

**THE STUDY OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS
AND
THE AGRAPHA AND NON-CANONICAL SOURCES**

I. Why seek the historical Jesus?

A. Truth is a public matter

If Jesus really existed, then he is as open to historical investigation as Abraham Lincoln.

“Many will dismiss the whole thing as a waste of time: we have the Bible, that's enough for us. But if we cannot say something *in public* about Jesus as he really was, we are turning Christianity into a private club.”¹

If we are to communicate to the broader public—the public that has little or no understanding about Jesus, let alone faith in him—then it means we need to we to to history.

The argument that the Gospels give us an accurate chronicle of events *because* they are inspired assumes that the Gospels intended to give us "history" in the modern sense. If the Gospel writers had not intended to give such "history," as the evidence suggests, would they be any less inspired?

B. It guards against distortion

The distortion of making Jesus fit our own tastes.

- I don't have any interest in seeing Jesus as a peasant, Jewish reformer;
- I would rather Jesus were a middle class guy who drove a Mitsubishi.²

The Jesus discovered through historical study functions as a *reality check*

- What we discover about the Jesus can be used to test claims made on Jesus' behalf.
- Some visions of Jesus simply will not stand historical scrutiny
- They lead to theological and ethical distortions
- Do we want to follow David Koresh's view of Jesus?
- Do we want to follow the Jesus of our own imagination?
- Or the Jesus of pop-Christian culture?
- Or do we want to follow Jesus who can be known through historical methods that can be tested in public?

Historical study provides a way to guard against distortion, deception, and dogmatic views of Jesus that are not open to correction or corroboration. It provides a *reality check* for others and us.

C. It is congruent with Christian Theology

¹N.T. Wright, "The New Unimproved Jesus" *Christianity Today* Sept 13, 1995:26.

²A quote from Marcus Borg, *The Search for Jesus* (Washington: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1994) 106.

One of the central tenants of the Christian faith is that God has acted in history, particularly in the Exodus Event and in the Person of Jesus.

The Judeo-Christian God affirms history; God's disclosures have been historical. God's action in history is open to and invites historical investigation.

If we deny Docetism, than we affirm that Jesus was truly human and therefore a fit subject of historical inquiry.³

"The quest for the historical Jesus reminds Christians that faith in Christ is not just a vague existential attitude or a way of being in the world. Christian faith is the affirmation of, and adherence to, a particular person, who said and did particular things in a particular time and place in human history" (John P. Meier, 1993:32).

D. It enriches our understanding and faith

To understand who Jesus Christ is "for us" today,

- We must understand who he was "back-then-and-there."

To deepen our understanding and appreciation of Jesus,

- We must do more than simply read the Bible,
- We must overcome a great distance between Jesus and ourselves.
- We are separated from the historical Jesus by four great gaps:
 - Language, culture, religion, and 2000 years.

Historical investigation—the type that supplies information about Jesus' lang, culture, religion—provides *content* for the faith; that is, it tells us more about Jesus than the Bible alone discloses.

N.T. Wright: "For me, studying Jesus in his historical context has been the most profoundly disturbing, enriching, and Christianizing activity of my life. As a historian, I meet a Jesus the church has unwittingly hushed up—a more believable Jesus, a Jesus who challenges me more deeply than any preacher, a Jesus who evokes my love and worship by what he is and does, not by the sentiment or hype that some preachers fall back on."⁴

E. Objections & Responses

1. First Objection: "It is hard to believe that God could have acted in Jesus to make salvation possible for the human race and at the same time believe that knowledge of the story is possible only for those who have the intelligence and leisure to fight their way through the thicket of historical Jesus research. Surely, if knowledge of Jesus is as vital as Christians believe it to be, God would have made it possible for ordinary people to gain this knowledge without learning Aramaic or receiving Ph.D.'s in historical critical biblical studies."⁵

³E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1989) 303.

⁴N.T. Wright, "The New Unimproved Jesus" *Christianity Today* Sept 13, 1995:26.

⁵C. Stephen Evans, "Can the New Jesus Save Us?" *Books & Culture* Nov/Dec 1995:7.

Response: Knowledge of the historical Jesus is not necessary for entrance into the faith. However, knowledge of the historical Jesus is necessary for a deeper and more accurate understanding of who Jesus was.

2. Second Objection: Scholars have offered as many different versions of the "historical Jesus" that they tend to lose credibility.

Response: True, there are different and diverging views, however, there does seem to be overlap in methods and results and that tends to confirm some degree of validity of their findings.

II. AGRAPHA—SAYINGS OF JESUS NOT IN THE GOSPELS

A. New Testament *Agrapha*

Acts 20:35	In all things I have shown you that by so toiling one must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."
1 Cor 7:10	To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband.
1 Cor 9:14	In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.
1 Cor 11:24-25	When he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."
Luke 6:5 (only in Codex Bezae)	The same day, seeing a certain man working on the Sabbath, he [Jesus] said to him, "Man, if you indeed know what you are doing, happy are you; but if not, you are accursed and a transgressor of the law."
John 7:53—8:11	The woman caught in adultery, Jesus said, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 8:11 She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again."

B. Other *Agrapha* that may be authentic

Clement of Alexandria, <i>Stromata</i> 1.24.158	Ask for the great things, and God will add to you what is small.
Origen, <i>On Prayer</i> 2	Ask for the greater things, and the small shall be added to you; ask for the heavenly things, and the earthly shall be added to you.
Origen, <i>Homilies on Jeremiah</i> 3.3; <i>Gospel of Thomas</i> 82	He who is near me is near the fire. He who is far from me is far from the kingdom.
Justin, <i>Dialogue with Trypho</i> 35.3	Many shall come in my name clothed on the outside with sheepskins, but inside they are ravenous wolves.
Justin, <i>Dialogue with Trypho</i> 35.3	There will be divisions and heresies.

2 Clement (95 A.D.)	If you are gathered together with me in my bosom and do not keep my commandments, I will cast you out and say to you, “Depart from me! I do not know where you are from, you workers of sin.”
Tertullian, <i>On Baptism</i> 20	No one can obtain the kingdoms [sic] of heaven who has not passed through temptation.
Eusebius of Caesarea, <i>Theophany</i> 4.12, citing the <i>Gospel According to the Hebrews</i>	I choose for myself the best; the best are those whom my Father in heaven gives me.
About 70 church fathers cite the saying to the right, including Origen, <i>Commentary on John</i> 19.7.12; <i>Homilies</i> 2.51.1; 3:50.2; 18.20.4.	Be competent money-changers!

III. NON-CANONICAL SOURCES

A. Christian Sources

1. The Gospel of Thomas

The Gospel of Thomas is a saying gospel—114 sayings—most of them are attributed to Jesus. So there is no narrative element in Thomas: no birth narrative, no temptation, no trial, no crucifixion, and no resurrection. Just sayings.

For centuries, scholars had known that the Gospel of Thomas exist, but no copy of it had survived. This changed in 1945, when a copy of the lost Gospel was discovered as part of a large collection of ancient religious texts known as Nag Hammadi Library, so called after the Egyptian city near which the collection was found.

When Thomas was originally written is much debated—65 AD to 150 AD.

2. Apocryphal Literature

The NT Apocrypha is a large body of early Christian writing from the end of the first century to the ninth. These writings claim to have been written by the apostles or those close to him. The second and third century church (the Great Church) rejected these writings over time, so these writings became known as *apocryphal* (meaning “hidden writings”).

E.g., The Infancy Story of Thomas

Written in the late second century. Presents the story of Jesus as a child from the ages of five and twelve, supposedly told by the Apostle Thomas. The work is filled with crude stories about Jesus’ miracles:

- How he made twelve sparrows from clay

- How he kills another boy who bumped into him,
- How he cause people who opposed him to go blind,
- How he even threatened his father, Joseph, when he disciplined him.

The document is not regarded as having any value in reconstructing the historical Jesus.

3. The Gospel of Peter

The Gospel of Peter is a work that may contain traditions that go back to the first century (so Helmut Koester and John Dominic Crossan), but most scholars date it to the mid-second century. The Gospel is 60 verses long and divided into 14 very short chapters. It is an account of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

4. The Secret Gospel of Mark

The Secret Gospel of Mark was found by Morton Smith in 1958, but did not publish it until 1973. In a previously unknown letter from Clement of Alexandria (ca. 170 A.D.), we find that Clement knows of three different versions of the Gospel of Mark: (a) Mark's public Gospel, the one we have, (b) Mark's Secret Gospel, which Mark wrote later, and (c) a version of Mark used by the Carpocratian Gnostics. To refute the Gnostics, Clement quotes from the Secret Gospel of Mark. The quotation is comprised of 18 short verses and comes after Mark 10:34 (the verse of Mark that we have).

The Secret Gospel of Mark

(2:23) And they came to Bethany. And there was a woman there, whose brother was dead. (24) And she came and fell down before Jesus and said to him: Son of David, (25) have mercy on me. But the disciples rebuked her. And in anger (26) Jesus went away with her into the garden where the tomb was; and (3:1) immediately a loud voice was heard from the tomb; and Jesus went forward and (2) rolled away the stone from the door of the tomb. And immediately he went to where (3) the young man was, stretched out his hand and raised him up, (4) grasping him by the hand. But the young man looked upon him and loved him, and (5) began to entreat him that he might remain with him. And when they had gone out (6) from the tomb, they went into the young man's house; for he was rich. And after (7) six days Jesus commissioned him; and in the evening the young man (8) came to him, clothed only in a linen cloth upon his naked body. And (9) he remained with him that night; for Jesus (10) was teaching him the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. And from there he went away (11) and returned to the other bank of the Jordan. ... (14) He came to Jericho. And there were (15) the sisters of the young man whom Jesus loved, and (16) his mother and Salome; and Jesus did not receive them.⁶

Smith and others argue that the material is characteristically Markan and derives from first-century Markan tradition. Others disagree.

5. Egerton Gospel

B. Non-Christian Sources about Jesus

⁶ "The Secret Gospel of Mark," in *New Testament Apocrypha. Vol. 1*. Wilhelm Schneemelcher and R. McL. Wilson, eds. (Revised Edition. Two Volumes. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1991) 108.

1. Josephus

Josephus (b. A.D. 37) was a Jew, who wrote prolifically during the first century. Josephus mentions Jesus in a couple of passages; one is considered authentic (from Josephus himself) and one is disputed (thought to have been added or edited by Christians). Here is the undisputed reference to Jesus.

a. Authentic

From Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.200

He [Ananus, the high priest] assembled the Sanhedrin of the judges, and brought before it the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others [or, some of his companions]; and when he [Ananus] had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned.⁷

The text is closely connected to its context. Shows no interest in Jesus himself, but mentions him only to identify his brother. The phrase “called Christ” implies neither assent nor doubt and it reflects Jewish rather than Christian terminology (none titular use of *Christos*).

b. Disputed

From Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.63-64

(63) Now, there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works — a teacher of such men as received the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ; (64) and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.⁸

This is called the “Testimonium Flavianum.” It is thought to have been preserved by Christian scribes, who could not resist the temptation to revise the text and exalt Jesus, something Josephus, who was not a convert to Christianity, would not have done. How much of the text is Christian and how much is from Josephus himself is debated.

2. Babylonian Talmud

The Babylonian Talmud (now published as a 30-volume Hebrew/English series by Soncino) was written between 200 and 550 C.E. Certain traditions embedded within the Talmud that are linked to Tannaitic Rabbis who passed on traditions

⁷ *The Works of Josephus. Complete and Unabridged. New Update Edition.* Trans. by William Whiston (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987) 538.

⁸ *The Works of Josephus. Complete and Unabridged. New Update Edition.* Trans. by William Whiston (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987) 480.

that may date back to the first century. One such tradition concerns Jesus or Yeshu the Nazarene.

From the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Sanh 43a*)

On the Sabbath of the Passover festival Yeshu the Nazarene was hanged. For forty days before execution took place, a herald went forth and cried: "Here is Jesus the Nazarene, who is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Anyone who can say anything in his favor, let him come forth and plead on his behalf." But since nothing was brought forth in his favor, he was hanged on the eve of the Passover ... Our rabbis taught: Yeshu had five disciples: Matthai, Nakai, Nezer, Buni and Toda.

Even though the rabbis who were responsible for propagating this tradition were not friends of Jesus, they support or corroborate several key beliefs about Jesus: he was a wonder worker, he influence a number of people within Israel, he had several named disciples, and he was executed by means of stoning-hanging during the Passover festival.

3. Tacitus (ca. 55—120 A.D.)

In his *Annals* [of the Roman Empire], the Roman historian Tacitus reports on what he knew about the founder of a superstitious group, the *Christiani* or *Chrestiani*, who was blamed for setting fire to Rome (64 A.D.).

From Tacitus' *Annals* 15.44.3

Christus, from whom the name [*Christiani*] had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and hateful from every part of the world find their center and become popular.

4. Suetonius (ca. 70—130 A.D.)

Suetonius wrote about the lives of the Twelve Caesars (*De Vitae Caesarum*) between 117 and 122 A.D. In his account of the Emperor Claudius, and the expulsion of Jews from Rome in 49 A.D., Suetonius mentions one Chrestus.

From Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars* (Claudius 25.4)

He [Emperor Claudius] drove from Rome the Jews who, stirred up by Chrestus, continually caused unrest.