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Reinterpretations of the Historical Jesus

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Chapter IV
Reinterpretations of the Historical Jesus

In addition to the major historical approaches presented in the last chapter, many have attempted to write more-or-less popular lives of Jesus. These authors often advocate unorthodox interpretations: Jesus never died on the cross; he was connected with the Qumran community; someone else changed his message to fit their own desires; he traveled to various parts of the word during the so called "silent years" or even after the crucifixion.

While such works are given virtually no attention by careful scholars, these attempts are sometimes very popular with those who are unfamiliar with the data behind such questions. Many are bothered by nonfactual or illogical presentations, but are not quite able to locate the problems involved. This is the major reason that these approaches are included in this book. We will investigate several of the most popular recent attempts to present unorthodox pictures of Jesus' life.

The Rise of the Swoon Theory

Each of the fictitious lives of Jesus surveyed in Chapter 1 taught that Jesus survived death on the cross and was later revived. His "appearances" to his disciples were not miraculous, of course, for he had never died in the first place. The swoon theory, espoused by Heinrich Paulus and others during the heyday of the Liberal naturalistic theories, was quite popular in the first half of the nineteenth century. It was disproven by the facts and indicted by Liberals like David Strauss. Before examining this view, it will be helpful to present an overview of two contemporary attempts to write similar lives of Jesus.

Hugh Schonfield's The Passover Plot created quite a sensation when it appeared.(1) However, very few readers were aware of the similarity between this book and earlier fictitious lives of Jesus. For Schonfield, Jesus had carefully planned his career of public ministry in accordance with his belief that he was Israel's Messiah.(2) Accordingly, he plotted events such as his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, on which occasion Lazarus helped him make the appropriate arrangements.(3) Jesus made especially intricate plans concerning his upcoming crucifixion, which required especially accurate timing. On this occasion his chief confidant was Joseph of Arimathea.(4)

While Jesus was on the cross, Joseph made arrangements for an unidentified man to give Jesus a drink that had been drugged. As a result, Jesus slipped quickly into a state of unconsciousness, which made him appear dead. Nonetheless, Jesus was in a very serious condition when he was removed from the cross, especially complicated by John's report of the spear wound in his chest.(5) On Saturday, Jesus' body was removed from the tomb, after which he regained consciousness briefly, but died shortly thereafter and was reburied.(6)

At this point, Schonfield turns to his proposed reconstruction of events that account for the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection. The unidentified man at the cross who administered the drug is the key figure in this reconstruction. He helped carry Jesus to the tomb, then returned on Saturday to rescue him. During Jesus' brief period of consciousness, Jesus asked this man to convey to his disciples that he had risen from the dead. However, Jesus died shortly after and this person helped bury him. It is also this anonymous person who was present in the tomb when the women came early on Sunday morning and was the one mistaken by Mary Magdalene as the gardener. Later this same man visited the disciples on the road to Emmaus, at the seashore and in Galilee. The disciples mistook this stranger for Jesus and proclaimed his resurrection from the dead.(7)

It should be obvious to the reasonably impartial reader that this incredible sequence of events, where an unidentified man simply "appears" very conveniently whenever there is a need to explain anything away, is extremely questionable, to say the least. The entire plot closely parallels the fictitious lives of Jesus which are now so outdated and ignored by serious scholars. Indeed, even Schonfield admits that much of his account "is an imaginative reconstruction."(8) Later he explains that "We are nowhere claiming for our reconstruction that it represents what actually happened."(9) According to John A. T. Robinson, The Passover Plot is an example of a popularistic book which is factually groundless enough that, if the public were not so interested in virtually anyone who writes on Christianity, it "would be laughed out of court."(10) Therefore, we assert that there is a very high improbability against Schonfield's reconstruction of Jesus' life.

One other example of the swoon theory in popular literature is Donovan Joyce's The Jesus Scroll.(11) The thesis of this book, which contains an even more incredible string of improbabilities than Schonfield's, will be left for a later section of this chapter. However, Joyce's account of the swoon theory is discussed here.

For Joyce, Jesus was also planning his escape from death on the cross. Accordingly, he was drugged and the Roman soldiers did not examine Jesus too closely, perhaps because they had been bribed. Neither did they stab him in the side with a spear in order to insure his death. As a result, Jesus did not die on the cross. Rather, he was resuscitated in the tomb, apparently by a doctor who had been concealed inside ahead of time.(12)

This account of Jesus' swoon likewise smacks of fictitious aspects, similar to both Schonfield and the eighteenth and nineteenth century attempts.

The Fall of the Swoon Theory

The swoon theory was perhaps the most popular naturalistic theory against the historicity of Jesus' resurrection in the early nineteenth century. But David Strauss, himself a liberal theologian, disproved this theory to the satisfaction of his fellow scholars.

Strauss raised a very important issue. Even if it was imagined that Jesus was able to survive Roman crucifixion, what could he do about the heavy stone in the entrance to the tomb? In his extremely weakened physical condition, could he move an object which even a healthy man would have a great problem with (according to tradition)? This would be even more difficult when it is remembered that the stone would have to be rolled uphill out of its gully. Additionally, the inside of the stone would provide no edge against which Jesus might at least use his weight to push. Then, even if he could have escaped from the tomb, could he walk the distance to the disciples' hiding place after having his weight suspended on a Roman crucifixion spike just a short time previously?

Yet, Strauss' most convincing point concerned Jesus' condition upon reaching his disciples. Very few would doubt that he would be in sad physical shape, limping badly, bleeding, pale and clutching his side. He would obviously be in need of physical assistance and, at any rate, would not appear to be the resurrected and glorified Lord of Life! As Strauss pointed out, the disciples would have gone for a doctor's help rather than proclaim Jesus the risen Son of God! Strauss asserted that even if the swoon theory was conceivable, it still could not account for the disciples' belief in the risen Jesus. Since they did proclaim him to be resurrected and glorified Lord, the swoon theory is not able to account for the facts.(13)

Shortly after the turn of the century, Schweitzer referred to Strauss' critique as the "death blow" to such rationalistic approaches.(14) After Strauss' views were circulated, the liberal "lives of Jesus" usually shunned the swoon theory.(15) By the early twentieth century, other critical scholars proclaimed this theory to be nothing more than a historical curiosity of the past. Even critics no longer considered it to be a viable hypothesis.(16)

Modern medical research has leveled at least two additional critiques against the swoon theory. First, crucifixion is essentially death by asphyxiation, as the intercostal and pectoral muscles around the lungs halt normal breathing which the body hangs in the "down" position. Therefore, faking death on the cross still would not permit one to breathe; one cannot fake the inability to breathe for any length of time. Breaking the victim's ankles insured death even quicker, since the person could not push up in order to free the lungs for breathing. The Romans were knowledgeable in these matters, as indicated by the broken leg bones of a first century crucifixion victim whose skeleton was recently discovered (see Chapter VIII) for details. Since Jesus' ankles were not broken, we have the Roman's assurance that he was previously dead. Otherwise, this method would have killed him. Either way, the end result of Jesus' death is very probable.

Second, an even stronger refutation of the swoon theory is gained from the medical conclusion that the Roman lance entered Jesus' heart. The gospel writer probably never understood the medical significance of what he recorded, for which eyewitness testimony is claimed (John 19:34 35). Medical doctors who have studied this issue usually agree that this is a very accurate medical description. The water probably proceeded from the pericardium, the sac that surrounds the heart, while the blood came from the right side of the heart. Even if Jesus was alive before he was stabbed, the lance would almost certainly have killed him.(17) Therefore, this chest would also disproves the swoon theory.

We have noted three major problems that are sufficient to refute the swoon hypothesis. The physical condition of Jesus (as advocated by Strauss), the nature of death on the cross by asphyxiation, and the study of Jesus' chest wound combine to eliminate this theory. Additionally, we witnessed the difficulties above (with Schonfield and Joyce) in the actual implementation of this view. Neither are these the only key problems. For example, this thesis cannot account for the conversions of James, the brother of Jesus, and especially Paul from their skepticism to Christianity. Therefore, it is no surprise that this hypothesis is rejected today by critics.(18)

Qumran Connections

Another popularistic picture of Jesus is that he was a member of the Essene Community at Qumran, which is said to have influenced his teachings tremendously. Sometimes, but seldom, he is even connected with the Essene "Teacher of Righteousness," a priest who called the people to obey the Law and to live a holy life before the Lord and was perhaps even martyred for his teachings.

For instance, Upton Ewing's The Essene Christ asserts that Jesus was raised as an Essene and belonged to the sect, as did John the Baptist.(19) It is even hinted that Jesus thought of himself as the "Teacher of Righteousness."(20) Because of this background of both John and Jesus, their followers were likewise influenced by Essene teachings. Subsequently, the four Gospels are said to have borrowed much from the Qumran community.(21)

Strangely enough, Ewing sees the major theme of the Essene community, including Jesus and the early Christians, as the teaching of monistic ethics. This teaching involves a type of pantheistic oneness of the entire universe with God, each other and all of life. As a result, no violence should be perpetrated on any creature or person, but we should live in peace and love with all.(22)

Another writer to link Jesus and Christian origins with the Qumran community is Charles Potter. He also suggests that both John the Baptist and Jesus studied at Qumran while growing up. This would explain where Jesus was during his so called "silent years" between the ages of twelve and thirty.(23) During these years, Potter postulates that Jesus either wrote, or at least read and was very influenced by an apocalyptic book named The Secrets of Enoch, which is closely connected with the ideas taught by the Essenes. While, at the very least, Jesus was inspired by these teachings, Potter is careful to point out that Jesus was not the Essene "Teacher of Righteousness," who lived long before Jesus.(24)

These works of Ewing and Potter are examples of popularistic attempts to explain the inner motivations and secret events of Jesus' life that are not recorded in the New Testament. Like the fictitious lives of Jesus described by Schweitzer, not only do we find an interest in these inner workings, we also confront the secretive organization of the Essenes once again. And like Schweitzer's examples, so are these works refuted by the facts, Four critiques of these views are now presented.

First, there is a train of illogic employed in these works. For Ewing, the connection between Jesus and the Essenes is based on the opinion that, since he was neither a Sadducee nor a Pharisee, Jesus must have been an Essene!(25) Again, since the Gospels depict Jesus as opposing both the Sadducees and the Pharisees but never opposing the Essenes, then he must have been one of the latter.(26)

Both of these statements are textbook examples of arguments from silence. Just because there is an absence of evidence in the Gospels as to what group Jesus favored, we cannot argue from that silence to the fact that he favored the Essenes. For instance, the Talmud fails to mention the Essenes, so does this make it an Essene book? These statements also commit the black white fallacy of logic. They assume that either Jesus had to be a Sadducee or Pharisee on the one hand or an Essene on the other. But this conclusion only follows if it is known that these are the only options. Jesus could have been a member of another group or of no group at all. Indeed, the Gospels depict him as one who was "his own man" without explicit support for any sectarian politics.

Potter argues similarly. He states that he applied the logic which he learned in college to the facts concerning The Secrets of Enoch and decided that there was "no convincing reason against Jesus' authorship."(27) With this logic he surely should have noticed that his argument was also from silence. An absence of reasons against Jesus' authorship provides no evidence that he did, in fact, write the book. Potter additionally argues that The Secrets of Enoch was written by one author, from 1 50 A.D.(28) That is also an argument from the absence of evidence. There were surely an enormous number of intelligent people who lived between these years who would, given accurate dates, also be candidates for authorship. But this is not evidence that Jesus was the author. In concession, Potter even admits that his thesis is somewhat "imaginative."(29)

The second major reason for rejecting this thesis is that, while there are similarities between Jesus and Qumran,(30) there are also many differences that oppose any close connection. As asserted by Brownlee, "The Qumran literature tells us much about the background of primitive Christianity, but it can tell us nothing directly about Jesus."(31) A number of scholars have noted numerous differences between Jesus and Qumran beliefs.(32) 1) Jesus opposed legalism, whereas the Essenes held strictly to it. 2) Jesus also opposed ceremonial purity, while the Essenes, again, adhered meticulously to it. 3) Jesus associated with common people and "sinners," whereas such activity was appalling to the Essenes. 4) The sinlessness of Jesus is in contrast to the Essene teaching that even the Messiah would be purified from sin by suffering. 5) Jesus combined several messianic aspects, while the Qumran community was looking for two (or even three) different messiahs.

6) Jesus did not teach a strong hierarchy among his followers, while the Essenes imposed strict social rules. 7) Jesus' group was open, but the Essene community was closed. 8) Jesus' ministry was public, while the Essenes were very private. 9) Jesus' teachings were oral, whereas the Essenes emphasized writing and copying. 10) Jesus' manner of teaching was clear, not obtuse as in the Dead Sea Scrolls. 11) Jesus had no formal training, in contrast to those from the Qumran community. 12) Healing was a major part of Jesus' ministry, but this aspect was not emphasized at Qumran.

13) The teaching of love was Jesus' major ethical message, but does not appear in Essene teachings. 14) Jesus' ethics are closer to Rabbinic literature than to Qumran. 15) Jesus had a more positive admiration for the Old Testament prophets than did the Essenes. 16) Jesus did not emphasize angelology as much as did the Qumran community.

17) Jesus' central teaching was the Kingdom of God, whereas the Essenes give little or no place to the concept. 18) For Jesus, salvation was straightforward, while the Essenes had an elaborate initiation system. 19) Jesus taught that salvation would also be extended to the Gentiles while the Essenes were more exclusivistic. 20) Jesus was missionary-minded, while the Essenes were not. 21) According to Josephus, the Essenes taught the immortality of the soul, in contrast to the Christian teaching of the resurrection of the body.

As a result, it is generally held that a close connection between Jesus and Qumran is very improbable.(33) Daniélou even states:

Must we then conclude that he was an Essene, at least at some period of his life? Here historians are unanimous in affirming the contrary. There is nothing either in his origins or in the setting in which he habitually lived, to justify such a conclusion.(34)

Our third critique opposes the minority opinion that Jesus was the Essenes' "Teacher of Righteousness." Although very few hold this view, we will still list several problems noted by scholars.(35) 1) The Essenes' Teacher was a priest, as opposed to Jesus' plural office. 2) The Teacher considered himself a sinner in need of purification, while Jesus was sinless. 3) The Teacher perceived that he was separated by an infinite gulf from God, while Christians hold that Jesus is the very Son of God.

4) There is no evidence of any atoning value being placed on the Teacher's death, while such is the special significance of Jesus' shed blood and death. 5) There is no claim or evidence that the Teacher was raised from the dead, while this is the central event for Christianity. 6) Jesus is worshiped by Christians as God, while such was not the practice of the Essenes and even opposed their belief. 7) Additionally, the Essenes' Teacher lived long before Jesus did.

Our fourth critique of this view is the strongest. While the point is often missed, this view is not necessarily critical of Christ or his teachings even if it was shown that he had affinities to Essene thought or even that he was a member of the group. As Pfeiffer explains:

It should be observed that there is nothing derogatory to the person of Christ in the assumption that He or His followers were of Essene background. The Scriptures make it clear that the mother of our Lord was a Jewess, and that He became incarnate in the midst of a Jewish environment. If it were proved that this environment was also Essene, Christian theology would lose nothing and the uniqueness of Jesus would be no more disproved than it is disproved by the assertion of the Jewish origin after the flesh.(36)

In other words, Jesus had to be born somewhere and he went to school somewhere. To assert that this background was influenced by the Essenes is not in itself critical of Christianity, as long as his teachings are not adjusted or his uniqueness modified. His person and teachings are still validated by a trustworthy New Testament (see Chapter II) and, if his resurrection is verified, this could also serve to confirm his message.(37)

Yet, we must still reject this approach to the life of Jesus. The illogical argumentation, the differences between Christianity and Qumran and the differences between Jesus and the Teacher of Righteousness all invalidate it. However, even if this hypothesis was demonstrated, it would affect nothing of major importance in Christianity since Jesus did have some type of background and his message can be shown to be trustworthy and unique anyway.

Jesus' Message is Changed by Others

The charge is often made that Jesus' message was actually quite different from the one which Christians have traditionally taught concerning him. This sometimes is said to be the case, for instance, because the Gospels represent the teachings of the early church and not those of Jesus himself (compare the discussion about Bultmann above). We saw how this approach is invalidated as an attempt to ascertain Jesus' teachings. On the other hand, Davies' thesis, as just observed, claimed that Paul changed the direction of Christianity, and allowed the later syncretism of the third century, which was also shown to be in error.

Hugh Schonfield postulated another reason for this change in Jesus' message. He holds that Jesus was a teacher who was true to Judaism and who had no desire to start any new religion. That is why, for instance, he never proclaimed his own deity.(38) While Paul did present some different teachings,(39) he is not the real culprit. Rather, Schonfield asserts that the church at Rome perverted Paul's teachings about Jesus in order to turn him into a deity who set up a new religion.(40) The Roman church did this by consciously writing some of the New Testament books and by influencing others to rewrite the story of Jesus. Books said to be either written or influenced strongly by this effort include the synoptic Gospels, Hebrews and Peter's epistles.(41) The general movement is from Jesus' original teachings, to Paul's assessments, to the Roman redirection.(42) The result is that Christian theology as it is taught today is not the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.(43) By such progress, the teachings of Jesus and Paul have been changed by a plot to make Christianity palatable to Roman gentiles. In spite of Schonfield's new "twists," his thesis is vulnerable to four criticisms.

First, since Schonfield rejects the testimony of the Gospels,(44) he presents no valid basis on which to assert that Jesus' original teachings were different from what traditional Christianity believes about him. The problem here is actually twofold. Initially, Schonfield is opposed by all of the evidence for the authenticity and trustworthiness of the Gospels (and the New Testament). Additionally, and more specifically, how can one rule out the Gospel's testimony and still have a basis on which to assert that the original teachings of Jesus were different? How can Schonfield know that Jesus did not present the message of the Gospels? What is his basis of comparison between Jesus and what the earliest sources say about him? It becomes apparent that there are no grounds of distinction between Jesus and the Gospels.

Schonfield might respond that Jesus could not have taught the message that traditional Christianity affirms, since it was contrary to what first century Jews believed. Yet Schonfield uses the Gospels to establish this response,(45) a basis which he rejects. And since it is not proper hermeneutical method to pick and choose the verses which one will accept and those which one will reject, he is again left without any valid basis for his position.

For those who contend that the Gospels are dependable sources that reveal a non divine Jesus and that Paul (and others) perverted this message, it should be mentioned here that even the synoptic Gospels reveal that Jesus claimed deity for himself. For example, he referred to himself as "Son of God" and "Son of Man," he taught that salvation was found only in himself and claimed that only he had the power to forgive sin.(46) He certainly claimed to be in a privileged relationship with God; his usage of "Abba" (Aramaic for "Daddy") is a very unusual name for God and is an indication of his unique sonship, as many critical scholars admit.(47)

At any rate, we cannot follow Schonfield and attempt to divorce Jesus' message from what the earliest sources indicate concerning him, for in so doing we destroy the basis which is needed to establish that division. Additionally, to assume that Jesus did not consider himself deity while ruling out the Gospels, is to do so on the grounds of the presumed first century Jewish thought, which is a circular argument that presupposes Jesus did not teach anything different. This is the very point to be demonstrated.

Second, there is no evidence for any such plot on the part of Christians at Rome, as presumed by Schonfield. Of course, one can argue anything without the appropriate support, but others are not obliged to accept it. Similarly, no one is constrained to accept Schonfield's thesis without the proper evidence.

Since we do not know that Jesus denied deity and especially since there are reasons to assert that he did claim such deity then why would there be a need for Roman Christians to "invent" the message? In other words, we can only begin to contemplate the alteration of Jesus' words if we know that he did not teach the message of his deity in the first place. But since the point is invalid, as just shown, one cannot leap to the next step of a conspiracy by the Christians at Rome.

Third, the Pauline epistles, which even Schonfield accepts as valid texts, attest to the orthodox view of Jesus' deity. Thus, while Schonfield holds that Paul followed Jesus' own teachings in rejecting the deity of the Messiah,(48) the writings of Paul which are accepted by Schonfield teach otherwise. This is revealed by even a brief survey. In Rom. 1:3 4, Paul gives Jesus the titles "Son," "Lord" and "Christ." Although completely ignored by Schonfield in a treatment of this verse,(49) the usage of "Lord," in particular, indicates Paul's view of Jesus' deity. As said Oscar Cullmann in his classic Christology, this term indicates that Paul could give Jesus the title of "God," since "Lord" itself "clearly expresses Jesus' deity."(50)

Even stronger is Paul's statement in Rom. 9:5, where Jesus is, in all probability, actually called "God."(51) Similarly, Paul affirms Christ's full deity in Col. 2:9. While Schonfield clearly mistranslates this latter verse,(52) Cullmann, agreeing with virtually all scholars, renders the key phrase as "the whole fullness of deity dwelt bodily" in Jesus Christ.(53) As philologists A. T. Robinson points out, this verse indicates that all the fullness of the very essence of God dwells in Jesus in bodily form.(54) These two references, in particular, reveal Paul's view of the full deity of Jesus.

Other passages are additionally helpful. Philippians 2:6 11 asserts that Jesus has the form or very nature of God and commends worship of the exalted Jesus. In Col. 1:15, Paul points out that Jesus is the "image of God" and in 2 Cor. 12:8, Paul prays to Christ.(55) By these means, then, Paul does teach the deity of Jesus. This is not a doctrine added by unscrupulous Christians from Rome, but a teaching of Jesus himself and of Paul.

Fourth, even if a divine messiah was not what first century Jews were looking for, there is a good reason why Jesus may still have made this very claim, as the evidence indicates he did. If he was truly deity, then he may have been attempting to correct the first century Jewish understanding of the messiah. And if he was, in fact, raised from the dead, this at least raises the possibility that his claims were verified. Again, any verification of Jesus' teachings is beyond the scope of this book, but if the resurrection is demonstrated as history, then claims in this area can no longer be disregarded.(56) Schonfield might then have to face his thesis in reverse.

At any rate, Schonfield's thesis (as well as others who claim that Jesus' teachings were changed) is invalid. This is especially so when the Gospels have been rejected, for there is then no basis for this conclusion. It is thereby circular to assume that Jesus' views did not differ from first century Jews, for this is the very point to be demonstrated. But then the presumed plot of the Christians at Rome also fails because there is no evidence that Jesus did not teach his own deity. In fact, there is much evidence in the Gospels that he did teach this.

If one rejects the Gospels there is little basis for rejecting the traditional Christian testimony concerning Jesus, and we arrive at a circular argument. If the texts are accepted, then we are faced with Jesus' claims to be deity. Additionally, Paul's firm teaching on the deity of Jesus invalidates this thesis, as does a possible verification of Jesus' claims if his resurrection is demonstrated as historical.

It should be carefully noted, however, that Schonfield and Davies represent only two versions of the thesis that Jesus' message was changed. This claim is a very common one. In general, the frequent charge is that Paul either originated or corrupted Christianity, usually on the subjects of the deity of Jesus and the nature and extent of the gospel message. It is to this more general charge that we wish to offer seven brief critiques.

(1) It has been mentioned above that Jesus made various statements regarding his own deity. He claimed to be the Son of Man, the Son of God, to forgive sin and that he was the actual means of salvation. There are also additional indications of his own teachings concerning his deity, such as his use of the word "Abba." It is quite significant that Jesus' first century contemporaries were convinced of his claim to deity (Mark 2:6 7; John 5:17 18).(57) Therefore, the thesis which asserts that the deity of Jesus is a later doctrine fails largely at this point.

(2) Numerous ancient, pre Pauline creeds also teach the full deity of Jesus. Philippians 2:6 11 not only attributes Old Testament praise of God (as the one true God) to Jesus (cf. Isa. 45:22 23), but it also calls Jesus "Christ" and "Lord." On this latter title, Cullmann asserts that it is even loftier than the passages which address Jesus as God, since Lord is the name for God. This allowed Christians to attribute what the Old Testament says about God to Jesus, as evidenced in this passage.(58) Additionally, and even stronger, Jesus is said in verse six to have the same nature or essence as God. Reginald Fuller states that here Jesus is "equal with God."(59) Cullmann speaks of Jesus' "identity of form with God," which shows that he is "equal with God" in his exaltation.(60) Other pre Pauline creeds also teach the deity of Jesus. Romans 1:3 4 calls Jesus "Son," "Christ" and "Lord." First Corinthians 11:23ff., which Joachim Jeremias states "goes back . . . to Jesus himself,"(61) also calls Jesus "Lord." First Corinthians 15:3ff., perhaps the oldest New Testament creed, calls Jesus "Christ." It is also significant that these creeds pre date Paul and extend back to the earliest church, which completely complement Jesus' own self claims.

(3) Paul did not teach a new religion. He taught that Christianity was a fulfillment of Judaism (Rom. 10:4, 9 11; Col. 2:16 17), which is what Jesus taught, as well (Matt. 5:18; Luke 16:16 17).

(4) Paul also agreed with Jesus as to the nature of the gospel. Both taught that men are sinners (Mark 3:38; Rom. 3:23; 6:23) and that Jesus died, with his shed blood providing atonement for that sin (Matt. 26:28; Mark 10:45; Eph. 1:7; Rom. 5:8). The death and burial of Jesus was completed by his resurrection (Luke 24:46 47; John 20:25 29; Rom. 10:9). Yet man cannot save himself, but needs God's grace and leading (Matt. 19:25 26; John 4:44; Eph. 2:8 9), which is imparted through faith and surrender to Christ (Mark 1:15; Rom. 10:9 11). The result is a changed life and commitment (Luke 14:25 35; John 15:1 11; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:10).

(5) Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:13 14). Jesus also taught the disciples to take the gospel to the Gentiles (Matt. 28:19 20; Luke 24:47; John 10:16; Acts 1:8) and that non Jews would be found in the Kingdom of God (Matt. 8:11 12; John 17:20). These teachings are actually the fulfillment of Old Testament promises (Gen. 12:3; Isa. 19:18 25), not a new doctrine.

(6) Paul's message of the gospel was both checked and approved by the original apostles (Gal. 2:1 10), providing official recognition that his message was not opposed to that of Jesus. It was also shown earlier (see Section E) that Paul's epistles were accepted as Scripture immediately after being written (2 Pet. 3:15 16; Clement of Rome; Ignatius and Polycarp).

(7) We have also introduced the significance of Jesus' resurrection with regard to the truthfulness of his teachings. Since Paul agrees with Jesus, any such confirmation would also apply to Paul's teachings.

Therefore we conclude that Paul was not the founder of Christianity and neither did he corrupt Jesus' teachings. They agree on the essentials of the faith. Furthermore, the early pre Pauline creed in 1 Cor. 15:3ff. presents the same view of the deity of Jesus and the nature of the gospel. As the eminent New Testament scholar C. H. Dodd pointed out, Paul's preaching coincided with that of primitive Christianity and those who would assert otherwise bear the burden of proof.(62)

Jesus as International Traveler

In surveys of popularistic lives of Jesus, it is not long before one discovers a prevalent tendency to view Jesus as an international traveler. It is sometimes asserted that he took journeys to such exotic places as India, Japan, or Egypt during his eighteen so called "silent years" (between the ages of twelve and thirty), or trips after his crucifixion; the latter usually necessitating a swoon theory. We looked briefly at one similar thesis already, with Potter's The Last Years of Jesus Revealed. Although Jesus did not travel too far, it is said that he spent his "silent years" in the Qumran community. (See the discussion of this thesis above.)

Another persistent legend states that Jesus traveled east to India and Japan. According to family documents which were purportedly uncovered in 1935 by Shinto priest Kiyomaro Takeuchi, Jesus reportedly sailed to Japan at the age of eighteen. He stayed in that country for about seven or eight years and studied Japanese philosophy and culture in his search for wisdom. Armed with both this knowledge and with some magic tricks which he had learned, Jesus went back to Palestine. Upon his return, Jesus preached the Kingdom of God. When it became clear that he was going to be killed, the Japanese legend relates that his brother, Isukiri, volunteered to die in Jesus' place so that Jesus could continue with his work on earth. Having convinced Jesus by such rationale, his brother Isukiri died and was buried. Afterwards, Jesus and Judas went to the tomb and reburied Isukiri's dead body.

The legend continues by teaching that Jesus then left Palestine and took four years to get to Shinjo, Japan. There he changed his name to Torai Taro Tenkujin, got married and fathered three children. After living a full life as a prophet and teacher, Jesus is said to have died at the age of 112 years. The Japanese of Shinjo commemorated his death with what they claim is Jesus' tomb located in a small valley not far from the village. However, when asked if Jesus is really buried in this tomb, Shinjo mayor Genki Kosaka replied that he could not say either way.(63)

Another hypothesis involving Jesus as a traveler is related by Donavan Joyce, who asserts that in 1964 he was told of a scroll which was stolen by a professor who would not give him his true name. This professor claimed that the scroll was found at Masada, on the Dead Sea, and was written by a man identifying himself as "Jesus of Gennesareth, son of Jacob," an eighty year old defender of Masada who apparently died while fighting the Romans during the Jewish revolt of 66 73 A.D. Unfortunately Joyce never found out the professor's real name and, in the meantime, the scroll has disappeared so that no one knows the whereabouts of it or of the professor!(64) Yet Joyce claims that there is a chance that this scroll was written by Jesus before his death at the age of eighty years. Therefore, there must be a history of what happened to Jesus during the almost fifty years from the time of his crucifixion until his death.

So Joyce suggests that Jesus never died on the cross, but "plotted" to remain alive in spite of crucifixion. He was drugged on the cross, but the guards, apparently bribed, did not examine Jesus' comatose body too closely. A doctor was concealed in the tomb in order to nurse Jesus back to health again, assisted by Joseph of Arimathea, Jesus' uncle. As Jesus recovered he paid one last visit to his disciples and then retired as a monk at Qumran.(65) But Jesus was not to live out the remainder of his days in the quiet Qumran setting. Joyce postulates that Jesus was a part of the Hasmonean line, and connects him with the Zealots as an open revolutionary against Rome. In accord with his background, Jesus had married Mary Magdalene even before his crucifixion, according to Hasmonean tradition, and fathered at least one son. Jesus was opposed to the Roman rule and left Qumran for Masada, where he died while fighting the Romans.(66)

Another recent attempt to present Jesus as a traveler is the book Holy Blood, Holy Grail. Acknowledging the usage of Joyce's presentation, this work also holds that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene (who is identified as Mary of Bethany). The children from this marriage were heirs of Jesus' kingly bloodline.(67) Jesus was said to have been crucified for crimes perpetrated against Rome, not against the Jews. However, he did not die on the cross, but was drugged to make him appear dead. Pilate was bribed in order to allow Jesus to be removed from the cross alive. The Essenes then took his body, which was laid in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a relative of Jesus. After nursing Jesus back to health, Joseph, Mary Magdalene and Lazarus (Jesus' brother in law) went to France to live. However, no one knows where Jesus went after his recuperation. The authors suggest India, Egypt, Masada or somewhere else in Israel.(68) The vast bulk of the book is devoted to the remains of Jesus' bloodline, through Mary Magdalene, as they settled and spread in France. This supposed bloodline is traced through royal families, secret organizations and age old mysteries. But, as even the authors recognize, the major question is whether this French lineage did, in fact, come from Jesus.(69)

These attempts to have Jesus avoid death and then travel afterward are laden with more difficulties than any other approach which we have studied. This is largely due to the presence of so much conjecture combined with an absence of facts. We present four major objections to such approaches to the life of Jesus.

First, in our earlier discussions we determined that the New Testament, and the Gospels in particular, are authentic and trustworthy documents for the life and teachings of Jesus. We will not belabor this point any further, except to note that this conclusion is based on both the early and eyewitness testimony behind the Gospels, including authors who were close to the facts, as well as the attestation of the earliest church and overwhelming manuscript evidence. Such facts reveal that the Gospels are a valid basis fort he teachings of Jesus, in opposition to these theses which almost always involve vast alterations of New Testament data. On this point alone these theses fail.

Second, most of these theses involve the swoon theory concerning Jesus' resurrection, without which there would be no basis for any post crucifixion travels followed by a later, obscure death. But as stated above in our examination of this hypothesis, this hypothesis falls prey to numerous problems which will not be repeated here.

Some sources, such as the Japanese legend cited here, assert that someone else died on the cross in place of Jesus. Other such assertions include the gnostic writing "The Second Treatise of the Great Seth" (55:15 20)(70) and the Muslim Koran (Surah IV, 156 159).(71) Whereas the Japanese tale claims that the crucified person was Jesus' brother, the gnostic source claims that Simon of Cyrene was killed while the glorified Jesus sat in the heavens and laughed at the error. A popular Muslim teaching is that it was Judas who died instead of Jesus.

Such strange "twists" to the swoon theory have been virtually ignored by scholars with good reason, for serious problems invalidate each of these theses. (1) The sources which report these theories are quite late. While the date of the gnostic writing is difficult to obtain, it was probably written two or more centuries after Jesus and definitely manifests theological rather than historical interests, since one gnostic belief is that Jesus could not have died physically on the cross, hence a substitute would be needed. The Japanese legend was not known until about 500 A.D. when it was introduced in Japan by the Chinese. The Koran is a seventh century A.D. writing. Works of the third to seventh century are rather late to have much authoritative claim, while the gnostic and Muslim sources plainly exhibit theological interests for their assertions.

(2) Why would Jesus' disciples, friends and relatives not recognize a substitute, especially when several were present at the crucifixion and burial? This is almost beyond credulity.

(3) How could Jesus' enemies have missed the oversight? Since they knew what his appearance was from his trips to Jerusalem and certainly had strong motives to kill him, including the desire to be present at the crucifixion to witness his death, such a mistake would be simply incredible.

(4) Such theories would not be able to adequately explain the reported appearances of Jesus to eyewitnesses after his crucifixion, since such testimony concerned both his glorified body and his healed wounds.

It is no wonder that such a variant hypothesis has had very little following even among critics. The late dates of the sources and the lack of recognition by both Jesus' loved ones and his enemies alike, even at extremely close range, together with his glorified but scarred post crucifixion appearances, combine to make this assertion quite unpalatable to scholars.

The third major objection to the thesis that Jesus was an international traveler after his crucifixion is that these theories lack historical credibility. Each of the theses is plagued with a lack of solid historical evidence. For instance, the Japanese legend not only rests on very questionable hearsay testimony but it was not even introduced into Japan until 500 A.D.(72) Certainly a gap of some 450 years should make us question the historical origin of this legend.

Concerning Joyce's thesis that Jesus died at the age of eighty while fighting the Romans at Masada, the historical basis is perhaps even more questionable. Joyce never knew the professor's true name, and even admits that he must rely on "hearsay" testimony. If that is not enough, the scroll has since vanished and no one knows the claimed whereabouts of either this document or the "professor" upon whose word the testimony rests! Interestingly, Joyce even wrote to Yigael Yadin, the well known archaeologist who headed the Masada expedition. Yadin's response to Joyce's story was that "anyone with a little knowledge of scrolls and conditions in which they were discovered at Masada would have immediately detected the nonsense in the story."(73) There can be little question that the story of the lost scroll cannot be used in any attempt to formulate the historical facts of the last years of Jesus' life.

In Holy Blood, Holy Grail we find a similar gap in the historical basis. The authors themselves characterize their own historical argument, before investigating the Christian sources, with the following description:

Our hypothetical scenario . . . was also preposterous . . . much too sketchy . . . rested on far too flimsy a foundation . . . could not yet in itself be supported . . . too many holes . . . too many inconsistencies and anomalies, too many loose ends.(74)

After their research into Christian origins, does their evaluation change? While holding that their thesis was still probably true, the authors conclude, "We could not — and still cannot — prove the accuracy of our conclusion. It remains to some extent at least, a hypothesis."(75) As we will see below, their thesis also has numerous gaps in argumentation.

Historically, then, such theses lack the data needed for the conclusions. Very late documents, missing evidence and faulty historical reconstructions certainly do not prove one's case.

The fourth major problem with these theses is that, in addition to the lack of a historical basis, each exhibits decidedly illogical argumentation. The Japanese legend contains such inconsistencies as Jesus' brother dying in his place, the fact that Jesus' teachings reflect none of the Japanese philosophy that he supposedly learned during his "silent years" spent in Japan, and the failure to acknowledge the Christian teachings of Francis Xavier. This Catholic priest visited Japan in the sixteenth century and probably accounts for much of the Christian influence in that country.(76) Even so, it is in the works of Joyce, Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln where we perceive more glaring gaps in logic.

For Joyce, the story does not stop with the admittedly hearsay evidence supplied by an anonymous "professor" who disappears along with all of the evidence for his claims, never to be heard from again. After asking where the scroll could have disappeared, Joyce postulates that there is one country in the world which would especially like to discover its contents — Russia! When he arrived in Delhi, India he remembered that the "professor" had also said he was going to Delhi. Therefore, Joyce felt that he had verified his thesis when he spotted a Russian plane at the airport, although he

apparently never questioned the presence of planes from various other countries at such an international airport. Russia had to have sent the plane to pick up the "professor" and his valuable scroll!(77)

To make matters worse, Joyce claims further evidence for his thesis in that a Russian official held a conference with the Vatican's Pope Paul in 1967. Although there was never a hint of what transpired at this meeting, Joyce is sure that they were talking about the "professor's" scroll! Russia was putting pressure on the Vatican, presumably with world revelation of the scroll hanging in the balances. And after all of this, Joyce states that the still unknown professor is probably a very respected scholar who is no longer free or perhaps even dead, thereby intimating that the Russians have him, so that his story will never be told!(78)

Such illogic is also carried over into Joyce's treatment of the life of Jesus. This happens often, but we will recount just one example here. In Luke 8:1 3, we are told that several women supported Jesus and his disciples financially. Joyce declares this to be "quite certain" evidence that Jesus was married.(79) Such a train of illogic hardly needs a comment, but it is certainly an example of how such hypotheses must really be strained to put together such a "case" for the life of Jesus. It is also typical of the assertions made in Holy Blood, Holy Grail, from which many examples could also be adduced.

It is held that since Jesus and his mother are called to a wedding in John 2:1 11 and since they play a major role, it must therefore automatically be Jesus' own wedding. Apparently no one can play a major role at anyone else's wedding, even if he is able to do miracles!(80) In the account of the raising of Lazarus in John 11:1 46, it is asserted that, since Martha ran out to greet Jesus upon his arrival while Mary waited in the house until Jesus asked for her (vv. 20, 28), Mary must be Jesus' wife! The authors even admit a non sequitur argument by such reasoning.(81)

It is obvious that, oftentimes in such theses, conclusions are arrived at only by taking out the Gospels and even adding to them what one would like to find. In this case, the authors even admit this procedure. After stating that they sifted through the Gospels searching for the specific points which they needed, they confessed that "we would be obliged to read between lines, fill in certain gaps, account for certain caesuras and ellipses. We would have to deal with omissions, with innuendos, with references that were, at best, oblique."(82) One instance of this arbitrary methodology occurs when they admit that they are utilizing such a procedure in order to find evidence for Jesus being married, which is obvious from the above examples on this subject. Another instance follows an attempt to make John the most historical of the four Gospels. The authors assert that modern scholarship has established this point, when such is simply not the case. But the authors' motives are exposed when they specifically acknowledge that they used John the most in an attempt to support their hypothesis! (83) Thus, we again see examples of illogic being used to support a case for one's own desired results. One is reminded here of Louis Cassels' evaluation of such attempts to "explain away" the facts.

The amazing thing about all these debunk Jesus books is that they accept as much of the recorded Gospels as they find convenient, then ignore or repudiate other parts of the same document which contradict their notions.(84)

The trustworthiness of the Gospels, the failure of the swoon theory in all of its forms, the lack of a valid historical basis, and the decidedly illogical lines of argumentation demonstrate the failures of these theories. This is not even to mention their hopeless contradiction of one another as well.

Summary and Conclusion

There have been many popular attempts to discredit the Jesus of the Gospels. Even in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries these attempts were prevalent. While they have been rejected almost unanimously by careful scholars, especially those who remember similar attempts disproven long ago, they still receive widespread attention among lay people. There have even been strictly fictional, novelistic attempts to deal with these subjects.(85)

It is because of this attention among the general populace that we have considered these popularistic "lives of Jesus" in this chapter. Accordingly, we investigated hypotheses involving swoon, Qumran connections, perversions of Jesus' message, and theses involving Jesus as an international traveler. Each was refuted on its own grounds by a number of criticisms.

Louis Cassels responded rather harshly to such "debunking" attempts:

You can count on it. Every few years, some "scholar" will stir up a short lived sensation by publishing a book that says something outlandish about Jesus.

The "scholar" usually has no standing as a Bible student, theologian, archaeologist, or anything else related to serious religious study.

But that need not hold him back. If he has a job -- any job -- on a university faculty, his "findings" will be treated respectfully in the press as a "scholarly work."(86)

Although such satirical comments remind one of Schweitzer's similar remarks concerning the "imperfectly equipped free lances" who composed the "fictitious lives of Jesus" from 130 to 200 years ago,(87) these statements cannot fairly be applied to all of the writings in this chapter. Yet they do remind us of characteristics that are true of many. Accordingly, while all of the theses surveyed in this chapter are refuted by the facts, some of them are additionally to be viewed from the standpoint of fictitious attempts to avoid the Jesus of the Gospels.

Endnotes--Chapter iv

1. Schonfield (New York: Bantam Books, 1965).
2. Ibid., pp. 37 38.
3. Ibid., pp. 112 115.
4. Ibid., pp. 153 161.
5. Ibid., pp. 160 161.
6. Ibid., p. 165.
7. Ibid., pp. 166 172.
8. Ibid., p. 6.
9. Ibid., p. 165; cf. pp. 171 173.
10. J. A. T. Robinson, Can We Trust the New Testament?, p. 15.
11. Joyce (New York: New American Library, 1972).
12. Ibid., pp. 106 110, 118.
13. David Strauss, A New Life of Jesus, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1879), vol. 1, pp. 408 412.
14. Schweitzer, pp. 56 67.
15. Ibid., cf. pp. 161 166 with 166 179, for example.
16. Eduard Riggenbach, The resurrection of Jesus (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1907), pp. 48 49; James Orr, p. 92.
17. For examples of physicians who deal with this issue, see C. Truman Davis, “The Crucifixion of Jesus: The Passion of Christ from a Medical Point of View,” in Arizona Medicine, March, 1965, pp. 183 187; Robert Wassenar, “A Physician Looks at the Suffering of Christ” in Moody Monthly, 79/7, March 1979, pp. 41 42; James H. Jewell, Jr., and Patricia A. Didden, “A Surgeon Looks at the Cross,” in Voice, 58/2, March April, 1979, pp. 3 5.
18. For examples, Barth, Church Dogmatics, vol. IV, p. 340 and Brown, p. 223.
19. Ewing (New York: Philosophical Library, 1961).
20. Ibid., pp. 48 51, 62 63.
21. Ibid., pp. 52, 62 64.
22. Ibid., see pp. 62 64, 368 369, 393, 397, for examples.
23. Charles Potter, The Lost Years of Jesus Revealed (Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, Inc., n.d.).
24. Charles Potter, Did Jesus Write This Book? (Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, Inc., n.d.), pp. 16, 77, 133 141.
25. Ewing, p. 51.
26. Ibid., p. 78.
27. Potter, Did Jesus Write This Book? p. 14.
28. Ibid., pp. 134 135.
29. Ibid., p. 136.
30. Jean Daniélou, “What the Dead Sea Scrolls Tell Us About Jesus,” in Daniel Rops, Sources for Christ, pp. 23 28; John M. Allegro, The Dead Sea Scrolls (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1956), pp. 148 151; William Brownlee, “Jesus and Qumran,” in Jesus and the Historian, ed. by F. Thomas Trotter (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968), p. 75.
31. Brownlee, p. 52.
32. Daniélou, pp. 28 29; Allegro, pp. 161 162; Brownlee, pp. 62 76; Charles Pfeiffer, The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), pp. 97 99, 130 134; F.F. Bruce, Second Thoughts on the Dead Sea Scrolls (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), pp. 79 84.
33. Allegro, p. 160.
34. Daniélou, p. 28.
35. Daniélou, pp. 30 32; Brownlee, pp. 69 70; Allegro, pp. 161 162; Bruce, Second Thoughts, p. 98.
36. Pfeiffer, p. 97.
37. Although this argument cannot be pursued here, see Habermas, The Resurrection of Jesus: An Apologetic.
38. High Schonfield, Those Incredible Christians (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), pp. IX, 50 51.
39. Ibid., p. 67.
40. Ibid., pp. 135 155.
41. Ibid., pp. 136 149.
42. Ibid., pp. 149, 211, 230.
43. Ibid., pp. XVII, 170.
44. Ibid., pp. 142 146, 259 272.
45. Ibid., pp. 50 51.
46. See Habermas, The Resurrection of Jesus: An Apologetic, Chapter 3 for several additional indications of Jesus’ claims to deity.
47. Reginald Fuller, The Foundations of New Testament Christology (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1965), p. 115, for instance.
48. Schonfield, Those Incredible Christians, pp. 98, 257.
49. Ibid., p. 155.
50. Oscar Cullmann, The Christology of the New Testament, transl. by Shirley Guthrie and Charles Hall (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), pp. 311 312.
51. Ibid., pp. 312 313; Raymond E. Brown, Jesus: God and Man (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1967), pp. 20 22.

52. Schonfield, Those Incredible Christians, p. 252.
53. Cullmann, p. 311.
54. A. T. Robinson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, 6 vols. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931), vol. 4, p. 491.
55. Cullmann, pp. 235, 311 312.
56. See Habermas, The Resurrection of Jesus: An Apologetic, especially chapters 1 3 for the details of such an argument.
57. The subject of Jesus' self designations is an intricate issue and cannot be dealt with in detail here. For some justification of these claims, see Oscar Cullmann, The Christology of the New Testament. On the last point, see Reginald Fuller, p. 115.
58. Cullmann, pp. 235, 237, 307.
59. Fuller, pp. 208, 248.
60. Cullmann, p. 321; see also p. 235.
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62. C. H. Dodd, The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), p. 16.
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64. Joyce, The Jesus Scroll, pp. 7 14.
65. Ibid., pp. 100 110, 131 140, 160.
66. Ibid., pp. 54 59, 76 99, 141 158.
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68. Ibid., pp. 322 332, 347.
69. Ibid., see Chapters 1 11, 13 for details. See p. 286 for the author's statement concerning the need to have evidence of such a bloodline.
70. See James Robinson, The Nag Hammadi Library, pp. 329 338.
71. The Meaning of the Glorious Koran, transl. by Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall (New York: New American Library, n.d.), p. 93.
72. Peterson, p. 6A.
73. Joyce, p. 187; see also pp. 7 14.
74. Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln, p. 286.
75. Ibid., p. 372.
76. Peterson, p. 6A.
77. Joyce, pp. 158 159, 184.
78. Ibid., pp. 159 160, 191.
79. Ibid., pp. 78 79.
80. Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln, pp. 303 304.
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82. Ibid., p. 103.
83. Ibid.
84. Louis Cassels, "Debunkers of Jesus Still Trying," The Detroit News, June 23, 1973, p. 7A.
85. Templeton, Act of God; Irving Wallace, The Word (New York: Pocket Books, 1973); Og Mandino, The Christ Commission (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1981).
86. Cassels, p. 7A.
87. Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus, p. 38.