

With Friends Like This Who Needs Any Enemies?

Zech 13:1-9

1 In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness.

2 And it shall come to pass in that day, saith the LORD of hosts, that I will cut off the names of the idols out of the land, and they shall no more be remembered: and also I will cause the prophets and the unclean spirit to pass out of the land.

3 And it shall come to pass, that when any shall yet prophesy, then his father and his mother that begat him shall say unto him, Thou shalt not live; for thou speakest lies in the name of the LORD: and his father and his mother that begat him shall thrust him through when he prophesieth.

4 And it shall come to pass in that day, that the prophets shall be ashamed every one of his vision, when he hath prophesied; neither shall they wear a rough garment to deceive:

5 But he shall say, I am no prophet, I am an husbandman; for man taught me to keep cattle from my youth.

6 And one shall say unto him, What are these wounds in thine hands? Then he shall answer, Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends.

7 Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the LORD of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered: and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones.

8 And it shall come to pass, that in all the land, saith the LORD, two parts therein shall be cut off and die; but the third shall be left therein.

9 And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried: they shall call on my name, and I will hear them: I will say, It is my people: and they shall say, The LORD is my God. (KJV)

Our Scripture is talking about the people who put Jesus to death. It was not his enemies, but his friends. He came to the Jewish nation as the promised Messiah, but they didn't accept him and put him to death because they had rather have man's religion that God's. We find ourselves in exactly the same situation today as those who claim to follow God seem to be in the business of trying to discredit Jesus.

On Friday, February the 20th, 1998 there was a headline in the News and Observer that read, "**Scholars don't take beliefs about Jesus as gospel.**" Most of you read it, and I hope you were appalled at what the scholars are saying about your Bible and our Savior.

This morning I'd like to take the time to discuss this article with you for it basically sums up the beliefs of many of our Bible scholars who claim to be Christians. I feel that even today that Jesus doesn't need any enemies with friends such as these. Incidentally, I'd like to add that many of these scholars are the same ones who are giving us the new translations of the bible.

The question of Jesus

Here are some of the topics under discussion at the Jesus conference:

- What was Jesus' attitude toward the apocalypse?
- Was Jesus a political revolutionary?
- How did he view human sexuality?
- Did he intend to start a new religion?
- Did he expect to die as a result of his work?
- What did he think of himself?

The conference "Jesus in Context" is organized by Duke University's Center for Continuing Theological Education. It continues through Saturday, but is booked.

Ask the world's most renowned group of Jesus experts what they think of Christianity's most basic beliefs, and they'll tell you most are myth.

Was Jesus born of a virgin? Not likely. Stories of virgin births were common in the Greco-Roman world.

Did he walk on water? Probably not. The story is meant to be read as an allegory.

Did he intend to found a new religion? Most scholars say no. He was essentially Jewish and wanted to reform his own faith.

Just about the only thing a group of seven internationally-known Jesus historians could agree on at a conference Thursday was that **Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist and crucified by Pontius Pilate**, but it was questions about the rest of Jesus' life that drew an eclectic group of 360 clergy and lay people to Chapel Hill, legal pads in tow, to take notes and learn about the new historical scholarship at a three-day conference sponsored by Duke University.

"I don't take things at face value," said Joe Haigler of Fuquay-Varina, a religion instructor at Wake Technical Community College who attended the conference. "This has forced me to step back from what I was given in church and ask 'Who is this we worship?'"

In recent years, Christians have been hungry for new insights into the life of Jesus. Books on the subject have achieved a kind of pop-culture following and have been accompanied by stories and TV documentaries that have been by individuals and Sunday school classes, alike.

But the portrait of Jesus drawn in these new studies differs dramatically from the Christ many Christians grew up with in church. Although historical research is mostly focused on Jesus' physical life, leaving questions of his divinity to others, its conclusions are still radical.

"An older, doctrinal understanding of: Christianity has ceased to be persuasive," said **Marcus Borg**, a leader in the Jesus Seminar group. "There's been an appetite for looking at Jesus in a way that doesn't depend on Christian theological claims, such as Jesus is the only begotten son of God."

The work of the Jesus Seminar, the 13-year-old colloquium of scholars based in Santa Rosa, California, has offered the most far-reaching revisions to the study of Jesus so far. Books by such scholars as Borg and **John Dominic Crossan** — both of whom are speaking at the conference — have become best sellers. With titles such as “**Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time,**” and “**Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography,**” these books are reaching beyond the academic sphere in what some say is in an attempt to recast Jesus for the modern masses, in what others say is sheer heresy.

The Duke conference showcases the findings of the Jesus Seminar scholarship alongside more traditional works to make it all more accessible to lay people.

At the heart of the debate is the nature of Jesus’ calling.

Traditional scholarship says Jesus was one in a long line of Jewish prophets who preached an apocalyptic end to the evils of his day and the imminent restoration of the Kingdom of God. Others —including Jesus Seminar scholars — think references to God’s immediate intervention were added on by the later church, which fervently awaited Jesus’ return to Earth.

These scholars say Jesus was more likely a social revolutionary or a philosopher cynic who fought an elitist religious establishment for an open society free of class boundaries and social distinctions.

More than one-dimensional

Competing views of Jesus are often passionately debated by academics. But for a lay audience eager for fresh inspiration to meet the changing times, the theories are intriguing.

“My idea of Jesus stems from what I learned as a little girl in Sunday school,” said Nancy Ehle, a Baptist from Chapel Hill. “I need to hear him speak to me as an adult.”

Others at the conference said they relished the opportunity to see Jesus as more than a one-dimensional figure.

“I cherish seeing Jesus as having many qualities rather than being viewed as just one type of person,” said Marilyn Dyer, a retired college administrator and a Quaker who lives in Chapel Hill, “Something would be wrong if we came away thinking Jesus was just a carpenter who died.”

The conference drew its share of critics as well. They said the new scholarship is a misguided attempt to turn Jesus into a social reformer and pacifist in the tradition of Martin Luther King Jr. or Mahatma Gandhi

“It’s not the Jesus who lived in first-century Judaism,” said **N. Thomas Wright**, dean of England’s Litchfield Cathedral and one of the panelists at the conference.

Clergy too, said they were skeptical.

“I don’t have a problem with the historical critical method these scholars use,” said the Rev. Douglas Jessee, pastor of First United Methodist Church in Cary and one of many clergy at the conference. “But I do have a problem with some of the conclusions the Jesus Seminar draws from it.”

More conservative scholars have problems with the method too.

“There’s an assumption that you can’t trust the Gospels because they were written by believers,” said Andreas Kostenberger, a professor of the New Testament at Southeastern Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, who did not attend. “I think that just because they were written by believers doesn’t mean they’re inaccurate. They had a certain responsibility to be faithful to the facts.”

The search for the historical Jesus is as old as Jesus himself. In AD325, church fathers at the council Nicea thought they had settled the issue in declaring that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. But discussion about the accuracy of the Christian Bible and its portrayal of Jesus have never been put to rest. At the turn of the century, the debate picked up steam with Albert Schweitzer’s 1906 “The Quest for the Historical Jesus.” It hasn’t stopped since.

In 1985, a group of about 70 scholars met to circulate papers and later to vote on the historical veracity of about 2,000 separate pieces of Scripture.

The Jesus Seminar received lots of attention because it sought to reach people in the pews and because it used an unconventional method of voting — dropping plastic beads in a bucket. Red signified Jesus said it. Pink that he may have said it. Gray, maybe. Black, probably not. The system is still in use.

The product of its work, “The Five Gospels,” (The Gospel of Thomas, an apocryphal work, was added to the traditional four), claimed that only 18 percent of the sayings attributed to Jesus may actually have been spoken by him. The rest were embellishments created by the early church to support its theological claims.

Examining Jesus' deeds

Next month, -the Seminar will publish a second volume of pronouncements — this one devoted to Jesus' deeds. According to Borg, the Seminar has rejected the gospel account of Jesus' birth, the so-called "nature miracles" — turning the water to wine or multiplying the loaves and fishes and Jesus' physical resurrection.

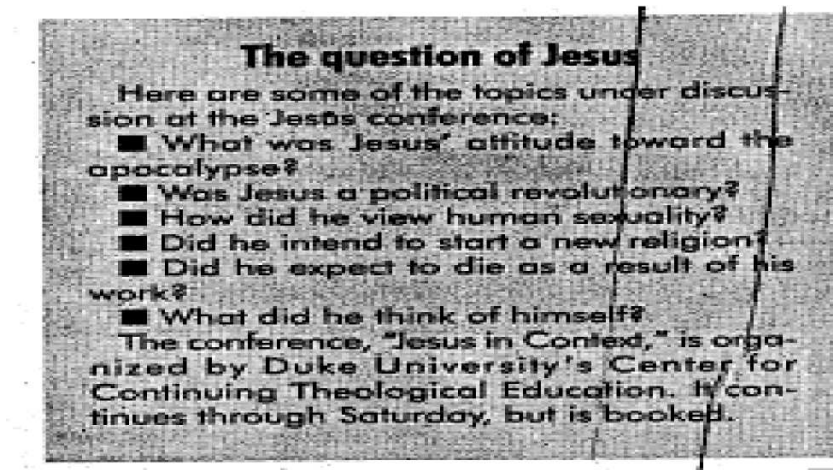
The seminar accepts that Jesus had paranormal ability to heal and exorcise demons, and that his disciples had visions of him after his death.

Some of the participants at the conference said they had already set aside questions about Jesus' divinity before they arrived at the conference.

"I don't get hung up on questions of divinity," said Valerie Yow, a psychotherapist and a Unitarian Universalist from Chapel Hill. "I think Jesus was saying we were all children of God. For me that's much more important than attributing to him that he was the Son of God."

Others said the conference helps them stretch spiritually.

"It may require me to make some sort of leap -- to say this is something I need to work on for awhile," said Marjorie Clark, the vice-president of Database Inc., and a United Methodist. "You're always adding to and snipping things away. The conference is designed to enrich your faith and challenge it. That's how it works for me."



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