

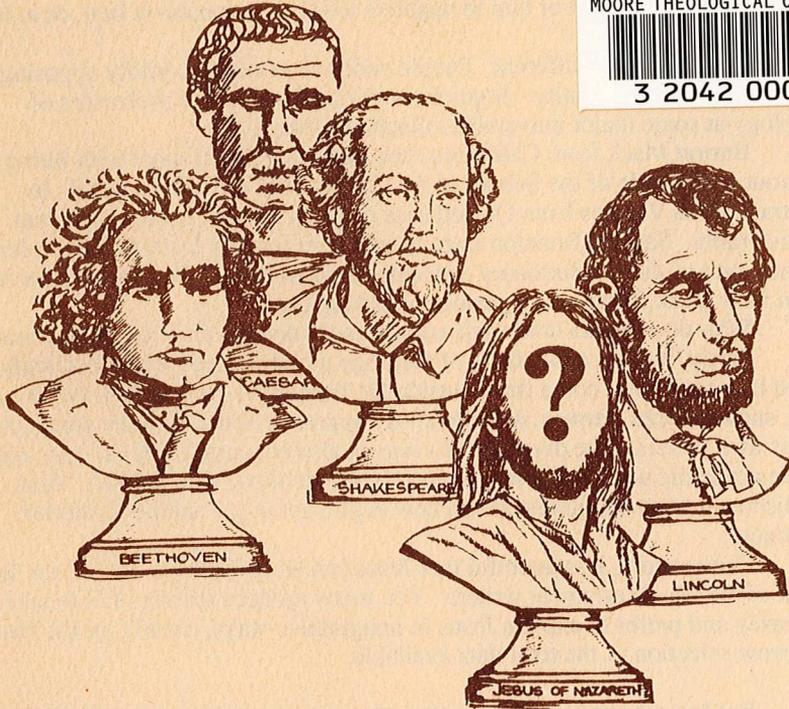
Who was Jesus?

by Dr Paul Barnett*

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Who was Jesus? asked the cover of TIME magazine in August, 1988.

The TIME article was provoked by the release of Martin Scorsese's sensational new movie, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, in which Jesus is portrayed as having sexual fantasies. According to reports, the film is irreverent, even blasphemous, and will prove to be deeply offensive to Christians.

However, even more worrying than offensive scenes, is Scorsese's studied disregard for the historical evidence concerning Jesus. A similar, though less blatant disdain for biographical truth was displayed in Shaffer's *Amadeus*, where the young Mozart is depicted (from Salieri's perspective) as a raunchy scatterbrain, in gross exaggeration of the known facts.

Is it because we find good people boring that Scorsese and Shaffer imaginatively darken the characters of Jesus and Mozart to make them better box office commodities? Laws of defamation may protect the reputations of the living, but they afford no help to the defenceless notables of the past. Fiction presented as fiction is acceptable; fiction presented as a recreation of history is not.

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Wildly Opposing Views

Well then, who was Jesus? It's an old question. In Jesus' own time people asked, "Who is this man?" and various answers were given. Many thought he was a prophet, like one of the Hebrew prophets of the past. One leading scholar of the time is on record as saying he was a teacher come from God, but others thought of him in negative terms: as a lunatic at best, or in league with the devil at worst.

Today, it is no different. People continue to express wildly opposing views about Jesus' identity. A quick survey of the views of professors of theology at some major universities illustrates the point.

Burton Mack from California sees Jesus as a philosopher with biting humour in the style of the School of the Cynics from the Greek world. In contrast, Geza Vermes from Oxford sees Jesus as a gentle mystic, a devout Jewish rabbi. Samuel Brandon from Manchester regards Jesus as a stern Jewish patriot, part of the revolutionary resistance against Rome. But for Morton Smith from New York, Jesus was a promiscuous magician.

Why do scholars hold such astonishingly diverse theories about Jesus?

Partly, it is because chairs of theology at universities are increasingly filled by people who come from outside the framework of Christian belief. A Jew, such as Geza Vermes, will obviously approach Jesus from the perspective of his own beliefs. The diversity of views is also encouraged by the very nature of the academic world. Those who get ahead, are those who publish. And publishers tend to be interested in a new angle, not in yet another orthodox treatment.

Furthermore, it is doubtful that Jesus can be understood outside the framework of the New Testament writers. Yet, many modern scholars fail to take this seriously and prefer to explain Jesus in imaginative ways, usually on the basis of a narrow selection of the total data available.

But lest we confine enquiry about Jesus to the ivory towers of academe, it also must be said that the community at large holds a broad range of opinions about Jesus. Son of God, miracle-worker, great moral teacher, a misunderstood prophet, a non-existent legend—all these opinions and more are expressed by people in our society.

Unfortunately, like the modern scholars, most people formulate their opinion of Jesus without much regard for the historical evidence of the New Testament. In a recent survey of young people at an Australian university, 91% expressed some firm opinion as to who Jesus was. However, 50% had never read any portion of the New Testament, and a further 25% had read five books or less (out of the 27 books). That is, while almost everyone had an opinion, hardly anyone had a reasonable basis for their opinion—hardly anyone had bothered to go back to the source and examine the raw evidence. And this among the most highly educated group in our society!

What about the New Testament?

It is obvious that the New Testament holds the key to the question of Jesus' identity, but can these documents be trusted? If they represent all we really know about Jesus, are they accurate and reliable? Five things can be said

in defence of their integrity.

1. Historical evidence in the New Testament is confirmed at a number of points by the non-Christian writers Tacitus and Josephus. From these historians we discover that:

- Jesus was a genuine figure of history (Tacitus and Josephus).
- Jesus was known as 'Christ' or 'the Christ' (Tacitus and Josephus).
- Jesus had a brother named James (Josephus).
- Jesus was executed in Judaea in the time of Pontius Pilate (Tacitus and Josephus).
- His movement broke out afresh and spread to Rome, where it had numerous adherents at the time of the great fire in A.D. 64 (Tacitus).
- The movement continued to flourish at the end of the first century (Josephus).

Tacitus and Josephus do not depend on the New Testament, yet at no point of information do they differ from the Christian writers. The one difference between them is in interpretation. The New Testament writers regard Jesus as the Son of God and Tacitus and Josephus do not. However, a friend and contemporary of Tacitus, Pliny (governor of the province of Bithynia) wrote to the Emperor Trajan that Christians worshipped Jesus as a god. The leading Romans knew what Christians thought of Jesus, even though they despised their views.

2. The New Testament documents are close in time to the figure of Jesus. 100 years separated the writing of Tacitus' great *Annals* from the Emperor Augustus, but Paul's letter to the Thessalonians was written less than 20 years after the death of Jesus. First Corinthians, written in the mid-50s A.D., contains oral summaries relating to the Last Supper and the death and resurrection of Jesus which went back to within three or four years of his lifetime. It is clear that the conviction that Jesus was the Son of God and that he had died for our sins and that he had been raised again from the dead went back to the time of Jesus and did not evolve over a period of time. No person or movement in all antiquity has such early documentation as Jesus and early Christianity.

3. This documentation is extensive, coming from as many as ten authors, eight of whom wrote independently of each other. Their style and emphasis differ, but their essential message is the same: Jesus is the Son of God, whose coming fulfils the Old Testament Scriptures, who has died for our sins, whom God raised again from the dead, and who was seen alive by many witnesses. The authors did not write in collaboration, but were scattered around the Mediterranean world. They wrote in response to the various needs of churches which had been established by an oral presentation of this message about Jesus.

4. The documents of the New Testament are historical in character, as well as theological. The writers make numerous references to Roman governors like Pilate, Felix and Festus as well as to the various members of the Herod family: Herod the Great, Archelaus, Antipas, Agrippa the elder, Agrippa the younger and Berenice. The writers certainly know the difference between history and legend. The literature of the New Testament is an outstanding quarry for historical research into the history, language and sociology of Palestine, Asia Minor and Greece in the first century.

5. The text of these documents has come down to us intact from the era in which it was written. Because the writings of the apostles were read aloud in the churches, numerous copies were needed for the movement as it

rapidly expanded around the Mediterranean region and beyond. Theologians and other Christian writers of the period quoted extensively from the New Testament, so that most of the New Testament exists in quotation in these early church writings. The multiplicity of early manuscripts and the quotations in early church writings mean that scholars are able to recover more than 99% of the text as originally written. It is interesting to contrast this with the *Annals* of Tacitus, which is the chief source of our information for Roman history in the New Testament period. There is only one, late manuscript of the *Annals*, of which almost half is missing.

Who is Jesus?

Given that the New Testament is a reliable historical document, what does it tell us about Jesus? The views of the New Testament writers could be expressed in brief terms as follows:

Matthew	The Christ or Messiah, Emmanuel ('God with us'), the Son of God
Mark	The Son of God, the Christ
Luke [Acts]	The Son of the Most High
John	The Christ, the Son of God
Paul	God's own Son, our Lord Jesus Christ
Author of Hebrews	The Son of God, our great High Priest
James	Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory
Peter	Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Chief Shepherd
Jude	Jesus Christ, our only Master and Lord

Who was Jesus? The writers of the New Testament were convinced that he was the Son of God, the Lord or King of all, to be believed in, trusted and served.

If the documents that make these claims are trustworthy, and I would strongly suggest that they are, we have a solid basis on which to investigate for ourselves who Jesus was. We can read the New Testament and make our own evaluation of the Jesus who walks its pages.

And we need to do so with an open mind, willing to accept what we find, and prepared to act in response.

Further Reading:

The New Testament, New International Version (recommended modern version)
P.W. Barnett, *Is the New Testament History?*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1986
F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, IVP, 1979
J.C. Chapman, *A Fresh Start*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1984

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