblical Theology No, 25). SCM Press Ltd, London, 1959, p. 12-13.

2. Virgin birth appears to be a popular form of mythological deification, as it was for:

- The Egyptian god, Horus
- The Greek demigod, Perseus
- The Greek demigod, Attis
- The Roman god, Mercury
- The Roman figure, Romulus
- The Indian Buddha, Gautama
- The Aztec god, Huitzilopochtli
- The Mongolian emperor, Genghis Khan
- The Hindu god, Krishna

3. Tom Harpur, Anglican priest and theologian, tracked the origins of Christianity through the works of Egyptologists, Godfrey Higgins, Gerald Massey, and Alvin Boyd Kuhn. In his book, *Pagan Christ*, he presents his findings that the fundamental ideas of Judaism and Christianity came from Egyptian religion. "Massey discovered nearly two hundred instances of immediate correspondence between the mythical

Egyptian material and the allegedly historical Christian writings about Jesus. Horus was indeed the archetypal Pagan Christ." (See http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_jcpa5b.htm.)

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